

# A Study on the Strategies for Handling Culture-Loaded Words in the Japanese Translation of China Keywords

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on culture-loaded words in the Japanese translation of China Keywords, and explores their semantic correspondence relations, strategy classification models, and optimization paths. Based on differences in semantic fields and cultural schemas, this study identifies three mapping types of image overlap, mismatch, and vacancy, analyzes the generation mechanism of semantic vacancies and the three-level classification of lexeme, sememe, and pragmatics, and proposes a three-dimensional compensation framework of semantics, aesthetics, and cognition. With the help of equivalence theory, this study establishes a weighing parameter system between functional equivalence and formal correspondence, clarifies the applicable boundaries of domestication and foreignization strategies, and constructs a three-level processing scheme of high, medium, and low for culture-specific items. From the three aspects of retention evaluation indicators, cognitive context adaptation principles, and communication effectiveness improvement methods, this study proposes optimization paths to provide an operable theoretical basis for the Japanese translation practice of culture-loaded words.

**Keywords:** culture-loaded words; Japanese translation strategies; semantic correspondence; equivalence theory; communication effectiveness

## Introduction

For culture-loaded words, which are vocabulary units with highly condensed meaning and imagery in a specific cultural system, the quality of their cross-linguistic conversion directly determines the cultural transmission validity of the translated text. In the field of Chinese-Japanese translation, due to the fact that the two languages belong to different language families and have significant differences in cultural traditions, the handling of culture-loaded words has long faced multiple obstacles such as image mismatch, semantic vacancy, and information attenuation. Existing studies mostly focus on the analysis of translation examples of individual words or the discussion of macro-level translation principles, and they lack a strategic framework based on systematic classification models and quantifiable evaluation indicators, which makes it difficult to meet the refined requirements for translation quality in the practice of cross-cultural communication between China and Japan. Therefore, constructing a strategic system that balances the preservation of source language cultural features with the adaptation to the target language cognitive context has important theoretical value and practical necessity. This study starts from a typological analysis of semantic correspondence relations, introduces equivalence theory as the basis for strategy classification, and then proposes optimization paths from three dimensions of evaluation indicators, adaptation principles, and effectiveness enhancement, aiming to provide a structured analytical tool and a referable operational scheme for the study of Japanese translation of culture-loaded words.

## 1. Semantic Correspondence Relations of Culture-Loaded Words in Japanese Translation

### 1.1 Cross-Linguistic Mapping Types of Cultural Images

When the images carried by culture-loaded words are transferred from Chinese to Japanese, they form various cross-linguistic correspondence relations. Based on differences in semantic fields and cultural schemas, this study identifies three basic mapping types: image overlap, image mismatch, and image vacancy. Image overlap refers to a high degree of consistency between the source language and the target language in terms of referents, cultural associations, and emotional connotations. For such

words, the Japanese translation can directly call upon the corresponding existing expressions without any mediating adjustment. Image mismatch manifests as the same referent evoking different mental images or value judgments in the two languages. For example, when certain plants or animals have partially overlapping symbolic meanings in Chinese and Japanese but differ in their core connotations, a partial modification of the image is required according to the cultural context<sup>[1]</sup>.

The image vacancy type is the most challenging mapping category in the process of Japanese translation, and it manifests as the situation where a Chinese culture-loaded word cannot find any corresponding image carrier in the Japanese lexical system. This type of vacancy originates from the different ways in which the two languages categorize specific objects or concepts, and from the lack of corresponding material bases or customary traditions in Japanese society, which prevents the image from being cognitively activated through literal translation or loan translation. For vacancy-type mapping, translation strategies need to approach the problem from the perspective of image reconstruction, and they should construct approximate images in the target language by means of annotations, substitutions, or the addition of new semantic features. The distinction among the three mapping types constitutes the basis for the analysis of semantic correspondence relations, and it also provides a classification foundation for subsequent strategy selection.

### ***1.2 Generation Mechanism and Typological Classification of Semantic Vacancy***

Semantic vacancy is not a random translation obstacle, but rather it is caused by systematic differences between Chinese and Japanese in terms of conceptual structures, cognitive categories, and cultural norms. From the perspective of generation mechanisms, semantic vacancy mainly arises from three sources: the absence of referents, which means that the entities or activities referred to in Chinese do not exist in Japanese culture; differences in conceptualization, which means that the same referent is assigned different semantic features or boundaries in the two languages; and the asymmetry of associative meanings, which means that the metaphorical, symbolic, or affective meanings of a word cannot be carried over by the target language vocabulary during cross-linguistic transmission. The joint action of these mechanisms causes the semantics of culture-loaded words to be fragmented or interrupted during Japanese translation.

Based on the occurrence levels of vacancy, this study divides semantic vacancy into three types: lexeme vacancy, sememe vacancy, and pragmatic vacancy. Lexeme vacancy refers to the target language lacking a corresponding word form or morpheme combination to refer to the object, and it belongs to the most superficial level of vacancy. Sememe vacancy manifests as the target language having a corresponding word form, but its semantic features cannot match those of the source language item, especially the absence of extended meanings or cultural connotations. Pragmatic vacancy involves the usage rules, appropriateness conditions, and implied intentions of a word in specific communicative contexts; even if the conceptual meaning corresponds, its pragmatic effect may still fail. This typological classification provides a theoretical basis for the precise application of subsequent processing strategies, and different types of semantic vacancy require differentiated compensation methods<sup>[2]</sup>.

### ***1.3 Compensation Dimensions for the Attenuation of Cultural Information***

In the process of Japanese translation, the semantic information of culture-loaded words inevitably undergoes attenuation, which mainly manifests as the loss of cultural specificity, the weakening of emotional intensity, and the decline of image vividness. The loss of cultural specificity refers to the phenomenon in which information closely related to a specific region, history, or folklore in the source language becomes generalized or neutralized after conversion. The weakening of emotional intensity is reflected in the reduction of commendatory or derogatory connotations and tones such as awe or humor. The decline of image vividness often occurs when paraphrasing or functional equivalence translation methods are adopted, and originally concrete metaphors are transformed into abstract explanations. The above attenuation is not entirely avoidable, but it can be regulated through systematic compensation strategies.

Compensation operations can be carried out in three dimensions. The semantic dimension aims to restore missing conceptual content, and it embeds cultural information into the surface structure of the target text by means of annotations, addition translation, or embedded explanations. The aesthetic dimension focuses on the reproduction of images and rhetorical effects, and it maintains the artistic appeal of the source language by means of rhetorical devices or image substitutions that are

functionally similar in Japanese. The cognitive dimension concerns the target language readers' processing load, and it reduces the cognitive barriers caused by cultural gaps by adjusting the information density and presentation order. The three dimensions are not independent of each other, and they often need to be applied collaboratively in actual translation practice. A systematic review of the compensation dimensions helps to construct a quantitative evaluation framework for the attenuation of cultural information, thereby enhancing the pertinence and operability of Japanese translation strategies.

## **2. A Classification Model of Japanese Translation Strategies Based on Equivalence Theory**

### ***2.1 Weighing Parameters Between Functional Equivalence and Formal Correspondence***

Equivalence theory provides a basic analytical framework for Japanese translation strategies of culture-loaded words, in which functional equivalence and formal correspondence constitute the two poles of strategy selection. Functional equivalence focuses on reproducing the communicative function and reader response of the source language culture-loaded words in the target language, and it allows moderate modifications to linguistic forms and cultural images. Formal correspondence pursues structural isomorphism with the source language at the lexical, syntactic, and imagistic levels, so as to preserve the original appearance of culture-loaded words. The weighing between these two poles needs to be determined according to several quantifiable parameters, including the convertibility of cultural information, the target language readers' cognitive familiarity, and the acceptable threshold of semantic loss<sup>[3]</sup>.

Specifically, the convertibility parameter measures whether the specific information in a source language culture-loaded word can be transformed into Japanese expressions without violating the grammatical norms of the target language. The cognitive familiarity parameter evaluates the target language readers' prior knowledge of the cultural concept; the higher the familiarity, the stronger the feasibility of formal correspondence. The semantic loss threshold specifies the upper limit of information attenuation permitted in the process of functional equivalence. These three parameters exhibit a dynamic interrelationship. When the convertibility of a culture-loaded word is low and the readers' familiarity is insufficient, the priority of the functional equivalence strategy increases. Conversely, if the semantic loss threshold is extremely sensitive, formal correspondence should be given priority. Establishing a parameterized weighing model helps to transform equivalence theory from an abstract principle into an operable basis for strategy selection.

### ***2.2 Determination of the Applicable Boundaries for Domestication and Foreignization Strategies***

As two basic orientations in cultural translation, domestication and foreignization each have their own applicable scenarios in the process of Japanese translation of culture-loaded words. The domestication strategy tends to incorporate source language culture-loaded words into Japanese expression habits and cognitive frameworks, and it reduces cultural unfamiliarity by means of substitution, generalization, or functional correspondence. The foreignization strategy advocates preserving the cultural heterogeneity of the source language, and it creates a cultural defamiliarization effect in the target language by means of literal translation, loan translation, or transliteration. The two strategies are not opposed or mutually exclusive, but rather they form a continuum, and the determination of their applicable boundaries depends on the degree of compatibility between the culture-loaded words and the target language cultural system.

The core criteria for determining the applicable boundaries include two dimensions: the cultural distance coefficient and the discourse reception environment. The cultural distance coefficient is determined by the degree of understandability of the images, values, and customs carried by the culture-loaded words in Japanese culture; the higher the coefficient, the stronger the necessity of the domestication strategy. The discourse reception environment focuses on the expected readership of the translated text and their reading purposes; academic texts or texts aimed at conveying cultural heterogeneity tend to favor the foreignization strategy, while texts for popular audiences are more suitable for domestication. The boundary determination is not a static division, but rather it is dynamically adjusted according to the specific types of culture-loaded words and their contexts of occurrence. A reasonable switch between domestication and foreignization strategies can optimize the target language readers' comprehension efficiency without compromising information integrity<sup>[4]</sup>.

### ***2.3 A Hierarchical Processing Scheme for Culture-Specific Items***

Culture-specific items refer to vocabulary units that have unique referential functions or associative values in the source language cultural system, and their Japanese translation requires the establishment of a hierarchical scheme to address the differentiated characteristics of different types of culture-specific items. According to the degree of relevance between culture-specific items and the Japanese cultural system, this study divides them into three levels: the high-compatibility level refers to those words that are unique to Chinese but have similar concepts or approximate expressions in Japanese culture, and they can be handled by direct correspondence or slight adjustment strategies; the medium-compatibility level involves words with partial overlap in semantic features but deviations in core images, and they require compromise measures such as substitution or annotation; the low-compatibility level refers to words that have no equivalent at all in the Japanese cultural system, and they must be handled by means of reconstruction or creative translation.

The processing schemes between the different levels are not isolated from one another, but rather they form a gradient design based on two indicators: the semantic retention degree and the reception fluency degree. The semantic retention indicator reflects the proportion of the original meaning of the source language culture-specific item preserved in the translated text, and the reception fluency indicator measures the target language readers' cognitive load when understanding the translated text. At the high-compatibility level, semantic retention takes priority over reception fluency, and a formal correspondence processing scheme can be adopted. At the medium-compatibility level, the two need to be balanced, and domestication and foreignization strategies are used alternately. At the low-compatibility level, the weight of reception fluency increases, and some semantic retention may be sacrificed when necessary in exchange for comprehensibility. The establishment of a hierarchical processing scheme allows the Japanese translation of culture-specific items to no longer rely on a single strategy, but rather to match differentiated conversion paths according to the inherent attributes of the words themselves, thereby improving the overall translation efficiency and the quality of information transmission.

## **3. Optimization Paths for Japanese Translation Strategies of Culture-Loaded Words**

### ***3.1 Evaluation Indicators for the Retention Degree of Source Language Cultural Features***

The optimization of Japanese translation strategies for culture-loaded words first requires the establishment of a quantifiable evaluation system to measure the retention degree of source language cultural features in the translated text. The retention degree evaluation can be carried out from three indicator dimensions: the semantic integrity indicator focuses on whether the conceptual core of a culture-loaded word is completely transmitted, including the clarity of the referent and the definiteness of the conceptual boundary, and this indicator emphasizes the prevention of semantic generalization or misinterpretation; the image specificity indicator measures whether the unique metaphorical, symbolic, or analogical elements in the source language are maintained after conversion and avoids their replacement by generalized expressions, and its core lies in examining whether the translated text preserves the unique cognitive schemas of the source language culture; the emotional valence indicator examines the degree of correspondence in the target language of the pragmatic coloring such as commendatory or derogatory meanings, intimacy or distance, and seriousness or humor carried by the word, and it involves the cross-linguistic conversion accuracy of tone intensity, social distance, and emotional orientation. These three indicators together constitute a multi-dimensional evaluation framework for retention degree, and each indicator can be divided into several gradient levels according to the degree of semantic deviation, thereby enabling a refined diagnosis of the retention status<sup>[5]</sup>.

The three indicators do not operate independently, but rather they have a dynamic relationship in terms of weight distribution. For different types of culture-loaded words, the priorities of the three indicators should differ: for referential culture-loaded words, the semantic integrity indicator should be given priority; for abstract culture-loaded words, the image specificity indicator needs to be strengthened; and for communicative culture-loaded words, the emotional valence indicator should be taken as the primary consideration. In the actual process of strategy optimization, the translated text can be scored item by item according to the above indicators, the dimensions with weak retention degrees can be identified, and targeted adjustments can be implemented. The establishment of an indicator-based evaluation system helps to transform judgments that originally relied on intuition into

testable and comparable operational procedures, thereby providing feedback for the selection of translation strategies.

### ***3.2 Adaptation Principles for the Target Language Recipients' Cognitive Context***

Japanese translation strategies for culture-loaded words must take into account the characteristics of the target language recipients' cognitive context, namely the knowledge reserves, reasoning abilities, and cultural schemas that Japanese readers rely on when understanding Chinese cultural information. The core of the adaptation principles lies in reducing the reasoning load generated during cross-cultural comprehension, while avoiding the loss of cultural information caused by excessive simplification. Specifically, adaptation operations need to follow the principle of cognitive accessibility, which means that they should prioritize the activation of existing relevant cultural nodes in the target language readers' cognitive structure and anchor unfamiliar information onto a familiar knowledge network. When the concepts referred to by a source language culture-loaded word completely fall outside the cognitive range of the target language readers, the translation needs to guide the reasoning path through the setting of contextual cues.

Another adaptation principle is the principle of information increment control, which requires that the amount of new and unfamiliar information provided by the translated text should be maintained within the allowable range of the target language readers' cognitive processing capacity. If too much culture-specific information is input at one time, the readers may give up deep understanding due to cognitive overload and instead adopt a shallow processing strategy, extracting only the roughest semantic information. If the information increment is too low, the unique value of the culture-loaded words will be difficult to manifest, and their function as cultural carriers will be weakened. Adaptation strategies can be implemented through layered presentation: for culture-loaded words that appear frequently or occupy a central position, explicit treatment can be adopted, and explanatory components can be embedded in the translated text, such as adding appositive phrases or parenthetical explanations; for low-frequency or marginal culture-loaded words, implicit treatment can be adopted, and their cultural meanings can be conveyed naturally through the context, so as to avoid disrupting the fluency of the text due to over-explanation. The adaptation to the cognitive context is not only related to the translation quality of individual words, but also affects the acceptability and communication depth of the entire translated text, because readers' comprehension obstacles at the local word level will accumulate into a sense of resistance to the overall text, thereby blocking the effective transmission of cross-cultural information.

### ***3.3 Methods for Improving Cross-Cultural Communication Effectiveness***

Improving cross-cultural communication effectiveness is the ultimate goal of optimizing Japanese translation strategies for culture-loaded words, and its core lies in achieving a leap from "translatability" to "accessibility". Communication effectiveness can be defined from two levels: the information coverage level refers to the breadth and depth with which the semantic connotations of culture-loaded words are accurately understood by target language readers; the cultural influence level refers to the ability of the translated text to arouse the target language readers' cognitive interest or emotional resonance while preserving the cultural characteristics of the source language. The methods for improving communication effectiveness include three types: semantic explicitation, image adjustment, and cultural embedding. Semantic explicitation raises implicit cultural information to the surface structure by adding qualifying elements or explanatory phrases. Image adjustment replaces the original image with a functionally similar image carrier in Japanese culture, provided that the core metaphorical logic is preserved. Cultural embedding supplements the background knowledge needed for readers' understanding by means of paratextual devices such as annotations, appendices, or prefaces and postscripts.

The selection and combination of the above methods need to be determined according to the communication goals of the culture-loaded words. If the goal is to accurately convey information, the combination of semantic explicitation and cultural embedding is more effective, with the former solving immediate comprehension obstacles and the latter satisfying the need for in-depth knowledge. If the goal is to evoke aesthetic experience or cultural feeling, image adjustment occupies a dominant position, because resonance at the aesthetic level depends on the vividness and familiarity of images rather than the accumulation of explanatory text. The improvement of communication effectiveness does not pursue maximum cultural retention, but rather seeks a balance between information accuracy and reception fluency, and the position of this balance point shifts with different text types, reader

groups, and communication media. By establishing feedback mechanisms, such as small-scale reader reception tests or semantic fidelity checks, communication effectiveness can be optimized cyclically: first selecting strategies based on theoretical models, then adjusting strategy parameters through empirical feedback, thereby forming a closed-loop regulation. Taking communication effectiveness as the guiding indicator for strategy optimization enables the study of Japanese translation of culture-loaded words to expand from the level of language conversion to the macro perspective of cross-cultural communication, thus responding more comprehensively to the essential attribute of translation activities as acts of cultural mediation.

## Conclusion

This study systematically discusses the strategies for handling culture-loaded words in the Japanese translation of China Keywords from three levels: semantic correspondence relations, a classification model based on equivalence theory, and optimization paths. By distinguishing the three mapping types of image overlap, mismatch, and vacancy, this study clarifies the generation mechanism of semantic vacancy and its typological classification, and it establishes a three-dimensional compensation framework for the attenuation of cultural information. Based on equivalence theory, this study proposes the weighing parameters between functional equivalence and formal correspondence, the criteria for determining the boundaries of domestication and foreignization strategies, and a hierarchical processing scheme for culture-specific items. In terms of optimization paths, this study constructs a multi-indicator evaluation system for the retention degree of source language cultural features, establishes two adaptation principles for the target language recipients' cognitive context, and summarizes three core methods for improving cross-cultural communication effectiveness. Future research can be deepened in the following directions: first, to conduct quantitative descriptions and statistical validations of the distribution of processing strategies for various types of culture-loaded words based on large-scale bilingual parallel corpora; second, to carry out target language readers' acceptance experiments to test the effectiveness differences of different strategy combinations in actual communication scenarios; and third, to explore a collaborative processing model combining machine translation and human proofreading, so as to improve the large-scale processing efficiency of Japanese translation of culture-loaded words.

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