

Bridging the Cultural Divide: Cultural Considerations and Practical Values in the Translation Shift from “Dragon” to “Loong”

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Abstract:

This article focuses on cultural differences and analyzes the cultural considerations and real-world significance surrounding the shift from “Dragon” to “Loong”. By examining the symbolic differences between “Dragon” and “Loong” in Chinese and Western cultures, it explores the cultural connotations in translation. The study analyzes how translators navigate cultural differences between the target and source languages from the dimensions of historical background, linguistics, and cultural communication. Drawing on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions framework and Hall’s high-low context culture theory, it uses concrete case studies to investigate translators’ strategies and their implications. Finally, it discusses the cultural sensitivity required for translators to navigate cultural differences, as well as the strategies and effectiveness thereof, aiming to reveal the significant value of translation in cultural communication and provide theoretical bases and practical examples for translation practices and cultural dissemination.

Keywords:

Translation Shift, Cultural Differences, Dragon, Loong, Cultural Considerations

1. Introduction

In the era of accelerating globalization, cultural exchange has become a cornerstone of international relations, with translation serving as its vital link. As a bridge for cross-cultural communication, translation transcends mere vocabulary replacement or sentence restructuring; it requires translators to grasp the rich cultural meanings behind source and target languages and achieve accurate cultural transformation.

Take “Dragon” and “Loong”—representative terms that highlight stark symbolic contrasts between Chinese and Western cultures. In Western tradition, “Dragon” is often portrayed as a sinister creature of evil and greed. In Chinese culture, “Loong” embodies positive symbolism of good fortune, honor, and authority, closely linked to the nation’s history, cultural heritage, and spiritual identity.

With the growing global influence of Chinese culture, scholars and translators have increasingly sought appropriate translations for “Dragon,” and “Loong” has emerged as a widely adopted choice. This shift not only reflects respect for cultural differences but also underscores translation’s role in fostering intercultural understanding. An in-depth analysis of this case can offer valuable insights for translation practices and global cultural dialogue.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory

Developed by Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede through large-scale cross-cultural research on IBM employees, this theory uses quantitative analysis to uncover the underlying structure of cultural differences across nations. It identifies five core dimensions, each providing a lens to compare cultural values:

2.1.1. Power Distance Index (PDI)

Measures societal acceptance of unequal power distribution. High PDI cultures (e.g., China) emphasize hierarchical order and top-down decision-making, while low PDI cultures (e.g., the U.S.) prioritize equality and flat management structures.

2.1.2. Individualism and Collectivism (IDV)

Distinguishes between societies that prioritize individual versus collective interests. Individualist cultures (e.g., the U.S.) value personal freedom, achievement, and competition, whereas collectivist cultures (e.g., China) emphasize group harmony and subordinating individual goals to collective objectives.

2.1.3. Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)

Reflects a society's tolerance of ambiguity. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Japan) tend to rely on strict rules and procedures to minimize risk, while those with low uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Sweden) are more open to change and innovation.

2.1.4. Masculinity and Femininity (MAS)

Examines cultural emphasis on traditional gender roles. Masculine cultures (e.g., Germany) prioritize competition and material success, while feminine cultures (e.g., Norway) focus on relationships and quality-of-life balance.

2.1.5. Long-Term and Short-Term Orientation (LTO)

Assesses the continuity of traditional values. Long-term oriented cultures (e.g., China) emphasize thrift, perseverance, and future planning, while short-term oriented cultures (e.g., the U.S.) prioritize immediate rewards and practical outcomes.

By quantifying cultural differences through standardized scales, Hofstede’s theory provides a robust analytical framework for cross-cultural research, widely applied to explain variations in values, management practices, and social behaviors [6,7].

2.2. Hall’s High- and Low-Context Culture Theory (HLCT)

In *The Silent Language*, American anthropologist Edward T. Hall introduced HLCT to analyze cultural differences through communication patterns:

2.2.1. High-Context Culture

Information is conveyed implicitly, relying on non-verbal cues, social norms, and shared historical context. East Asian societies like China and Japan exemplify this model, where communication emphasizes indirectness to maintain relational harmony. For instance, individuals often use subtle gestures or contextual clues to avoid direct confrontation, with meaning derived from unspoken understandings.

2.2.2. Low-Context Culture

Information is transmitted explicitly through language, with minimal reliance on situational context. Western cultures such as the U.S. and Germany prioritize clarity and directness; for example, business negotiations focus on precise contract terms and logical arguments, with meaning anchored in explicit linguistic codes.

Hall highlights that high-context cultures prioritize relationship-building and long-term trust, while low-context cultures emphasize efficiency and rule-based structures. This framework explains cross-cultural miscommunication arising from differing encoding styles. For example, the rich symbolic layers of the Chinese Loong—rooted in high-context traditions—cannot be fully captured by the low-context term "Dragon," necessitating the neologism "Loong" to reconstruct cultural imagery [5,8].

2.3. The Value of the Theories in Translation Studies

Hofstede's and Hall's theories offer complementary insights into the "Dragon" to "Loong" translation shift:

Hofstede's Dimensions: The contrast in "Dragon" and Loong symbolism reflects deeper cultural values. In Western individualistic cultures (low PDI, high IDV), "Dragon" represents a conquerable antagonist, embodying ideals of personal heroism. In China's collectivistic culture (high PDI, high LTO), Loong symbolizes unity, auspiciousness, and historical continuity, tied to collective identity and long-term societal harmony.

Hall's HLCT: The challenge of translating Loong stems from high- vs. low-context communication differences. The Chinese symbol's meaning is embedded in millennia of cultural context (e.g., imperial heritage, mythological narratives), which "Dragon"—a low-context term—fails to convey. "Loong" emerges as a strategic solution, creating a linguistic sign that aligns with high-context norms by preserving cultural specificity.

Together, these theories underscore that translation is not merely linguistic conversion but cultural reconstruction. Effective cross-cultural translation must navigate both value systems (Hofstede) and communication modes (Hall), as demonstrated by the "Loong" shift. This case illustrates how theoretical frameworks can inform practices, ensuring that cultural nuances are preserved in global discourse.

3. Symbolism of "Dragon" and "Loong" in Chinese and Western Cultures

3.1. Symbolism of "Dragon" in Western Culture

In Western cultural tradition, “Dragon” has long been synonymous with negativity and danger. In ancient Greek mythology, Ladon—the dragon guarding the Golden Apple Orchard—represents a formidable adversary for heroes like Hercules, embodying chaos and obstruction. Medieval chivalric literature frequently portrays dragons as the primary antagonists in knights’ quests, symbolizing evil that must be vanquished to prove heroic virtue. This motif persists in modern fantasy narratives, where “Dragon” typically embodies malevolent forces opposing protagonist ideals.

This negative symbolism is deeply rooted in Western individualism, as outlined in Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory. Western cultures (high Individualism-Collectivism, IDV) celebrate narratives of lone heroes overcoming monumental challenges, casting “Dragon” as the quintessential symbol of conquerable evil. By framing the dragon as an adversary to be defeated, Western mythology reinforces its role as a foil to individual courage and triumph [2,3,12].

3.2. Symbolism of “Loong” in Chinese Culture

In the Chinese cultural system, Loong is a sacred symbol embodying auspiciousness, unity, and divine authority. Revered alongside the phoenix as a spiritual totem, it represents the collective identity of the Chinese nation, symbolizing harmony, resilience, and wisdom. From ancient imperial regalia to modern festivals like the Dragon Boat Race, Loong permeates cultural practices, serving as a bridge between historical heritage and contemporary values.

Feudal emperors historically claimed the Loong as a symbol of their mandate, while folk traditions use dragon dances to express communal wishes for prosperity. Through Hofstede’s lens, this reflects China’s collectivist orientation (low IDV), where Loong unites societal values around group harmony and shared destiny. Additionally, China’s Long-Term Orientation (LTO) is evident in Loong’s role as a carrier of cultural continuity, embodying both reverence for tradition and hope for future generations [1].

3.3. Cross-Cultural Contrasts in Symbolism

The symbolic meanings of “Dragon” and Loong reveal profound cultural divergences:

Western “Dragon”: Represents conflict, individualism, and explicit opposition (low-context culture, per Hall’s theory). Its negative connotations stem from narratives of heroic conquest, aligning with Western values of personal achievement and direct confrontation.

Chinese “Loong”: Embodies unity, collectivism, and implicit symbolism (high-context culture). Rooted in millennia of tradition, it signifies harmony with natural and societal orders, reflecting Confucian values of balance and collective welfare.

Such disparities are not merely superficial cultural expressions but reflect deep-seated differences in values and belief systems between Chinese and Western cultures. These distinctions provide crucial grounds for cultural considerations in translation [14,4].

4. Translation Transformation: The Evolution and Considerations Behind the “Dragon” to “Loong” Shift

4.1. Historical Background of the Translation Shift

During the early phases of Sino-Western cultural exchange, limited cross-cultural understanding and undefined translation norms led to the direct translation of Chinese “龙” as “dragon.” However, with China’s growing global influence, scholars and translators increasingly recognized the limitations of this approach: the Western “Dragon” carries inherent negative connotations—rooted in myths of conquest and evil—which risked distorting the Chinese loong’s positive symbolism. This misalignment hindered the effective transmission of Chinese culture, as Western audiences often associated “Dragon” with their own cultural narratives, leading to misunderstandings.

For instance, using “Dragon” in international cultural exhibitions or products often evoked negative stereotypes, contradicting the Chinese loong’s role as a symbol of auspiciousness and unity. To address this, the translation “Loong” emerged as a strategic solution [14]. From Hall's High-Low Context Culture Theory, Western low-context cultures rely on explicit language, making “Dragon” inadequate to convey the high-context symbolism of Chinese “龙”. “Loong” mitigates this gap by preserving cultural nuance while differentiating itself from the Western construct [10,9].

4.2. Linguistic Considerations

Linguistically, “Loong” offers the following advantages:

Phonetic Fidelity: It approximates the Chinese pronunciation “lóng”, maintaining the original term's acoustic identity. This helps Chinese speakers recognize the cultural referent while allowing Western audiences to engage with its linguistic distinctiveness.

Lexical Innovation: “Loong” is a neologism, free from the negative associations of “Dragon.” Its unique structure (e.g., plural “Loongs”) aligns with English grammatical norms, enabling flexibility in various contexts.

However, as a newly coined term, “Loong” requires contextual explanation in translations to ensure clarity. Its absence in standard dictionaries necessitates brief annotations (e.g., “Loong: a Chinese cultural symbol of prosperity”) to anchor its meaning for readers [4].

4.3. Considerations from a cultural communication perspective

From a cultural communication perspective, the translation of “Loong” is significant. First, it enhances the positive image of Chinese dragon culture internationally, allowing Western audiences to more intuitively perceive the auspicious and noble qualities of the “dragon.” In cross-cultural communication, the shaping of cultural images is crucial. By using “Loong,” Western readers can more clearly perceive the positive connotations of auspiciousness and mystery inherent in the Chinese cultural system’s “dragon” [4].

Second, “Loong” facilitates the global dissemination of Chinese culture. As a symbolic element of Chinese culture, its accurate translation can drive other cultural elements onto the world stage, enhancing Chinese culture’s international influence. As one of Chinese culture’s most representative icons, the dragon’s accurate

translation plays a pivotal role in disseminating its overall image. Using “Loong” creates new models for international cultural dissemination, leading more distinctive Chinese elements to the global stage in a precise and accessible way. This promotes a comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture’s diversity and richness worldwide.

Third, this translation approach demonstrates translators’ cultural sensitivity and strategic skills, resolving cultural conflicts and fostering Sino-Western cultural exchange. When encountering cultural symbols like “Dragon” and “Loong” with distinct cultural characteristics, translators recognized the misunderstandings posed by traditional translations. They explored innovative approaches, successfully bridging the cultural divide and promoting positive interaction between Chinese and Western cultures.

5. Other Case Studies of Translation Transformation

5.1. Naming of the “Loongson” Processor and the “Wing Loong” Drone

China’s first domestically developed computer CPU chip, the “Loongson,” adopted the “loong” translation approach in its naming. This choice preserves the pronunciation of “龙” while avoiding the negative connotations of “Dragon,” accurately conveying the product’s deep roots in Chinese culture. The “Loongson” case exemplifies the practical advantages of the “loong” translation method, enhancing the product’s cultural resonance and international communication efficacy. Similarly, the “Wing Loong” UAV integrates the drone’s flight characteristics with the “loong” translation, highlighting its cultural ties to China. This naming strategy showcases Chinese cultural identity, mitigates cross-cultural misunderstandings, and facilitates the global dissemination of China’s military technological culture [9].

5.2. Pinyin Translation of Chinese Cultural Elements

Beyond the “dragon” translation, numerous unique Chinese cultural elements have embraced direct pinyin transliteration, reflecting thoughtful consideration of cultural differences and the positive impact of innovative translation methods on cultural dissemination. For instance, baijiu—once commonly translated as “Chinese liquor” or “Chinese spirits”—failed to capture its unique cultural essence. Today, the pinyin “Baijiu” has gained global recognition, concisely preserving its Chinese pronunciation, distinguishing it from other alcoholic beverages, and enabling foreign consumers to identify it as a distinct Chinese cultural product. This approach has effectively promoted the international spread of baijiu culture.

Similarly, “kung fu” was historically translated as “martial arts,” a term that overlooked its philosophical and cultural depth. The pinyin “Kungfu” now prevails, preserving its authentic Chinese character and allowing the world to appreciate its cultural nuances. “Jiaozi,” once simplified as “dumpling” (which encompasses various noodle dishes in English), is now widely recognized by its pinyin name, clearly positioning it as a unique Chinese culinary tradition and advancing the global dissemination of Chinese food culture.

The adoption of pinyin translations like “Baijiu” and “Kungfu” demonstrates translators’ proactive alignment with the goal of cultural output—retaining linguistic originality to enhance international recognition of Chinese cultural symbols [13]. This strategy mirrors the “Loong” translation method: both leverage phonetic innovation

and lexical flexibility to transcend traditional translation frameworks, driven by the need for effective cultural communication and the re-encoding of cultural symbols.

6. Cultural Sensitivity and Strategies in Translation Practice

6.1. Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity refers to the ability to keenly perceive and understand the differences and characteristics among different cultures. For translators, this ability is demonstrated by their capacity to anticipate and navigate implicit cultural conflicts.

Take *Folding Beijing* as an example. The translator rendered “亏欠” as “regret and sorrow” to convey the concept of filial piety culture [11], an approach analogous to the translation of “Loong” to avoid the negative connotations associated with “Dragon.” Both instances require translators to transcend the surface-level language and explore deeper cultural structures.

Translators must possess cultural sensitivity, being acutely aware of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and deeply familiar with the values, beliefs, and social customs of diverse cultures. Only in this way can they accurately grasp the cultural connotations of the source text and convey them to target-language readers, thereby preventing cultural misunderstandings. Fundamentally, translators are not merely language converters but “mediators” of cultural ecosystems, aiming to achieve precise transmission and balance of cultural connotations in cross-cultural communication.

6.2. Strategies for Addressing Cultural Differences

In translation practice, multiple strategies can be adopted to handle cultural differences: employ literal translation when it preserves the imagery and meaning of the source text; opt for free translation or rewriting to fit the target-language cultural context if literal translation risks misunderstandings or cultural conflicts, selecting methods based on the characteristics of cultural elements; add cultural notes to explain unfamiliar cultural elements to the target audience; substitute cultural elements without altering the original meaning to align with the target cultural background; and apply appropriate cultural omission to maintain conciseness for less significant content or elements without target-culture equivalents [12].

6.3. Analysis of the Effectiveness of Strategy Application

In translation practice, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on the specific context. However, in general, by flexibly applying these strategies, translators can more effectively address cultural differences, reduce misunderstandings and conflicts, and make translations more accurate, fluent, and comprehensible. This not only enhances the cultural depth and value of the translation but also promotes communication and understanding between different cultures.

7. Conclusions

This paper, through the study of the translation shift from “Dragon” to “Loong,” underscores the importance of cultural considerations in translation. Translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but a transmission and exchange of culture. When navigating cultural differences, translators should demonstrate strong cultural

sensitivity and flexibly apply diverse translation strategies to mitigate misunderstandings and conflicts.

In practice, translators must deeply understand the cultural contexts of both source and target languages, respecting and embracing cultural disparities. As globalization progresses and information technology evolves, translators need to continuously enhance their cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication skills to adapt to changing cultural landscapes. It is hoped that future translation practices will continue to innovate, contributing significantly to the exchange and integration of diverse cultures.

Conflicts of Interest

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