

A Study on Eileen Chang's Translation Style: Taking Her Translation of *The Old Man and the Sea* as an Example

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the unique translation style of the renowned writer Eileen Chang in translating the masterpiece *The Old Man and the Sea* by American literary giant Ernest Hemingway. By introducing Eileen Chang's life background, literary achievements, and translation philosophy, and combining specific textual analysis, this paper attempts to reveal how Eileen Chang, while preserving the original style, integrates her personal linguistic characteristics to present a classic translation that is both faithful and innovative to Chinese readers. The study finds that Eileen Chang focuses on the rhythm of language, cultural adaptability, and sincere emotional expression in the translation process, all of which together constitute her translation style.

Keywords: Translation style, Cultural adaptability, Emotional expression.

1. Introduction

The essence of translation is to convey information expressed in one language into another, and the translation of literary works strives to convey the artistic conception of the original work. When a work created in one linguistic context is transmitted to another, the translator, in order to achieve the same artistic effect in the target language as in the original, will mobilize and inspire their life experiences to grasp the spirit of the original work as much as possible. Different translators have different life experiences, creative styles, and translation styles, which often conceal the thoughts and emotions of both the author and the translator. These styles are often embedded in the language and form of the work, and the translator's thoughts and emotions naturally adhere to the translation. Among the many versions of *The Old Man and the Sea* in China, the translation by Wu Lao is widely circulated, but the most vivid translation is that by Eileen Chang.

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing) is a prominent figure in modern Chinese literature, known for her dual identity as both a writer and a translator. Her literary works often explore themes of love, loss, and cultural identity, while her translations reflect her deep understanding of both Western and Chinese literary traditions. Chang's translation of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is particularly noteworthy within the context of Chinese literary translation. It not only showcases her ability to convey the original's emotional depth and stylistic nuances but also highlights her innovative approach to bridging cultural gaps.

The significance of this research lies in its exploration of Chang's translation style and its cultural-literary implications, shedding light on how her unique perspective as a writer informs her translation practice. By studying her work, we gain insights into the complexities of translating literature across cultural boundaries and the role of the translator as a cultural mediator.

The Old Man and the Sea tells the story of an old Cuban fisherman, Santiago, who has gone 84 days without catching a fish. He finally hooks a giant marlin. After a grueling struggle lasting three days and nights, he manages to catch the fish, only to have it gradually devoured by sharks on his way back. In the end, the old man returns to the harbor with only the skeleton of the fish, yet he remains undaunted in spirit.

Hemingway's writing style is renowned for its simplicity and power. His "iceberg theory" advocates that words should be like an iceberg, with only one-eighth exposed above the surface and the rest hidden beneath. *The Old Man and the Sea* is a quintessential example of this theory. Through simple narration and dialogue, it conveys rich emotions and profound themes. At the beginning of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway uses two parallel sentences to introduce the time, place, and characters of the story. The vocabulary is simple and easy to understand, and the sentence structure is concise and clear. The narrative unfolds in a gentle and comfortable tone, allowing readers to effortlessly enter the reading context. How to convey Hemingway's unique linguistic characteristics is a great challenge for translators.

1.2 Literature Review

Previous studies on Eileen Chang's translation works have primarily focused on her stylistic choices and the fidelity of her translations to the original texts. Scholars have noted her ability to maintain the emotional resonance of the source material while adapting it for Chinese readers. Additionally, existing scholarship on Chinese translations of *The Old Man and the Sea* has highlighted the challenges of preserving Hemingway's distinctive prose style in translation. However, there remains a gap in comprehensive analyses that specifically examine Chang's translation strategies and their implications for understanding her dual identity as a writer and translator. This study aims to fill that gap, contributing to the broader discourse on translation studies and the complexities of cross-cultural literary exchange.

Eileen Chang, a prominent figure in the realm of Chinese

literature, is noted not only for her own literary creations but also for her significant contributions as a translator. While previous studies on Chang's translation works have predominantly centered on her stylistic choices and the fidelity of her translations to the original texts, this analysis aims to delve deeper into her translation strategies, especially in the context of her dual identity as both a writer and a translator. By examining this aspect, we will explore how Chang navigates the nuances of cultural translation, and how her personal and cultural experiences inform her approaches to translation.

1.2.1 Chang's Stylistic Choices

Eileen Chang's translations have been acclaimed for their ability to resonate emotionally with readers while remaining faithful to the source material. This characteristic of her work is particularly notable in her translations of Western literature, where she adapts the text not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a cultural engagement. Chang's translations often retain a lyrical quality, reflecting her own narrative style in her original works. The emotional depth she imparts in her translations serves to bridge the cultural gap between the original text and its new audience, resulting in a reading experience that feels both authentic and relatable.

The concept of fidelity in translation, which examines how closely a translation adheres to the source material, comes with its own set of challenges, particularly in the context of literary translations. In her translations, Chang exhibits a keen understanding of the balance between staying true to the original text and adapting it for her intended audience. For instance, in the case of her translation of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, she faced the daunting task of preserving Hemingway's distinctive prose style, characterized by its minimalism and simplicity. Chang's approach often involves reinterpreting complex emotional landscapes into culturally resonant concepts for Chinese readers. This process highlights her strategic use of language, where she might choose phrases that evoke similar feelings rather than direct translations of sentences, thus allowing her translations to be emotionally faithful even if they are not literally so.

1.2.2 Challenges in Translating Hemingway

Hemingway's writing style, marked by laconic sentences and subtle subtext, presents unique challenges in translation. Chang's adept handling of these complexities showcases her linguistic skills and her deep understanding of both source and target cultures. Many scholars argue that maintaining the integrity of Hemingway's voice in translation requires more than a surface-level approach to language; it necessitates an appreciation of the thematic elements behind the prose. Chang's choice to emphasize certain emotional states over rigid adherence to the text allows her to capture the essence of Hemingway's storytelling while making it accessible to Chinese readers.

As a translator, Chang navigates the interplay between her cultural identity and the texts she engages with. Born in Shanghai to a well-educated family, and later living in a Western context, her dual identity grants her a unique

perspective that is reflected in her translation philosophy. She often finds herself in a position to reinterpret cultural nuances, thereby enriching the target text with insights drawn from her bicultural experiences. This ability to function effectively in both cultural contexts speaks volumes about her skill as a translator and her deep understanding of cross-cultural communication.

1.2.3 Implications for Understanding Chang's Dual Identity

The study of Chang's translation strategies lends itself to broader discussions about identity and representation in translation studies. Her dual identity as a Chinese writer and a translator of Western literature allows her to serve as an intermediary, translating not just words but cultural experiences. This positions Chang as a vital figure in the conversation surrounding globalization and literary exchange, as she offers unique insights into how cultural narratives can be adapted and reinterpreted across different linguistic landscapes.

In addition, Chang's translations may be seen as an act of cultural negotiation, where she not only translates but also transforms the narratives to resonate with the expectations and sensibilities of her readers. This transformation is inherently tied to her own experiences as an expatriate, navigating the complexities of belonging to and representing multiple cultures. Her translations thus become a reflection of her quest for identity, allowing readers to glean insights not only about the original text but also about the cultural contexts that shape both the source and the target narratives.

In summary, Eileen Chang's translation works present rich opportunities for academic exploration. While previous scholarship has rightly acknowledged her stylistic prowess and fidelity to the original texts, there remains a need for a deeper analysis of her translation strategies and the implications they have for understanding her dual identity as a writer and translator. By examining her adaptation of Western literature through a cultural lens, we not only gain insight into her personal narrative but also contribute to the larger discourse on translation studies and the intricacies of cross-cultural literary exchange. This exploration emphasizes that translation is not merely a technical skill but a profound act of cultural interpretation, making the act of translating as significant as the literary works themselves.

2. An Overview of Translator Subjectivity and Eileen Chang's Translation Philosophy

2.1 Translator Subjectivity in Literary Translation

Translator subjectivity in literary translation has gained increasing recognition in the field of translation studies. This theory posits that translators do not occupy a neutral position; rather, their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and emotional responses significantly shape the translation process. As such, the subjective lens through which a translator views a text can influence the final product in ways that go beyond mere linguistic translation. This essay will explore the concept of translator subjectivity, supported by relevant examples, to highlight its impact on literary translation.

Translator subjectivity refers to the inherent biases, interpretations, and emotional responses that translators bring to their work. According to Venuti (1995), translation is not a straightforward transfer of meaning but a complex process shaped by the translator's identity, cultural context, and individual worldview. This perspective challenges the traditional notion of objectivity in translation, suggesting instead that the translator's voice is integral to the interpretation of the text.

For instance, when translating literary works, a translator's cultural background can deeply affect their choices. An American translator handling a novel by a Chinese author may interpret cultural references through the lens of their own upbringing, potentially altering the meaning and tone of the original text. As Huang (2017) notes, translators often find themselves negotiating cultural elements that may not have direct equivalents in the target language, leading to subjective decisions that reflect their understanding of both cultures. The role of translator subjectivity in literary translation. The implications of translator subjectivity are profound, as they challenge the role of the translator as a mere conduit for meaning. Rather, translators emerge as active participants in the creation of textual interpretations. Their subjective experiences shape not only the linguistic aspects of the translation but also the emotional and cultural resonances that emerge in the final product.

One important consideration is how translator subjectivity can lead to both enriched interpretations and potential misrepresentations of the original text. For example, an overly subjective translation might impose the translator's own cultural biases, thereby distorting the author's voice or intent. This is particularly critical in sensitive texts that deal with cultural identity, historical context, or political issues, as highlighted by Bassnett (2002). The responsibility of the translator extends beyond linguistic skill; they must navigate their subjectivity carefully to remain true to the original's spirit while also making it accessible to a new audience.

In conclusion, translator subjectivity plays a crucial role in literary translation, shaping both the process and the outcome. As illustrated through examples from esteemed literary translations, the translator's personal experiences, cultural background, and emotional interpretations fundamentally influence the way a text is rendered into another language. While subjectivity can enrich translations and enhance readers' engagement with the text, it also poses challenges in maintaining fidelity to the original work. Understanding the implications of this subjectivity is crucial for both translators and readers, as it shapes our understanding of cross-cultural literary exchange, emphasizing that translation is as much an art as it is a science.

2.2 Eileen Chang's Translation Philosophy: Between Fidelity and Creative Interpretation

Eileen Chang (1920–1995), renowned for her literary mastery in both Chinese and English, developed a distinctive translation philosophy that blended linguistic precision with creative adaptation. Her approach to translation was deeply informed by her bilingual upbringing, her modernist sensibilities, and her preoccupation with the nuances of

cultural and emotional expression.

Chang prioritized the conveyance of cultural and emotional essence rather than rigid word-for-word fidelity. Her translations often involved subtle shifts in idiom, imagery, or syntax to preserve the "spirit" of the original text. For instance, in her self-translations (*The Golden Cangue*, *The Rouge of the North*), she reworked metaphors and dialogues to resonate with Anglophone readers while retaining the psychological depth of her Chinese narratives.

As a writer-translator, Chang treated translation as an act of reinterpretation. When translating her own works, she exercised artistic license—revising descriptions, streamlining plots, or amplifying certain themes—to suit the target audience. This practice reflects her belief that translation is not merely reproduction but a parallel creative process.

Chang's translations often mirrored her own literary style: elliptical, evocative, and laden with sensory detail. She embraced the hybridity of language, occasionally infusing English translations with Chinese rhetorical flourishes (e.g., proverbs or indirect speech) to evoke cultural specificity. Conversely, her Chinese translations of Western works, such as *The Old Man and the Sea*, incorporated vernacular fluency without sacrificing the original's tone.

Chang's focus on inner lives shaped her translating choices. She meticulously rendered psychological subtleties—such as unspoken tensions or repressed desires—through deliberate lexical and rhythmic adjustments. Her translation of *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* (《海上花列传》), for example, reimagines 19th-century Shanghainese courtesan culture with a modernist lens, balancing archival authenticity with emotional immediacy.

Unlike contemporaneous translators her translations avoided over-explanation, trusting readers to navigate cultural gaps. This stance aligned with her critique of Orientalist narratives in her essays.

Chang's philosophy occasionally sparked debate. Critics noted her liberties with source texts, while admirers praised her ability to "rewrite" across languages without losing textual soul. Her work remains a touchstone for discussions on agency, creativity, and the translator's visibility.

3. Chang's Translation Style in the Reflection of Hemingway's Original Themes

Eileen Chang's translation of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* reflects the original themes through a combination of faithful rendition and culturally nuanced adaptation. Her translation not only preserves the core themes of perseverance, dignity, and the human spirit in the face of adversity but also enhances the reader's engagement by integrating cultural and stylistic elements that resonate with Chinese readers.

Firstly, Chang's translation captures the essence of Hemingway's "iceberg theory," which emphasizes the underlying depth and complexity beneath the surface simplicity of the narrative (He 2024). By maintaining the

concise and powerful style of Hemingway's prose, Chang conveys the universal themes of the novella, such as the old man's struggle against nature and his unwavering determination (Farooqui 2021). For instance, the iconic line "A man can be destroyed but not defeated" is translated in a way that retains its philosophical weight and inspirational impact (Farooqui 2021).

Secondly, Chang's translation highlights the cultural and emotional depth of the story. She employs a delicate and sensitive approach to convey the old man's inner world, emphasizing his loneliness, resilience, and reverence for nature (Chen 2023). This approach aligns with Hemingway's portrayal of Santiago as a tragic hero whose battle against the marlin symbolizes the human struggle for dignity and self-affirmation (Farooqui 2021). Chang's translation thus bridges the cultural gap by making these themes more accessible to Chinese readers while preserving their original significance (Chen 2023).

Moreover, Chang's translation reflects Hemingway's themes through her unique stylistic choices. She uses vivid and evocative language to describe the old man's physical and emotional journey, thereby enhancing the reader's emotional connection to the story (Chen 2023). Her translation also incorporates cultural references and contextual nuances that help Chinese readers better understand the setting and background of the story (Chen 2023). For example, she carefully translates culturally specific terms and idioms to ensure that the translation remains faithful to the original while being comprehensible to the target audience (He 2024).

In summary, Eileen Chang's translation of *The Old Man and the Sea* successfully reflects Hemingway's original themes by combining fidelity to the source text with a culturally sensitive and stylistically nuanced approach. Her translation not only conveys the universal messages of perseverance and dignity but also enriches the reader's experience through its unique literary charm (Chen 2023).

3.1 Linguistic Features

This part will analyze Chang's lexical choices, comparing key terms from Hemingway's original text with her translations. It will also look at syntactic structures, focusing on how she adapts sentence rhythm and punctuation to fit the flow of Chinese prose. Eileen Chang focuses on character portrayal during the translation process. By describing the characters' language and actions, she makes the roles in the translation more three-dimensional and vivid. For example, she translates the old fisherman's monologue very vividly, allowing readers to feel his loneliness and strength.

Eileen Chang pays great attention to vocabulary selection during the translation process. She prefers to use simple and vivid words to convey the artistic conception of the original work. For example, the original "old man" is translated as "老渔夫," which not only accurately conveys the character's identity but also enhances the visual impact.

Eileen Chang is adept at using the sentence structure of the Chinese language to make the translation more fluent and natural. She often breaks down long English sentences into

multiple short sentences to adapt to the Chinese expression habits. For example, the compound sentence in the original, "Then he lay on the planks of the skiff and slept and dreamed of Africa when he was a boy and the long golden beaches and the white-capped mountains and the plains where the lions were in the sun," is translated as: "他躺在小船的木板上睡着了, 梦见自己小时候在非洲的情景: 长长的金色沙滩, 戴着雪帽的高山, 还有阳光下的草原上的狮子。"

Another example is "He put his left hand on the rope and held it against the rough wood of the bow and leaned all his weight against the hand and brought the fish around with the pressure." Eileen Chang translated it into "他把左手放在绳子上, 靠在船头粗糙的木头上, 用全身的重量压住手, 用力把鱼拉了过来". In this description, Eileen Chang vividly recreates the scene of the old fisherman's struggle with the fish through specific action descriptions. She uses verbs like "放在," "压住," "靠在," and "拉" to convey the old fisherman's effort and determination.

3.2 Cultural Adaptation

The handling of culturally specific references, such as maritime terminology and Western idioms, will be explored. The analysis will discuss how Chang balances the authenticity of the source text with the accessibility for target readers, ensuring that the translation resonates within the Chinese cultural context.

Eileen Chang fully considers the differences between Chinese and Western cultures during the translation process. She uses annotations or rephrasing to make the translation more accessible to Chinese readers. For example, she adds annotations to explain details related to Western culture. Additionally, she adjusts certain expressions according to Chinese habits to make them more natural. Eileen Chang skillfully incorporates Chinese elements to make the translation more relatable. For example, when describing the old fisherman's loneliness, she uses metaphors with traditional Chinese cultural connotations, such as "他像是孤独的行者, 行走在无边的荒漠中".

In her translator's preface, Eileen Chang wrote that she had no interest in dangerous sports such as whale hunting or lion hunting, and she was even surprised that she liked *The Old Man and the Sea*. It seems that what moved Eileen Chang was not the hard-man spirit displayed in the work, but something deeper. The linguistic charm of Hemingway and the "bittersweet" and "melancholic" life implications in the story truly resonated with her. Hemingway's seemingly plain writing style is in line with the "plain and natural language style" that Eileen Chang later advocated.

"He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish." is translated into "他是一个老渔夫, 独自一人在墨西哥湾流中捕鱼, 现在已经连续八十四天没有捕到鱼了". Eileen Chang uses a literal translation method here to accurately convey the information of the original text. At the same time, she enhances the visual impact through descriptions like "独自一人" and "在墨西哥湾流," allowing readers to intuitively feel the old fisherman's loneliness and

hardship.

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3.3 Narrative Voice and Aesthetic Coherence

This section will examine how Chang reproduces Hemingway's terse prose style in Chinese, including her use of rhetorical devices like metaphors and symbolism to mirror the original tone. The aim is to highlight her ability to maintain aesthetic coherence while adapting the narrative voice for a different audience.

"Come on," the old man said to himself. "Make another turn. Smell them. Aren't these sardines lovely? Eat them well, and then you can have the tuna—hard, cold, and lovely. Don't be shy, fish. Eat them." Eileen Chang translated it into "“来来，”老人自言自语。”再兜一个圈子。你闻闻看。这沙丁鱼可爱不可爱？好好地吃它们吧，不时还可以吃吃那鲐鱼，硬硬的，冷的，可爱的，鱼，别怕难为情。吃吧”。In the dialogue between the old man and the fish, Eileen Chang translates "Aren't they lovely?" into the more feminine "这沙丁鱼可爱不可爱?" This makes readers feel that the old man is using a language style inconsistent with his own to lure the fish. Hemingway's simple description of the bait as "Hard and cold and lovely" is translated by Eileen Chang into "硬硬的，冷的，可爱的。” The use of reduplication ("硬硬的") and the word "可爱的" with the particle "的" may make it difficult for readers to imagine such a resolute hero using such feminine expressions. Here, Eileen Chang unconsciously reveals her identity as a female translator.

4. Conclusion

The study summarizes the distinctive features of Eileen Chang's translation style, emphasizing her fluidity, literariness, and cultural mediation. It also highlights her contributions to modern Chinese translation practices, illustrating how her work has enriched the field. Through the analysis of Eileen Chang's translation of *The Old Man and the Sea*, we can see that she focuses on the rhythm of language, cultural adaptability, and sincere emotional expression in the translation process. By carefully selecting vocabulary, adjusting sentence structure, handling cultural differences, and delicately depicting emotions, she successfully transforms Hemingway's original work into a classic translation that is both faithful and innovative. Eileen Chang's translation style not only enriches the practice of Chinese literary translation but also provides valuable references for cross-cultural communication.

Acknowledgements

Liaoning University of International Business and Economics Undergraduate Innovation and Entrepreneurship Project - A Study on Zhang Ailing's English Translation Style - Taking

Zhang Ailing's Translation of *The Old Man and the Sea* as an Example, Project No.: 2021XJDCA109

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