

# A Study on Chinese Modern Prose Translation Strategy from the Perspective of High Context Culture and Low Context Culture

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**Abstract:** As the carrier of Chinese culture and thought, prose, especially modern prose, is becoming more and more popular abroad, which enjoys great reputations in other cultures. This thesis bases on Edward T. Hall's theory of high and low context culture, with Zhang Peiji, Zhu Chunshen, Wang Jiaosheng and Liu Shicong's prose translations as examples, which attempts to analyze the application of different translation strategies in Chinese to English prose translation under the framework of high and low context cultural theory, hoping to provide referential value for further prose translation. This study on Chinese modern prose translation strategy will be analyzed from the perspective of high context culture and low context culture.

**Keywords:** Chinese modern prose; High and low context culture; Prose translation strategies

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## Introduction

With the rapid development of Chinese literature, more and more Chinese literary works have been translated into foreign languages in order to seek broader sense of identity across the world. Particularly under the background of "taking Chinese culture to the global stage", it is inevitable for prose, one of the most important form of Chinese literature, to play an vital role in spreading Chinese culture and forming a system of Chinese narrative. For many years, excellent prose works and authors have emerged in endlessly. In recent years, some famous translators has begun the study on prose translation, such as Zhang Peiji, Zhu Chunshen, Wang Jiaosheng and Liu Shicong. However, studies on prose translations have long been lagged behind in comparison with researches on translation of fiction, poetry in China. According to that, the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall has classified context into high context culture and low context culture from the perspective of culture. Based on this theory, scholars have analyzed the reasons for the cultural differences between China and the West and how to use this theory to overcome the differences in cross-cultural communication. However, there are few studies on its significance and application in translation. Therefore, studying prose translation from this perspective will promote the development of Hall's theory in proving its feasibility and applying it to translation studies.

## 1. Chinese Modern Prose and Prose Translation

What is prose? As an important Chinese literature, the word "prose" has appeared in the Period of Taiping Xingguo (December 976—November 984) of the Northern Song Dynasty. Chinese modern prose refers to the prose produced after the May Fourth Movement, which is distinguished from other literary genres by its unique stylistic features. Prose's structure is flexible and does not need to follow strict rhythmic forms and patterns as poetry does. Its language is concise and natural, presented in loose and short sentences. Although many excellent translators have translated many excellent works and made great contributions to modern prose translation, the study of modern Chinese prose translation has been neglected and lagged behind compared with the translation practice.

## 2. Hall's High and Low Context Culture Theory

Edward T. Hall, an American anthropologist, first put forward the concept of high and low context culture theory in his book *Beyond Culture*. Due to different social backgrounds, the process of communication is more typical. Hall argues that in low context cultures, information can mostly be interpreted through specific words and their literal meanings. In contrast, in high context cultures, information is connotative and implicit. The receiver of the information have to understand the meaning from the judgment of the context.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1 Connotative Meaning of Prose

Living in a typical high context culture country, Chinese people tend to be reserved and restrained, and this is reflected in literature, which is more implicit and connotative in language and expressions than people from low context culture countries. For this reason, prose, one of the Chinese literary forms, has even more connotative meanings than other literary form, like poetry, fiction and reportage. It uses many literary methods and connotative words to indicate the hidden meaning. According to Hall's theory, people living in low context culture can not figure out the true meaning unless they master a lot of knowledge about the expressions of high context culture. Therefore, translators should take into account the reader's receptivity, cultural background and social context.

Since most English speakers are from low context cultures, C-E prose translation needs to be explicit and clear in order to make sense. On the basis of Hall's high and low context culture theory, two translation strategies have been extracted—amplification and free translation. Some specific examples from Zhang, Zhu, Wang and Liu's prose translation will be analyzed and discussed.

### 3.2 Amplification

### 3.2.1 Example 1

Original text: 这样本是一个很平常的现象,但这个平常的现象不就有有点像欧洲中世纪的游吟诗人(troubadour)的崇拜女性吗? (郭沫若.《菩提树下》)

Zhang Peiji's translation: This is no uncommon occurrence among chickens, but doesn't it border on woman-worship as expressed by the medieval troubadours in their amorous lyrics?

This sample is from the prose Under the Linden Tree of Guo Moruo, in which it narrates the experience of raising chickens. This sentence is used to describe the scene that rooster let hens to eat first. But “欧洲中世纪的游吟诗人的崇拜女性” doesn't mean the medieval troubadours worships women. The real meaning is the scene that rooster let hens to eat first is just like the scene of men describing their worships and respects towards women written by the medieval troubadours in their amorous lyrics. If we simply translate this sentence into “but doesn't it border on woman-worship as expressed by the medieval troubadours”, this may lead to misunderstandings among foreign readers. Zhang Peiji adopted the translation strategy, amplification, to explain the implicit meaning by adding “in their amorous lyrics”. In this way, readers can better understand this simile.

### 3.2.2 Example 2

Original text: 低声吟着帘卷西风,人比花瘦之句,这个小小的灵宫,是弥漫了怅惘的情绪。(庐隐.《异国秋思》)

Zhang Peiji's translation: My heart was filled with melancholy when I recited in a low voice the following lines of an ancient Chinese poet:

When the west wind furls up the curtain,  
I'm more frail than the yellow chrysanthemum.

This example is from the prose Autumn in a Foreign Land of Lu Yin, in which it describes the author's desolate mood in a foreign land. The sentence “帘卷西风,人比花瘦” is cited from line of “莫道不销魂,帘卷西风,人比黄花瘦” in the classical poetry Zui Huayin, also known as Topsy in the Flowers' Shade, of Li Qingzhao in Song dynasty. The line of “莫道不销魂,帘卷西风,人比黄花瘦” means: Say not my soul / Is not consumed. Should the west wind uproll / The curtain of my bower, / You'll see a face thinner than yellow flower. (Translated by Xu Yuanchong) This line was produced to describe Li Qingzhao's longing for her husband, which was then extended as a sense of sentimental sadness. According to Hall's theory, this sentence is a typical product of high context culture, which contains rich connotative meaning. It may be easy for people in high context cultures to figure out the true meaning of it, but due to lack of the knowledge of Chinese poetry and ancient culture, it is confusing for foreigners in low context cultures to understand why the author is reciting this sentence at this time. By adding “of an ancient Chinese poet”, foreign readers can understand the connotative meaning more easily, because it is natural for someone wants to recite a line from a poetry when he has some emotional feelings. Therefore, Mr.Zhang used this method to make clear understanding among low context cultures' readers.

### 3.2.3 Example 3

Original text: 在远方,埋葬着我的亡失了了的伴侣的那块土地上,在冬天,是不是不只披着衰草,也还生长着不知名的花朵,为她铺着一张花床呢? (缪崇群.《花床》)

Liu Shicong's translation: I thought of the place in the distance where my departed life companion was buried. I hoped that is was not covered with withered grass only, but also flowers, known or unknown, growing thick enough to make a flower bed for her.

This example is from Flower Bed of Miao Chongqun, in which the author expresses his melancholy of his wife's death. The word “伴侣” can be translated into companion, which could be friends, partners or spouse. When this word appears in this prose, it no longer means friends, but author's departed wife. By adding the word “life”, Mr.Liu not only preserved the form of the original text, but also realized the equivalence of information between the two languages. In addition, Mr.Liu enlarges the translation of “I hoped”. If the differences between Chinese and English are not considered in translation, it will be difficult for readers of low context culture to understand. After reading this sentence, it is clear that the author is expressing his wishes that his wife can live a happy life even they can't meet each other again. In Mr.Liu's translation, the subject and logical words are added and the emotional expression is specified. Thus, the addition used here is very appropriate.

## 3.3 Free Translation

### 3.3.1 Example 1

Original text: 先说到我的遗传:我的父亲是个海军将领,身体很好,我从来不记得他在病榻上躺着过。(冰心.《我的童年》)

Zhang peiji's translation: Let me begin with my family background. My father was a high-ranking naval officer, he was very healthy and strong and I do not remember ever to have found him confined to bed by sickness.

This example is from the prose My Childhood of Bing Xin, in which it introduces her golden times with her father when she was a little girl. The literal meaning of the phrase “我的遗传” is “my personal genetic heredity”, but if this is the translation, the translation completely contrary to the meaning of the text. What follows the sentence is the introduction of her father, so this sentence actually refers to the author's family background. In high context cultures, people can think of heredity as family, whereas people in low context cultures do not. Thus, Mr.Zhang chose free translation as the translation strategy in order to avoid misunderstanding and ambiguity.

### 3.3.2 Example 2

Original text: 但热闹是他们的,我什么也没有。(朱自清.《荷塘月色》)

Zhu Chunshen's translation: But the liveliness is theirs, I have nothing.

This example is from the prose Moonlight over the Lotus Pond of Zhu Ziqing, in which it expresses the author's dissatisfaction and light sadness. The word “热闹” literally means noise. However, according to the context, it can be inferred that the true meaning the author wants to express is “(树上的蝉和水里的蛙)生机勃勃”(the cicadas in the trees and the frogs in the pond are lively), so this is why “the noise is theirs” should be translated into “the liveliness is theirs”, otherwise it may cause understanding gap between

the source language readers and the target language readers, people in low context culture may be confused to understand the reason why the author doesn't have noise. Therefore, Mr. Zhu adopted free translation by directly presenting the true meaning of this sentence.

### 3.3.3 Example 3

Original text: 古人所说的梧桐一叶而天下知秋的遥想, 大约也就在这些深沉的地方。(郁达夫. 《故都的秋》)

Wang Jiaosheng's translation: It was probably something as profound as this that inspired the phantasy of the ancients that the fall of a single leaf from the parasol-tree intimated to all the world the arrival of autumn.

This example is from the prose Autumn in the Old Capital of Yu Dafu, in which it draws a vivid picture of autumn in Peiping. The sentence “梧桐一叶而天下知秋” literally refers to: a single leaf of parasol-tree makes everyone knows autumn. Nevertheless, as an old Chinese saying goes, the words fail to convey the meaning. The actual meaning of this sentence refers to: When the first parasol-tree leaf falls, it indicates that the autumn is around the corner. As we can see, the previous explanation can't convey the connotative meaning of the original text. Accordingly, Mr. Wang adopted free translation to translate this sentence by explaining the meaning directly.

## 4. Conclusions

As one of the most important literary forms, prose has become the main force of the “go global” strategy. It brings the world's attention to Chinese literature and culture. Consequently, prose translation plays a vital role in the cross-cultural communication.

How to find a balance between target language and source language has become a general problem in prose translation. The high and low context culture theory can solve this problem efficiently. There are two main translation strategies be extensively used in prose translation: amplification and free translation. Each of them has its own advantages. More prose translation examples could be analyzed and discussed from the perspective of Hall's high context culture and low context culture. With the unremitting efforts of many scholars, there will be more work to link this theory with translation in the future. Prose translation is still a long journey.

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