

TRANSLATING CHINESE REALIA INTO ARMENIAN: A CASE STUDY OF YU  
HUA'S TO LIVE

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the present paper is to investigate the translation methods of Chinese culture-specific items (realia) suggested by authors in translating the Chinese novel *To Live* (*活着*) by *Yu Hua* into Armenian, as well as the factors influencing the authors' choice of Chinese culture-specific realia translation strategies. This study takes realia as the research object and discusses their translation challenges, as well as evaluates appropriate strategies for their effective transference into the Armenian cultural and linguistic context. In this study, authors mainly used transcription plus footnote translation strategy which allowed to preserve phonetic and cultural nuances of the source material.

**Keywords:** Culture-specific item, Realia, Translation methods, Strategies.

**Introduction.** In recent years, the growing cultural, economic, and political ties between China and Armenia have significantly increased interest in the Chinese language across the country. As more Armenians seek to learn Chinese and engage with Chinese literature, media, and official documents, translation activities from Chinese into Armenian have seen a noticeable rise. This growth in translation work has brought to light several challenges—particularly when it comes to conveying Chinese realia, or culturally specific items, in a way that makes sense to Armenian readers. As a result, the issue of translating Chinese realia has become an increasingly important topic for linguists and translators.

Language is the main means of recognizing the cultural characteristics of a nation, and its guardian, and a tool for reproducing this information in the languages of other cultures. According to V.A. Maslova, “Language is a part of culture that we inherit from our ancestors”; and “Language is the main tool with which we assimilate culture” (Maslova, 2001: 256). These statements allow us to conclude that the bearer of language is the bearer of culture, language is a mirror that reflects the views

and beliefs of the people who speak that language. Culture and language constantly have a mutual influence on each other, and language is a component of culture and at the same time its tool.

In every language, there exist lexical units that lack direct dictionary equivalents in other languages. These units are referred to as *realia* or culture-specific items. They denote objects, concepts, or phenomena that are unique to a particular culture, and as such, often pose challenges for translation and cross-cultural communication. Most of these words rarely become part of the borrowing language's lexicon, in contrast to regular loanwords. However, it should be noted that in recent decades, intercultural interactions have become so dynamic that many culture-specific items have begun to spread rapidly and, over time, may transition from being purely national *realia* to becoming standard loanwords (Qamalyan, 2020: 67).

Nowadays, both Armenian and foreign linguists pay a lot of attention to the study of 'specific vocabulary', however, there is still no prevailing view on this subject. Moreover, there are opposing views on the concept of 'realia or culture-specific item', and this term is used by many authors with different meanings.

The term 'realia' has been widely used in translation studies since the middle of the XX century after the Bulgarian researchers S. Vlahov and S. Florin published their work 'The Untranslatable in Translation'. According to the authors, *realia* are a vivid example of untranslatable elements of the text (Vlahov, Florin, 1980). Peter Newmark (1988) referred to *realia* as "cultural words," emphasizing techniques like transference and functional equivalence to preserve cultural meaning. Later, Susan Bassnett (1991) and Lawrence Venuti (1995) situated *realia* within the broader "cultural turn" in translation studies, with Venuti's notions of foreignization and domestication directly impacting the ethical and practical handling of *realia*. Mona Baker (1992) further contributed practical strategies for translating culture-bound terms, including paraphrasing, cultural substitution, and the use of glosses.

L. Nelubin in his "Explanatory Translation Dictionary" gives four definitions of the term 'realia' such as "1. Words or expressions, denoting objects, concepts, situations, that do not exist in the practical experience of people speaking other languages... 4. Words, denoting national-specific features of life" (Nelubin, 2008).

In translation studies, *realia* mainly refer to culture-specific words or expressions that denote objects, concepts, or phenomena unique to a particular culture—such as food, clothing, traditions, geography, traditional medicine, political activities, etc. These terms often lack direct equivalents in other languages, making them challenging to translate. Scholars have developed categorizations to classify *realia* or culture-specific items, each contributing unique perspectives that have shaped the field.

The Soviet linguists S. Vlahov and S. Florin are credited with systematically developing the concept of *realia* in translation studies. They define *realia* as "words and expressions that denote objects, concepts, and phenomena characteristic of a given culture and absent from others" (Vlahov & Florin, 2012: 47). Their classification is based primarily on the subject field and includes the following categories:

- Geographical *realia* (e.g., names of rivers, mountains, regions),
- Ethnographic *realia*, encompassing daily life, food, clothing, housing, tools, and traditions,
- Political and social *realia*, including administrative structures, political movements, and customs.

Their model emphasizes the ethnographic and socio-historical dimensions of realia, making it particularly useful for literary and historical texts.

P. Newmark's classification is translator-oriented and widely cited for its practical guidance in addressing cultural references (Newmark, 1988: 94–102). He organizes them into five categories:

1. Ecology (e.g., flora, fauna, geography)
2. Material culture (e.g., food, clothing, architecture)
3. Social culture (e.g., leisure activities)
4. Organizations, customs, ideas (e.g., political, religious, or artistic terms)
5. Gestures and habits

Armenian linguist A. Qamalyan in her “Fundamentals of Translation Theory” textbook mentions 13 categories of culture-specific items: *national dishes, beverages, spices; national musical instruments; national dances; units of measurement and currency; titles, positions, and ranks; household realia, objects, and items characteristic of a given nation, region, or lifestyle; elements of national costume; ethnographic, mythological, and legendary realia; flora and fauna unique to a given country or region; geographical realia; socio-political realia; forms of addressing; historical realia* – words or expressions referring to objects, phenomena, or concepts unique to the historical development of a particular nation or people, which typically do not exist in the conceptual framework or language of other nations (Qamalyan, 2020: 67-69).

**Methods and material.** The study's data come from both the original text (Yu Hua's *To Live in Chinese*, 1993) and the examples of sentences that are translated into Armenian by authors. It is worth mentioning that many mainstream media such as the Washington Post, Time magazine, and Seattle Times spoke highly of Yu Hua's work, and the English version of *To Live* ranked first in the American book list for a long time (Tang, 2021: 270). Originally banned in China but later named one of that nation's most influential books, a searing novel that portrays one man's transformation from the spoiled son of a landlord to a kindhearted peasant. The novel has not been translated into Armenian yet. Therefore, it was chosen as the research data. Realia are carefully chosen so that readers can get a clear idea of what realia are and how to analyze translation strategies.

While the concept of realia has been examined from a theoretical and historical perspective, the practical side of translating these culture-specific items presents significant challenges. The lack of direct equivalents, deep cultural associations, and the risk of misinterpretation or loss of meaning make realia one of the most problematic aspects in translation. This is particularly evident in language pairs with distinct cultural frameworks, such as Chinese and Armenian.

The translation of realia has long been a subject of debate in translation studies. Different scholars have proposed their own classifications and techniques to address the unique challenges realia present.

Soviet linguists S. Vlahov and S. Florin were among the first to systematize the concept of realia in translation. They defined realia as lexical units that denote objects or concepts specific to a particular culture, lacking direct equivalents in other languages. Their classification focuses on three main strategies:

- *Transcription or Transliteration* – Retaining the original form phonetically.
- *Literal Translation (Calque)* – Word-for-word rendering.

- *Descriptive Translation* – Explaining the meaning in a descriptive way.

They also suggested the use of *footnotes, explanations, or commentaries* when necessary. Their approach is widely considered foundational in the field (Vlahov & Florin, 2012).

Newmark's classification for translation strategies included: *naturalization, shifts or transpositions, transference, modulation, recognized translation, descriptive equivalent, componential analysis, synonymy, through-translation, cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, compensation, couplets, paraphrase, notes* (Newmark, 1988).

A.V. Fedorov believes that it is not right to talk about the 'translation' of realias, because realia is an extralinguistic concept and cannot 'be translated'; we can talk about the translation of the names of realias (culture-bound words or word-realias). A.V. Fedorov offers four ways of translating culture-bound words, namely *transliteration or transcription* (full or partial); *creation of a new word*, a compound word, or a word combination; *approximate translation*; *translation with a more specific term* (hyponym) (Fedorov, 2002).

According to A. Qamalyan culture-specific items are typically translated using several methods:

a) They may be *transliterated or transcribed*, considering the characteristics of the target language as well as its cultural and translational traditions.

b) At times, they are translated through *calquing* (full or partial loan translations) or *semantic translation*. Even in such cases, they are generally perceived as phenomena specific to the culture or lifestyle of another country or people.

c) They may also be translated using *an approximate equivalent*.

d) Sometimes a *descriptive translation* is used, where the culture-specific item is rendered and explained using a phrase or a sentence in the target language. Descriptive translation may also be accompanied by *transliteration*. Descriptive translation can appear not only in the main text but also as a *footnote*.

Culture-specific items that gradually become part of the everyday life and usage of another culture often lose their sense of foreignness and may eventually be reclassified as standard loanwords. These are most commonly names of foods, fruits, vegetables, and spices—such as pelmeni, cognac, khachapuri, and pizza (Qamalyan, 2020: 69-70).

**Results and Discussion.** The research will explore applied translation strategies from the classification of culture-specific realia through the analysis of the following instances. Here are some sentences from Yu Hua's novel *To Live* in Chinese that contain Chinese culture-specific items or realia deeply embedded in Chinese culture, society, or history. The authors have selected examples that reflect aspects such as customs and habits, festivals, food, and units of measurement. Each example includes the original Chinese, translation into Armenian, a brief explanation of the cultural element, and translation strategy:

### Festivals

“逢年过节我们总要去贴春联。”

Translation: “Նոր տարուն մենք միշտ կպցնում ենք բարեմաղթանքներով զույգ կարմիր շարվածքներ դռան կողքերին:”

春联 (chūnlián) - red banners with poetic lines expressing blessings for the New Year — a key decorative tradition.

Translation method: This translation employs a **descriptive translation** method, which is often used to convey culture-specific concepts that may not have an equivalent in the target language. This method helps to bridge the cultural gap and maintains the meaning of the source text while making it accessible to the target audience.

“清明那天，我带着有庆去上坟。”

Translation: “Յինմին փառատոնին\* ես տարա Յուուցինին այցելելու գերեզմանները:”

Footnote\*: Չինական ավանդական տոն է, որի ժամանակ մարդիկ հարգում են իրենց նախնիներին՝ այցելելով նրանց գերեզմանները և մաքրելով գերեզմանաքարերը:

清明 (Qingming Festival) is a traditional Chinese festival when families honor their ancestors by cleaning graves and making offerings.

Translation method: The translation method employed here is **transcription plus footnote**, which effectively preserves the original terms while providing additional context for clarity. This combination of transcription and footnoting allows the translator to preserve the original cultural flavor of the text while ensuring that the target audience has access to the necessary background information.

“那年中秋，家珍蒸了几个月饼给孩子吃。”

Translation: “Այդ տարի լուսնի տոնին\* Ճյանընը երեխաների համար մի քանի լուսնային կարկանդակ էր պատրաստել:”

Footnote\*: Լուսնի տոնը, որը նաև անվանում են Աշնան կեսի տոն, նշվում է չինական լուսնային օրացույցի 8-րդ ամսվա 15-րդ օրը և խորհրդանշում է ընտանեկան վերամիավորում ու բերքառատությունը: Տոնի ժամանակ պատրաստում են տարբեր միջուկներով լուսնային կարկանդակներ:

中秋节 (Moon Festival or Mid-Autumn Festival) emphasizes family reunion, completeness and unity.

Translation method: In this sentence, for translating 中秋 **calque** is the primary method used, with elements of **cultural substitution** to bridge the gap between the source and target languages. The translators adapted the term 中秋 into Armenian by using a familiar English term, ensuring that the meaning is accessible to the audience while maintaining the integrity of the original text. The inclusion of a footnote enriches the translation by providing essential background information about the Mid-Autumn Festival, allowing the reader to understand the cultural context of the holiday and ensuring the meaning of the source text is preserved.

### Food

“那年过年，家里只包了十几个饺子。”

Translation: “Այդ տարի Նոր տարուն տանը միայն պատրաստել էին տասից ավել **ձյառծը**\*:”

Footnote\*: Չինական անվանական պելմեններ, որոնք համարվում են չինական Նոր տարվա հիմնական խորհրդանշաններից մեկը:

包饺子 (making dumplings) — Dumplings are traditional food for Lunar New Year, symbolizing wealth and reunion.

Translation method: The translation method used here is **transcription plus footnote**.

“那时候我们吃的是红薯叶子熬的汤。”

Translation: “Այն ժամանակ մեր ուտելիքն էր **քաղցր կարտոֆիլի տերևներով ապուրը:**”

红薯叶子汤 (sweet potato leaf soup) - Chinese rural dish which was cooked in poor families.

Translation method: The translation of 红薯叶子 as “քաղցր կարտոֆիլի տերևներ” uses a **descriptive calque**, maintaining the structure of the original while replacing misleading elements with accurate equivalents. This ensures clarity for the target audience, as 红薯 specifically refers to sweet potatoes, not red-skinned potatoes. A direct calque like “կարմիր կարտոֆիլ” could confuse Armenian readers unfamiliar with the term.

“那年中秋，家珍蒸了几个月饼给孩子吃。”

Translation: “Այդ տարի լուսնի տոնին Ծյանընը երեխաների համար մի քանի **լուսնային կարկանդակ** էր պատրաստել:”

月饼 (mooncake) is a traditional Chinese pastry eaten during the Mid-Autumn Festival, which celebrates the full moon, family reunion, and harvest. It typically symbolizes completeness and togetherness.

Translation method: In this translation, **calque** is the method used for 月饼.

#### Customs and habits

“娶媳妇要请全村人吃喜酒。”

Translation: “Երբ տղամարդիկ ամուսնանում էին, ապա պետք է ամբողջ գյուղին հրավիրեին մասնակցելու **հարսանեկան խնջույքին:**”

喜酒 (wedding wine) is a traditional celebratory feast for weddings in rural China, where food and drink are shared among extended community members.

Translation method: In this sentence, **the descriptive translation method** is used to convey the culturally specific term 喜酒 in a way that is both accurate and accessible to Armenian readers. It successfully adapts the cultural content by describing the term’s function and meaning, ensuring clarity without requiring additional explanation. Instead of translating it literally (which might be confusing or unnatural in Armenian), the phrase is rendered descriptively as “հարսանեկան խնջույք” (wedding banquet).

“有个小孩过满月，全村人都去喝满月酒。”

Translation: “Երբ լրանում էր երեխայի մեկ ամիսը, ամբողջ գյուղը գնում էր **շնորհավորելու:**”

满月酒 (full-month banquet) is a traditional celebration when a baby turns one month old, thanking relatives and neighbors, and symbolizing survival in earlier times when infant mortality was high.

Translation method: The translation of 满月酒 as “շնորհավորելու” employs the **omission with implicit cultural substitution** method. By omitting the specific cultural item (the "full moon wine") and focusing instead on the general celebratory action, the translator adapts the sentence in a way that makes it more comprehensible for Armenian readers, who may not be familiar with this particular Chinese custom. The translation maintains the spirit of the original text, even if it doesn't directly convey all the details.

“娶媳妇得靠全家人攒钱，没彩礼哪能成？”

Translation: “Տղային ամուսնացնելու համար ամբողջ ընտանիքը ստիպված էր գումար խնայել, ինչպես կարելի է առանց **հարսնացուի հատուցագնի**: ”

彩礼 (bride price) is a longstanding custom in Chinese marriage transactions, reflecting familial involvement in marriage as an alliance, not just a romantic union.

Translation method: The translation of 彩礼 as “հարսնացուի հատուցագնի” employs a **descriptive translation** that substitutes the culturally specific term with a more broadly understandable equivalent in the target language. This strategy ensures clarity and cultural relevance, even if the practices differ slightly between cultures.

#### Units of measurement

“那时候我们家的地有一百多亩，从这边一直到那边的烟囱，全是我们家的。”

Translation: “Այն ժամանակ մեր ընտանիքը ուներ հարյուրից ավել **մու**\* հողատարածք, այս կողմից ձգվում էր մինչև այնտեղի ծխնետույզը, ամբողջը մերն էր:”

Footnote\*: Հողի մակերեսի չինական չափման միավոր: 1 亩 = 666,7 մ<sup>2</sup>

亩 (mu) is a traditional Chinese unit of land measurement, equivalent to about 1/6 of an acre.

Translation method: The term 亩 (mu) has been **transcribed** directly as “մու” in Armenian, with a **footnote** provided to explain its meaning and equivalent in square meters. This ensures that the translation is both culturally accurate and comprehensible for Armenian readers.

“有庆十来岁的时候，一天两次来去就得跑五十多里路。”

Translation: “Երբ Յոուցիանը մոտ տաս տարեկան էր, մեկ օրվա մեջ գնալ գալու համար պետք է անցներ հիսունից ավել **լի**\* ճանապարհ:”

Footnote\*: Հեռավորության չինական չափման միավոր: 1 里 = 500 մետր:

里 (li) is a Chinese unit of distance. One 里 is equal to 500 meters.

Translation method: **Transcription** is used because 里 (li) is a specific Chinese unit of distance with no direct equivalent in Armenian. The **footnote** helps to bridge this gap by explaining the meaning of 里 and offering a conversion to a more familiar unit (meters).

**Conclusion.** In this study, authors examined various classifications of translation methods proposed by different linguists, analyzing their approaches and categorization systems. While these classifications offer valuable insights into the translation process, authors found out that the above-mentioned classifications for culture specific items didn't fully correspond to the material chosen. Thus, the following translation methods were used (with numbers corresponding to times):

- transcription plus footnote - 4,
- calque - 3,
- descriptive translation - 3,
- omission - 1.

As a result, authors mainly used transcription plus footnote translation strategy which allowed to preserve phonetic and cultural nuances of the source material. This dual method ensures that readers gain a deeper insight into both the literal and the underlying cultural meanings, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the material. The footnote compensates for the lack of a direct

equivalent in the target language, making the cultural reference understandable without altering the text's meaning.

The translation process does not only involve two languages but also two different cultures. In this study, we deal with two totally different language systems, absolutely different cultures. From the connection among cultural words and translation procedures analysis, we can conclude that every cultural word class requires different translation strategies.

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