

# *Cultural Default and Translation Compensation—Take Joy Luck Club as an Example*

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**Abstract:** Cultural default refers to the omission of shared cultural background knowledge between communicators during the communication process. Target readers are unable to comprehend the omitted cultural information in the original text, and the tacit understanding between the author of the original text and the native readers is lost between the translator and the target readers, which resulting in a semantic vacuum, the artistic value of the literary work is greatly reduced. Therefore, translators should pay special attention to the existence of cultural default phenomena, carefully consider the cultural background of the original work, and compensate for translation with appropriate compensation strategies. In this way, the target readers can get the literary enjoyment from the original work. This paper takes the cultural default in the communication between the four mother-daughter pairs in the film “*The Joy Luck Club*” as an example to explore the crucial role of cultural default and translation compensation strategies in cross-cultural communication.

## 1. Introduction

In the age of globalization, cross-cultural interactions and interlingual communication have become increasingly prevalent and pivotal. However, barriers stemming from distinct cultures and languages often lead to the inadequate transmission of information, emotions, and cultural nuances, resulting in cultural default. Translation, functioning as a vital conduit, assumes a critical role in mitigating these gaps and ensuring the faithful conveyance of information and culture.

“*The Joy Luck Club*” directed by Wang Ying, is a cinematic adaptation based on Amy Tan’s eponymous novel. The film intricately portrays the emotional, traditional, and cultural struggles among four sets of mothers and daughters within immigrant families in diverse cultural and linguistic environment. Within this context, translation emerges as a key factor. Mothers usually articulate their emotions, values, and narratives in Chinese, whereas daughters primarily employ English. This language difference encompasses more than lexical and syntactic disparities; it embodies challenges in conveying emotions, information, and cultural subtexts. The phenomenon of cultural default during communication often exacerbates complexities, and the absence of translation compensations for cultural elements becomes a substantial factor escalating conflicts and impeding effective communication between mothers and daughters[1]. This paper takes the cultural default in the communication between four mother-daughter pairs in the film “*The Joy Luck Club*” as an example, and discusses the key role of cultural default and translation compensation strategy in cross-cultural communication.

## 2. Cultural Defaults in the Movie *The Joy Luck Club*

The concept of “cultural default” was first proposed by Charles F. Hockett in 1954, considering it as “arbitrary loopholes in form”. The initial research on cultural default and translation compensation in China was conducted by Wang [2]. He defined that the meaning of cultural default is the absence of some cultural background knowledge shared by the author and his or her intended reader, on the coherent interpretation in translation reading. He also categorized cultural defaults into “contextual default” “situational default” and “cultural default” taking into account the different types of missing content.

From the perspective of linguistic communication, the purpose of default is to enhance communicative efficiency. This heightened efficiency is due to both communicators understanding the omitted portions. Although the omitted components are not explicitly expressed in speech, they may be activated in the recipient's memory under specific contexts. Consequently, the actual semantic gaps in speech are filled by the recipient's cultural knowledge, thereby achieving a coherent semantic comprehension. In the film “*The Joy Luck Club*,” cultural default manifests as omissions of presumed shared cultural background knowledge between mothers and daughters during their communication. However, due to the cultural disparities between them, some cultural defaults become ineffective during the communicative process, resulting in unclear meanings. This situation leads to incoherent semantics, subsequently generating contradictions and conflicts [3]. Such occurrences are abundant in the film, propelling the story's progression.

Language, as the primary means of expressing emotions, carries the characteristics of different cultures. In American culture, emotions are usually expressed directly, hence the wording is more straightforward. In contrast, Chinese culture values implicitness; therefore, even though mothers deeply love their daughters and wish for their success, the way they express themselves tends to be more implicit and subtle rather than using a direct phrase like “I love you, my daughter.” At times, expressions might even manifest through scolding, as the expression of emotion is not usually as direct in Chinese culture as it is in American culture.

June's mother aspires for her to become a pianist. Hence, Suyuan continuously sought children's success stories in magazines and urged June to practice the piano diligently every day. However, June could not accept or understand her mother's approach to education. Consequently, she began opposing her mother's methods and requests, deliberately disrupting piano recitals and shattering her mother's expectations. Moreover, she shouted at her mother, “I'll never be the kind of daughter you want! I wish you weren't my mother. I wish I were dead!”[4] Traditional Chinese parents firmly believe that everything they do is for the good of their children, particularly their belief in rigorous education. However, children receiving an American education may not comprehend this perspective.

Ying-Ying's mother tells others that Lena is an “art tech,” when in fact, Lena is an architect. Additionally, her mother, An-Mei, mispronounces the word “psychiatrist” as “psyche-atricks.” Meanwhile, the daughters were born and raised in the U.S., receiving an American education and actively participating in society. English is their first language and the official language. They rarely speak Chinese, making them prone to mistakes when speaking Chinese. This saddens their mother, who strongly hopes her children will inherit traditional Chinese culture.

Lindo and Waverly discuss their hometown, Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi Province. However, Waverly misinterprets it as Taiwan (the English pronunciation of these two places is similar). This misunderstanding disappoints Lindo's mother, as Waverly does not understand her mother's emotional connection to her homeland. The mother's limited English and the daughters' limited Chinese proficiency hinder effective communication between them. Language conflicts arise due to misunderstandings, and sometimes, the Pinyin of the Chinese language can make it difficult for the

daughters to understand the Chinese.

When Waverly's boyfriend, Rich, attends a family gathering, being an American, he doesn't understand Chinese cultural customs. Lindo tactfully self-deprecates, saying, "The food is too bland and tasteless. It's hard to swallow." In reality, she is implying that she wants others to praise her cooking. However, Rich, not realizing they are both Chinese immigrants with different cultural backgrounds, directly criticizes Lindo's cooking, pointing out her shortcomings in cooking. This makes Lindo feel embarrassed.

Conflicts arise between traditional Chinese values and American culture in the four mother-daughter pairs in the film, and these conflicts, stemming from cultural default, escalate the tensions between them. Taking cultural conflicts in the film as an example, translators must fully consider the cultural default present in the original text, including the implied artistic motives and aesthetic values. Only then can they accurately convey the semantics, cultural information, and artistic effects of the original work, avoiding information loss during reader understanding.

### 3. Translation Compensation for Cultural Deficiencies

Since the target language audience lacks the relevant background knowledge of the source language and the original text, as well as the existence of cultural defaults and other problems, translators need to take targeted translation compensation measures. In order to solve the problem of cultural default, translators should make efforts to deeply understand and grasp the rich cultural connotations in the source language, familiarize themselves with all kinds of cultural and intellectual backgrounds related to it, master the target language, choose appropriate translation strategies, and integrate the knowledge and contextual information together in order to fully comprehend, translate, and convey the rich cultural information contained in the source language. Keith Harvey holds that "compensation is a technique which involves making up for the loss of a source text effect by recreating a similar effect in the target text through means that are specific to the target language and/or text"[5]. Ke Ping defined compensation as it is to compensate for the loss of meaning of the source language in "literal translation" and the cause of translation loss was cultural differences between the source language and the target language [6]. He also proposed eight compensation strategies: annotation, contextual amplification, shift of perspective, specification, generalization, paraphrase, adaptation and back translation. Ma Hongjun divides compensation strategies into explicit compensation and implicit compensation [7]. Xia Tingde puts forward his own definition of compensation as: according to the text type and translation purposes, the translator repairs or makes up for the potential loss, or the loss that has already happened in translation. In this process, the translator adopts the methods peculiar to target language as a primary means to compensate for the loss while drawing support from the methods of non-target language conforming to the norms of the target language as a secondary means [8].

#### 3.1 Annotation within text

Annotation within text refers to the fact that in the process of translation, in order to accurately convey the meaning or information of the original text, the translator adds some contents or details to the translated text that are not explicitly expressed in the original text. The purpose of annotation within text is to ensure that the translation conveys a similar or even clearer meaning than the original text, while remaining fluent, coherent and easy to understand. The disadvantage is that the original meaning may be altered. Excessive annotation within text may lead to mistranslations or the addition of information not found in the original text, altering the intent of the original text. Second, it can also lead to translation difficulties. Deciding when and how to make additions requires a high level of linguistic and cultural literacy on the part of the translator to ensure that the

new additions accurately and appropriately convey the meaning of the original text. Third, it may increase the reading burden. If too much text is added, it may make the translation lengthy and make it more difficult for the reader to understand. In short, when using annotation within text, translators need to weigh carefully to ensure that the added content can better convey the meaning of the original text without changing the intent of the original text or making the translation cumbersome.

### 3.2 Annotation outside text

Annotation outside text refers to the notes, explanations, or supplementary explanations added to the text by translators or editors during the translation or editing process in order to better convey the meaning of the original text or to provide additional information. These notes, usually in the form of footnotes, end notes, or marginal notes, are intended to help readers understand the original text, to provide background knowledge or explanations of specific terms, or to supplement relevant information not contained in the original text. It has the following advantages. First, it enhances understanding and transparency. It provides additional information and explanations that help readers to better understand the original text, especially when it relates to complex or domain-specific content. Second, provide background information. It can provide readers with background knowledge related to the original text and enhance their understanding of the text. Third, translations are clearer. The use of annotation outside text in translation can make translations clearer and avoid ambiguity or misunderstanding. But it still has some disadvantages. First, it interrupts the reading experience. It may interrupt the readers' reading fluency because they need to jump to the annotated part and then return to the original text, which may affect the coherence of reading. Second, it may be too cumbersome. If overused, annotations may become cumbersome, making the balance between the original text and the annotations lost and reducing the beauty and simplicity of the text. Third, the translation difficulty. In the translation process, it may be challenging to accurately convey the meaning in the original text in the annotations, as different languages and cultures may require different ways of interpreting and conveying information. Therefore, when using annotation outside text, the pros and cons need to be weighed to ensure that the use of annotations enhances understanding without unduly interfering with the reader's reading experience.

### 3.3 Free Translation

Free translation means that in the process of translation, the translator expresses the meaning of the original text in the target language in a more fluent, natural and easy-to-understand way according to the original text's meaning, emotion, purpose and the audience's characteristics, instead of translating word by word and sentence by sentence. Free translation has the following advantages. First, enhance comprehensibility. Free translation can make the translation more in line with the language habits and cultural background of the target language, and improve the understanding and acceptance of the audience. Secondly, it is fluent and natural. Free translation can make the translation read more naturally and fluently, and with more natural language rhythm. Thirdly, conveying intention. The focus of translation is to convey the intention and message of the original text, not to translate each word or sentence rigidly. However, free translation still has some disadvantages. First, the translation may lose the original flavor. Free translation may lose some nuances of meaning or cultural characteristics of the original text, especially when translated into different languages or cultures. Second, subjectivity. Free translation involves the translator's personal understanding and judgment, which may have a certain degree of subjectivity and may lead to different translations by different translators. Third, it may be misleading. Excessive free

translation may make the translation produce different meanings, or even go against the original text, resulting in misleading. Therefore, when choosing whether to adopt free translation, translators need to consider the characteristics of the original text, the target audience, the purpose and the cultural context in which it is used. The free translation should be presented in a way that is more suitable for the target language and culture on the premise of keeping the intention of the original text as far as possible.

#### 4. Summary

By analyzing the cultural aspects of translation compensation in the film “*The Joy Luck Club*,” we can better promote the coexistence of cultural diversity and achieve successful cross-cultural communication. This also serves as a reminder that translators are not merely conveyors of language but conveyors of culture and emotions, emphasizing the critical role they play[9]. Translation is a communicative activity with a dual task: on one hand, translators need to understand the original text from the perspective of the reader; on the other hand, during the translation process, translators need to engage in a form of creative re-writing based on a prior understanding and experience of the intended readers of the translated text. Therefore, in translation work, translators should employ appropriate cultural compensation while staying faithful to the original author and the readers of the translated work. Translators need to choose suitable translation strategies and approaches, fully respecting and faithfully translating the rich cultural information contained in the original work, accurately presenting the cultural nuances and artistic effects of the original text, ensuring they are conveyed to the audience of the translated text. This will contribute to facilitating intercultural communication and the dissemination of Chinese and Western cultures.

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