

A Study on the “Truth-Seeking and Utility-Attaining” in Julia Lovell’s Translation of *The True Story of Ah Q* from the Perspective of Translator Behavior Criticism

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Abstract: This study employs the framework of translator behavior criticism to conduct a systematic examination of Julia Lovell’s English translation of *The True Story of Ah Q*, utilizing the “intra-translation and extra-translation dichotomy.” The research investigates how extra-translation factors—such as the translator’s identity, translation motivations, and target readership positioning—shape the formation of the translated text. Through an analysis of intra-translation elements, including linguistic stylistic features, strategies for handling culture-loaded terms, and the use of paratexts, the study reveals the dynamic balance of Lovell’s translation within the “truth-seeking—utility-attaining” continuum. The findings demonstrate that as a Western sinologist-translator, Julia Lovell’s cultural identity, combined with the market-oriented approach of Penguin Books, has collectively shaped a distinctly “reader-oriented” characteristic in her translation. In rendering culture-specific items, she predominantly adopts domesticating strategies, enhancing readability through simplified sentence structures and other accessibility measures to achieve utilitarian goals. Simultaneously, the translator retains an appropriate degree of foreignness in the treatment of key cultural concepts, reflecting a dialectical balance between “authorial fidelity” and “reader adaptation.”

Keywords: Translator behavior criticism; *The True Story of Ah Q*; Truth-seeking—utility-attaining continuum

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1. Introduction

Since its publication in 1921, Lu Xun’s *The True Story of Ah Q* has held a pivotal position in modern Chinese literary history, with its global influence expanding through numerous translations. Among the various English renditions, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*^[1], translated by British sinologist Julia Lovell and published by Penguin Classics, has garnered significant scholarly attention due to its distinctive translational style and broad market reception. Research on Lovell’s translation has yielded

a substantial body of academic work. A review of existing literature reveals that current studies primarily follow three analytical trajectories: comparative analysis of translations, examination of translation strategies, and investigation of dissemination and reception effects.

In the domain of comparative translation studies, Zhu's ^[2] application of the "truth-seeking—utility-attaining continuum" evaluation model to analyze four major English translations offers particularly illuminating insights. The study reveals that George Kin Leung's version demonstrates the highest degree of truth-seeking, while Julia Lovell's translation exhibits the most pronounced utility-attaining orientation. The renditions by Yang Xianyi & Gladys Yang and William Lyell, though comparable in truth-seeking, display marked differences in their utility-attaining approaches. While this research effectively maps the distributional characteristics of these translations along the continuum, it does not sufficiently explore the intrinsic relationship between translators' identities/backgrounds and their strategic choices. Guo's review ^[3] further notes that existing scholarship has predominantly focused on the Yangs' and Lyell's translations, with research on Lovell's version remaining limited in both quantity and theoretical depth—often confined to superficial descriptive analyses. Regarding translation strategy analysis, Wu and Guan's diachronic study ^[4] observes that Lovell's translation "prioritizes fluency and target-reader acceptability while maintaining source-text fidelity," yet fails to situate this finding within a systematic theoretical framework. Huang and Feng's corpus-based comparative study ^[5] identifies a clear divergence between diasporic Chinese translator Chi-chen Wang and native-English translator Lyell: the former leans toward truth-seeking, whereas the latter emphasizes utility-attaining. This finding provides a critical reference for understanding Lovell's behavioral tendencies as a Western translator. Nevertheless, three significant research gaps persist: Insufficient specialized studies on Lovell's translation, with most existing work remaining descriptive rather than analytical; Lack of organic integration between translators' social factors (e.g., cultural identity, translation motivations) and concrete linguistic choices (e.g., lexical, syntactic features); Absence of systematic investigation applying the "intra-translation and extra-translation dichotomy" from translator behavior criticism to Lovell's rendition.

In light of these considerations, the present study transcends the binary opposition paradigm prevalent in traditional translation studies. Grounded in Zhou's ^[6] translator behavior criticism framework, it conducts a rigorous examination of Julia Lovell's translational behavior, systematically investigating both her truth-seeking endeavors to preserve source-text meaning and her utility-attaining strategies to fulfill target-culture demands. Methodologically, this study adopts Zhou's ^[7] framework of "intra-translation and extra-translation dichotomy" as its analytical approach. The investigation proceeds along two complementary dimensions to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the translator's behavior. On one hand, it examines the extra-translational social factors that influence the translation process. These include the translator's professional identity and cultural background, the underlying motivations for undertaking the translation project, the anticipated target readership, and the specific requirements set forth by the publishing house. These external elements collectively shape the translator's decision-making process and strategic orientation. On the other hand, the study conducts a meticulous analysis of intra-translational linguistic manifestations present in the target text. Particular attention is paid to lexical selections, syntactic features, and the handling of culture-specific terms. Furthermore, the research scrutinizes paratextual elements such as prefaces, footnotes, and annotations, which often reveal significant behavioral traces of the translator's intervention.

By situating these findings within the dynamic framework of the "truth-seeking—utility-attaining continuum evaluation model," the study aims to systematically assess the translator's behavioral tendencies along the spectrum between source-text fidelity and target-reader adaptation. This analytical approach ultimately

seeks to uncover how Julia Lovell's translation negotiates the delicate balance between maintaining faithfulness to Lu Xun's original authorial intent while simultaneously accommodating the expectations and comprehension needs of English-language readers. The methodology thus provides a robust framework for understanding translator behavior as existing within a complex network of linguistic choices and socio-cultural considerations, rather than as a series of isolated decisions. This dual perspective allows for a more multidimensional examination of how various factors interact to shape the final translated product.

2. Theoretical framework of translator behavior research

Traditional translation studies have long prioritized fidelity to the source text as the fundamental criterion, emphasizing the degree of faithfulness in target texts. However, such static analytical approaches exhibit significant limitations in accounting for the complexity of translation as an activity, particularly in addressing contextual, social, and human factors. With the evolution of translation studies, scholars have increasingly recognized that translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but also a form of social communication, wherein the agency and behavior of translators play a decisive role. Consequently, the research paradigm has shifted from a text-centric approach to a humanistic perspective, emphasizing a translator-oriented analytical framework. Within the humanistic paradigm, translator behavior research emphasizes the translator's agency, motivations, and behaviors, while emphasizing the social and dynamic nature of translational practice. This approach extends beyond conventional concerns with conceptual, connotative, collocative, and thematic meanings to incorporate social meaning (how translations function in target cultures), affective meaning (emotional resonance with readers), and reflective meaning (broader ideological implications). This research approach examines not only textual fidelity but also the translator's behavioral manifestations in socio-cultural contexts and their impact on translation practices. Within the humanistic paradigm, translator behavior research not only examines the textual comparison but also investigates the translator's agency in the translation process and its broader societal implications. It can be argued that examining translation phenomena and issues from a sociological perspective reflects theoretical sophistication and scientific validity. Traditional purely linguistic-textual approaches fail to account for the complexity of translation as a social activity. In contrast, building upon a tripartite analytical model encompassing textual, behavioral, and social dimensions, translator behavior research develops an integrated evaluation system that systematically examines translation as a multidimensional practice. The textual dimension examines the target text's fidelity to the source text and its linguistic quality; the behavioral dimension investigates the translator's motivations, strategies, and behaviors; While the social dimension assesses the target text's societal impact and reception in the target culture. This integrated evaluation framework not only offers a more comprehensive understanding of translation phenomena but also provides a more objective and scientific approach for translation criticism.

In practical application, the "truth-seeking—utility-attaining" continuum evaluation model requires researchers to analyze translator behavior through both textual and behavioral dimensions. First, from the behavioral dimension, researchers must examine the social impact and external factors influencing the translation act. This includes the translator's sociocultural background, cultural identity, translation purpose, target readership expectations, and market positioning. By analyzing these extrinsic factors, researchers can discern the societal pressures and expectations shaping the translator's decision-making process. For instance, translators may adapt source texts to accommodate target-culture norms or adopt specific strategies to meet market demands. This approach highlights the socially embedded and dynamic nature of translation, revealing

the sociological determinants of translator behavior. This stage evaluates the translator's performance in "utility-attaining"—demonstrating how translators negotiate external constraints to fulfill societal needs, representing the extra-translational research approach. Second, from the textual dimension, researchers must assess the target text's fidelity to the source text's meaning, focusing on intralinguistic challenges and semantic reconstruction, which include the degree of fidelity to the source text, linguistic quality of the target text, treatment of culture-bound terms, and syntactic restructuring for readability. Through these intrinsic analyses, researchers evaluate the translator's linguistic performance in meaning transfer, uncovering the translator's language-oriented behaviors. For example, translators may strategically manipulate cultural references or adjust syntactic structures to enhance coherence. This intra-translational approach emphasizes the linguistic and fidelity-bound aspects of translation, exposing the textual constraints governing translator behavior. The objective here is to determine the translator's adherence to "truth-seeking"—their efforts to achieve linguistic accuracy and semantic equivalence.

In the operation of this framework, Zhou claimed that researchers should observe the following key considerations: First, when assessing textual fidelity, rigid absolutism must be avoided, as the "truth-seeking" and "utility-attaining" principles exist in a state of dynamic balance. Translators may strategically compromise certain degrees of source-text fidelity to achieve functional adequacy when situational demands require, and vice versa. Second, the analysis of translator behavior should be conducted considering multiple factors such as the translator's individual background and professional habitus, the socio-cultural constraints of both source and target contexts, and the purpose of the translation project. These intersecting factors collectively shape the translator's decision-making process. Finally, researchers should avoid using unidimensional analysis by integrating textual and behavioral approaches, thereby illuminating the inherent complexity and dynamic nature of translator behavior through multidimensional investigation. Therefore, a translator should strive for optimal semantic fidelity ("truth-seeking" behavior) on the intra-translational dimension, and make necessary adaptations to fulfill socio-cultural needs ("utility-attaining" behavior) on the extra-translational dimension. The negotiated balance between these dimensions demonstrates the rationality of translational decisions within specific contextual constraints.

In summary, translator behavior criticism can address the limitations of traditional translation studies. By focusing on translators' agency and behavioral patterns, it provides a comprehensive understanding of the social and dynamic nature of translation activities. This research approach not only enhances the objectivity of translation criticism but also offers more effective guidance for translation practice, thereby advancing translation studies to a deeper level of development.

3. Extra-translational examination: Julia Lovell's translator identity and motivations

The Critical Theory of Translator Behavior emphasizes that translation is not merely a linguistic transfer process but also a sociocultural act, shaped by multiple factors, including the translator's identity, motivations, and target-reader positioning. As the English translator of *The True Story of Ah Q*, Julia Lovell's distinct cultural identity and explicit translation motivations profoundly influenced the form and direction of her rendition.

Julia Lovell, a prominent contemporary British sinologist and translator, currently serves as Professor of Modern Chinese History and Literature at Birkbeck, University of London. Compared to previous translators of *The True Story of Ah Q*, Lovell's cultural identity exhibits distinctive characteristics: she is neither ethnically

Chinese (unlike George Kin Leung, Chi-chen Wang, or Yang Xianyi) nor a specialist in Lu Xun studies (unlike William Lyell). Instead, she operates as a cross-cultural mediator—a “China expert” active in both academic and mainstream publishing. This unique positioning enables her to maintain critical cultural distance while leveraging her scholarly training to penetrate the textual essence of Chinese literary classics. Lovell has openly acknowledged that she is “not a Lu Xun specialist,” undertaking the translation primarily out of personal interest and at the commission of Penguin Books ^[8]. This dual “outsider-insider” status endows her translation with a hybrid quality—simultaneously scholarly and accessible.

From an academic standpoint, Julia Lovell graduated from the University of Cambridge’s Chinese Studies program in 1998, specializing in contemporary Chinese writer Wang Shuo during her doctoral research before shifting her focus to modern Chinese history. This interdisciplinary training spanning literature and history enabled her to balance both literary artistry and historical contextualization when translating *The True Story of Ah Q*. Unlike William Lyell, whose approach prioritized Lu Xun scholarship, Lovell emphasized accessibility for general readers, as evidenced in her translator’s introduction: “I want English-language readers to approach Lu Xun’s fiction as literature rather than as sociohistorical documents” ^[9]. This methodological stance directly influenced her parsimonious use of annotations—employing merely 3 footnotes and 7 endnotes throughout, a stark contrast to Lyell’s version with 67 detailed explanatory notes. This strategic approach to annotation reflects not only Lovell’s consideration for general readers but also her profound understanding of the social dimensions of translation. She maintains that excessive annotations may increase readers’ cognitive load, thereby compromising the text’s readability and appeal. Consequently, she employs alternative strategies—such as simplifying syntactic structures and embedding cultural explanations—to align the translation with target readers’ expectations, thereby enhancing both its accessibility and reception.

Lovell’s translation motivation exhibits a dual nature: on one hand, it stems from her genuine appreciation of Lu Xun’s literary merit; on the other, it reflects a deliberate strategy to introduce Chinese literature into the mainstream English-language book market. As she noted in an interview: “Compared with China’s Foreign Languages Press or academic publishers like Columbia University Press, Penguin enjoys much stronger brand recognition among Western readers, making it more effective in bringing Chinese literature into the mainstream publishing market” ^[8]. This market-oriented approach to translation stands in sharp contrast to Yang Xianyi’s principle of “adhering as closely as possible to the source text” ^[9], inevitably leading Lovell’s version to prioritize the “utility-attaining” dimension. As one of the most influential commercial publishers in the West, Penguin Classics imposes unavoidable market-driven constraints on its translations. Known for catering to general readers with high-quality paperback editions, the “Penguin Classics” series requires its selected works to meet specific readability standards. Lovell openly acknowledged this influence: “To enhance the translation’s fluency, I minimized the use of footnotes and endnotes... When encountering culturally dense passages that would require lengthy explanations, I opted for syntactic simplification” ^[1]. Such strategies—clearly shaped by the publisher’s market positioning—highlight the socially conditioned nature of translator behavior. In contrast, academic presses (e.g., University of Hawaii Press) prioritize scholarly rigor, as seen in Lyell’s meticulously annotated edition. This dichotomy underscores how institutional publishing contexts fundamentally shape translational outcomes.

Lovell’s explicit positioning of target readers constitutes one of the defining factors shaping her translational behavior. She conceptualizes her primary readership as “educated general readers in the English-speaking world” ^[8] rather than specialists in Chinese literature. This deliberate orientation predisposes her toward domestication strategies when handling culture-specific items, prioritizing idiomatic accessibility over

literal fidelity. For example, Lovell renders “胡说” (*húshuō*) as the English idiom “shoot one’s mouth off” (rather than the literal “talk nonsense”); the translation of “而立之年” (*ér lì zhī nián*) is “at the age of thirty—the year in which Confucius enjoined men to stand firm,” which is embedded with cultural explanation. This intratextual contextualization deliberately avoids supplemental annotations. This domestication strategy not only enhances the target text’s conformity with the reading habits of its intended audience but also significantly improves its readability and acceptability. Through this approach, Julia Lovell successfully transforms Lu Xun’s literary work into a text that is both comprehensible and appealing to general English-language readers, thereby achieving her “utility-attaining” translation objective. It is noteworthy that Julia Lovell’s approach transcends mere reader expectation accommodation, instead maintaining measured cultural heterogeneity within acceptable parameters. A representative case is her treatment of “黄酒” (*huángjiǔ*)—a culturally loaded term specific to Shaoxing region. Rejecting the fully domesticated “wine,” she opts for “rice wine,” which achieves dual objectives of accurate cultural authenticity and avoidance of comprehension barriers from excessive foreignization. This balancing act demonstrates the translator’s dual commitment to cultural authenticity and reader accessibility—the primary reason for the translation’s success in popular and scholarly reception.

Lovell’s translation strategy demonstrates not only her profound understanding of the social dimensions of translation, but also her ability to dynamically balance between “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining” principles. An effective translation must address both linguistic accuracy and readability while simultaneously considering its impact on target readers. Through this balanced approach, she has successfully rendered Lu Xun’s literary works into texts that are both accessible to general English readers and faithful to the original’s cultural distinctiveness and literary value.

4. Intra-translational analysis

The Critical Theory of Translator Behavior claims that translators’ socially conditioned choices ultimately manifest themselves through concrete linguistic forms, leaving observable and analyzable “behavioral traces.” At the extra-translational level, Julia Lovell’s approach demonstrates a distinct utility-attaining orientation, shaped by her identity as a Western sinologist, Penguin Books’ market-driven agenda, and her prioritization of general readership needs. However, as emphasized by translator behavior criticism, social and linguistic dimensions are not dichotomous but dialectically interrelated. While catering to reader expectations, Lovell’s translation simultaneously engages creatively with Lu Xun’s stylistic particularities at the intra-translational level. Through multiple textual interventions, she negotiates a dynamic balance between truth-seeking and utility-attaining principles.

4.1. Stylistic features and readability strategies

In lexical selection, Julia Lovell demonstrates a marked preference for contemporary English usage, employing colloquial expressions and informal vocabulary to enhance textual vitality and align with modern readership expectations. Compared to Yang Xianyi’s and William Lyell’s versions, Lovell’s treatment of profanity proves particularly audacious.

Case analysis: Profanity translation in **Table 1**.

Table 1. The iconic epithet “妈妈的” (*māmā de*)

Translator	Translation	Strategy
Lovell	Bastard/Damn you	Modern vernacular equivalents
George Kin Leung	You bad fellow/you rascals	Early 20th c. euphemisms
Yang & Gladys	Curse you	Literary mitigation

The three distinct translations of “妈妈的” exemplify varying linguistic styles and readability features that reflect the translation orientations shaped by their respective historical and ideological contexts. Julia Lovell’s contemporary colloquial rendering as “Bastard/Damn you” preserves the original’s sexual connotation (with “bastard” literally meaning “illegitimate child”) and direct aggressiveness, mirroring the linguistic characteristics of underclass characters in modern film/literature. By employing contemporary profanity to achieve functional equivalence in emotional impact^[10], this version enables immediate comprehension of the rage by modern English readers, creating direct emotional resonance for 21st-century audiences. George Kin Leung’s 1920s version^[11], “You bad fellow/you rascals,” demonstrates colonial-era gentrification, diluting street vulgarity into moralistic didacticism that sanitizes Ah Q’s proletarian image into childish mischief. The translator’s “civilizing” tendency as a colonial elite and adherence to decorum standards sacrifice sociolinguistic authenticity, softening Ah Q’s vulgar persona into a “mischievous child” archetype. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang’s Cold War-era “Curse you” strikes a balance between political exigency and literary fidelity, abstracting the profanity into biblical terminology that retains the essence of anger while eliminating specific offensive content, thereby conforming to the “civilized discourse” requirements of socialist foreign propaganda.

Collectively, these three approaches form a continuum of translation ethics—ranging from Lovell’s reader-oriented approach (maximizing readability), to Yang’s politically-driven orientation (ensuring cultural safety), and Leung’s morally-guided strategy (emphasizing civilized edification)—revealing how power dynamics across different historical periods shape translation strategies.

For another example, Ah Q’s “revolutionary proclamation”:

“革这伙妈妈的命，太可恶！太可恨！”

Lovell: “There’s a whole bunch of fuckers I’d like to revolution clear out of this world and into the next, the sorry bastards!”^[1]

Chi-chen Wang: “the detestable, loathsome things” (lexical softening)

Lyell: “the sorry bastards” (partial domestication)

Julia Lovell’s rendition employs highly provocative contemporary English expletives like “fuckers” and “sorry bastards,” which stand in sharp contrast to Chi-chen Wang’s more restrained “the detestable, loathsome things” and William Lyell’s relatively muted “the sorry bastards.” While Lovell’s bold approach may deviate from strict source-text fidelity in the “truth-seeking” dimension, it effectively achieves “utility-attaining” objectives by successfully recreating the original’s emotional intensity. This strategic choice enables English-language readers to viscerally experience Ah Q’s profound resentment and frustration.

Beyond profanity, Lovell’s translation demonstrates a distinct modernization tendency in its lexical choices. For instance, she renders “秀才” as the generic “scholar” rather than the more culturally precise “xiucaì” or “cultivated talent.” Similarly, the traditional gambling term “押牌宝” is simplified to “gamble,” in contrast to Lyell’s more detailed translation “play a round of Pick-a-side.” While these choices sacrifice certain culture-specific nuances, they significantly enhance the text’s readability, aligning perfectly with Penguin Classics’ market positioning as a mainstream literary series.

At the syntactic level, Julia Lovell demonstrates a clear preference for simplifying complex structures, dividing long sentences, and adjusting word order to better align with English idiomatic patterns. Statistical analysis reveals that Lovell’s translation has an average sentence length of 16.71 words, shorter than Chichen Wang’s 17.39 words ^[5], indicating relatively simpler sentence structures. Simultaneously, Lovell’s version shows higher sentence length dispersion (73.85) compared to Wang’s (55.33), reflecting more frequent alternation between short and long sentences that creates richer rhythmic variation—a stylistic feature that enhances both the literary quality and readability of the text. A representative example can be seen in the translation of “塞翁失马安知非福.” Lovell renders this as “losing can sometimes be a blessing in disguise” ^[1], substituting the classical allusion with a concise English proverb, whereas Wang provides a literal translation: “who knows that it is not a blessing for the Tartar to have lost his horse?” ^[12], preserving the cultural reference to “the old frontiersman” at the cost of immediate comprehension. While Lovell’s simplified approach sacrifices certain cultural particulars, it achieves superior instant comprehension—a strategic choice perfectly consistent with her target audience of general readers. Another notable example of syntactic restructuring appears in the psychological depiction of Ah Q: “他赢而又赢，铜钱变成角洋，角洋变成大洋，大洋又成了叠。” Lovell creatively divides this into three concise sentences: “Ah Q won! He won again! And then again he won some more! Copper pennies turned into silver dollars, and the dollars piled up into a tall stack.” ^[1] By employing exclamatory sentences and parallel structures, she vividly recreates Ah Q’s gambling excitement and the accumulating wealth. In contrast, Wang’s version maintains the original as a single extended sentence: “He won and won, his coppers turning into dimes, dimes into silver dollars, silver dollars growing into a big pile.” ^[11]. While accurate in semantic terms, Wang’s translation lacks the dynamic immediacy of Lovell’s rendition.

A readability assessment conducted with the BFSU-Huge Mind Readability Analyzer reveals that Lovell’s translation outperforms Wang’s version across all measured metrics, demonstrating superior accessibility for contemporary English readers (**Table 2**).

Table 2. A readability assessment conducted with the BFSU-Huge Mind Readability Analyzer

Readability metric	Lovell’s translation	Wang’s translation	Interpretation
Flesch Reading Ease (FRE)	73.52	70.51	Higher score = Easier to read
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FK)	7.16	7.75	Lower score = Requires less education
Gunning Fog Index (GFI)	18.08	20.04	Lower score = Fewer reading obstacles

Note: FRE >70 = “easy”; FK 7-8 = US middle school level; GFI >18 = “difficult” for general audiences; Data source: Huang and Feng ^[5]

The data shows that Lovell’s higher FRE score (73.52 vs. 70.51) confirms better immediate comprehension for average readers; the lower FK grade level (7.16 vs. 7.75) suggests Lovell’s text is accessible to younger or more casual readers, and the improved GFI (18.08 vs. 20.04) indicates fewer complex sentence structures and jargon.

The data corroborate the success of Julia Lovell’s concerted efforts to enhance the readability of her translation. It is noteworthy that this improved accessibility is not achieved at the expense of the source text’s core meaning. When handling key concepts and culture-loaded terms, the translator maintains an appropriate degree of heteroglossia—for instance, rendering “黄酒” as “rice wine” rather than the fully domesticated “wine,”

and translating “翰林” as “Hanlin academician” instead of the culturally diluted “imperial scholar.” This balanced approach ensures that the translation neither alienates general readers through excessive foreignization nor sacrifices cultural distinctiveness through radical domestication, exemplifying the translator’s judicious balance between “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining” principles.

Stylistic analysis reveals that Julia Lovell’s translation is characterized by its colloquial and contemporary lexical choices, flexible and concise syntactic structures, and the resulting high readability. These features collectively serve a central purpose: to enhance the accessibility and appeal of Lu Xun’s classic text for contemporary general English-language readers. From the perspective of translator behavior criticism, this demonstrates the translator’s strong “utility-attaining” orientation. However, this approach should not be mistaken for unprincipled compromise; rather, it represents a creative reconstruction grounded in thorough comprehension of the source text.

4.2. Culture-loaded terms and paratextual strategies

The Critical Theory of Translator Behavior emphasizes that the treatment of culture-specific items serves as a crucial window into observing a translator’s behavioral tendencies. In her translation of *The True Story of Ah Q*, Julia Lovell demonstrates systematic and strategic choices when dealing with the text’s rich array of culture-loaded terms—choices that are closely tied to her identity as a translator and her positioning of the target readership. Simultaneously, as a key intratextual element, her use of paratexts (including prefaces, annotations, and appendices) reflects her dedicated balancing act between “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining.”

The True Story of Ah Q abounds with culturally specific references deeply rooted in Chinese contexts, such as: Imperial examination terms (*xiucai* 秀才, *Hanlin* 翰林), traditional customs (*ya paibao* 押牌宝, *huangjiu* 黄酒), and folk sayings (*Sai Weng Shi Ma*, *An Zhi Fei Fu* 塞翁失马安知非福). Lovell’s approach to these terms forms a strategic spectrum, ranging from full domestication to moderate foreignization, dynamically distributed along a continuum based on contextual demands (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of Julia Lovell’s translation strategies for culture-loaded terms

Strategy type	Example	True-seeking degree	Utility-attaining degree	Application context
Full domestication	“秀才” → “scholar”	Low	High	Concepts with low cultural specificity
Moderate adaptation	“黄酒” → “rice wine”	Medium	Medium	Cultural terms needing basic distinction
Limited foreignization	“太极图” → “Taiji symbol”	High	Low	Proper nouns with some target-culture recognition
Embedded explanation	“而立之年” → “at 30 in which Confucius enjoined men to stand firm”	Medium-high	Medium	Important but obscure cultural concepts

At the fully domesticated end of the spectrum, Lovell frequently employs cultural substitution, replacing source-text concepts with target-culture counterparts, for example, “秀才” → “scholar,” “地保” → “local constable,” “押牌宝” → “gamble.” While such translations sacrifice cultural specificity, they ensure immediate comprehension, aligning with general readers’ expectations. This is particularly evident in her treatment of profanity:

- (1) “忘八蛋” → “bastard” (functional equivalence for “son of a turtle”)

(2) “小乌龟子” → “beggar” (pragmatic adaptation of “little turtle”)

In the moderate adaptation zone, Lovell adopts a “literal translation and explanation” strategy, integrating cultural information directly into the text rather than relying on annotations, for example,

(3) “而立之年” → “at the age of thirty—the year in which Confucius enjoined men to stand firm”

(4) “黄酒” → “rice wine” (differentiating it from generic “wine”)

This approach minimizes paratextual intrusions while preserving essential cultural markers, demonstrating the translator’s negotiated compromise between fidelity and fluency.

For limited foreignization, Lovell selectively retains pinyin forms for culturally pivotal concepts:

(1) “阿Q” → “Ah Q” (not “Ah Quei”)

(2) “太极图” → “Taiji symbol” (not “symbol of the Supreme Ultimate”)

Such choices target concepts with pre-existing recognition in English, where foreignization poses no significant comprehension barrier yet maintains controlled cultural otherness.

As to paratexts, Lovell adopts a deliberately restrained approach to them, starkly contrasting with Lyell’s heavily annotated version (67 detailed notes). Her translation contains only 3 footnotes and 7 endnotes, significantly fewer than typical academic editions. This economy stems from Penguin’s market-driven mandate for reader accessibility and the translator’s intent to present Lu Xun “as literature rather than sociohistorical document”^[1].

A paradigmatic example is her rendering of “黄金格的信” as “an extremely formal letter, shaped like an umbrella”^[1]. In *The True Story of Ah Q*, the “gold-grid letter” is a deeply satirical detail. During the late Qing and early Republican period, formal documents and upper-class correspondence often used luxurious gold-lined stationery as a symbol of prestige. In the novel, this letter is a forged official document that Landlord Zhao falsely attributes to a low-ranking military officer (“把总”) and sends to the Provincial Graduate, claiming to severely punish Ah Q’s “rebellion.” The extravagant stationery creates an absurd contrast with the rustic setting of Weizhuang Village. Originally a tool of elite social exchange, the gold-grid letter is here weaponized to suppress a landless laborer under fabricated charges—its rigid traditional formatting serving only to mask the abuse of power. Through this detail, Lu Xun exposes the gentry class’s hypocritical “performance of authority” and reveals how even Ah Q’s oppression is orchestrated as an elaborately staged farce, laying bare the empty formalism of rural power structures. Such a “tempest in a teapot” official document epitomizes the absurdity of old Chinese society. Julia Lovell’s translation of this phrase as “an extremely formal letter, shaped like an umbrella” represents a strategic cultural compromise. In Western contexts, the umbrella symbolizes ceremonial authority (e.g., the British parliamentary mace). Lovell replaces the Eastern-specific “gold-grid” with an instantly recognizable equivalent of formal grandeur, avoiding the confusion a literal “gold-grid paper” might cause. While this approach sacrifices certain material-cultural specifics (the visual/tactile qualities of gold-lined paper) and dilutes the original historical context, it prioritizes the transmission of the satirical intent. The exaggerated phrasing “extremely formal” effectively recreates Lu Xun’s ironic tone, preserving the text’s absurdness. This aligns perfectly with both the Skopos theory of translation and Penguin Classics’ mass-market positioning. It can be said that Lovell’s solution succeeds within the framework of popular literary translation. As translation has no absolute “right” or “wrong”—only appropriateness to purpose—her version masterfully serves its primary goal: making Lu Xun accessible as a canonical author for the English-speaking world.

Another illustrative example is Lovell’s endnote for “Hanlin”: “A member of the Hanlin Academy, an elite scholarly institution in imperial China”^[1]. This concise annotation provides only essential historical context. In contrast, Lyell’s note on the same term offers far more academic detail—including the Academy’s founding

date, functional evolution, and political role in the Qing dynasty ^[12]. Lovell’s rationale for such paratextual minimalism is explicitly stated in her preface: “I want readers above all to enjoy these stories as works of literature... I have therefore kept scholarly annotation to a minimum, providing explanations only where strictly necessary” ^[1]. This prioritization of literariness over scholarly exhaustiveness directly serves her core objective: expanding the text’s accessibility to general readers.

An analysis of Julia Lovell’s treatment of culture-loaded terms and paratexts reveals a dialectical balance in her translational approach: while ensuring fundamental readability, she strategically preserves essential cultural heteroglossia; while minimizing scholarly annotations, she embeds necessary cultural explanations directly within the main text. This art of balance enables her translation to avoid both the elitist inaccessibility of excessive foreignization and the cultural erasure of radical domestication, ultimately maintaining the text’s distinctive cultural character.

Data from Goodreads demonstrates Lovell’s significant reach among general readers: her translation boasts a 3.92/5.00 average rating (based on 2,106 reviews), substantially higher than Wang Chi-chen’s 3.58/5.00 (only 38 reviews). This popular acclaim aligns with scholarly endorsements—UC Irvine historian Jeffrey Wasserstrom praised it as “the most impactful work Penguin Classics has ever published in Chinese literature” ^[13]. The evaluation validates the translation’s success in the “utility-attaining” dimension. It can be said that at the cultural transmission level, Lovell’s translator behavior exhibits a hybrid orientation—predominantly “utility-attaining” yet retaining measured “truth-seeking” commitments. Through systematic strategic choices, she negotiates a personally distinctive balance between cultural authenticity and reader accommodation—one that leans toward pragmatism without wholly abandoning source-text culture. This orientation stems from both the cultural distance inherent to her identity as a Western sinologist and Penguin Classics’ prioritization of market accessibility, representing the dynamic interplay between the translator’s social agency and linguistic decision-making.

5. Conclusion

This study employs the Critical Theory of Translator Behavior within a “dualistic intra-/extra-translational framework” to systematically examine the production mechanisms and textual features of Julia Lovell’s English translation of *The True Story of Ah Q*. At the extra-translational level, three sociocultural factors shaped Lovell’s approach. First, her identity as a non-Chinese Western sinologist maintained deliberate “outsider-with-insight” cultural distance, prioritizing target-reader receptivity; secondly, as a Penguin-commissioned translator, she explicitly served market-expansion goals, elevating readability and fluency over scholarly precision; and thirdly, as a literary scholar rather than a Lu Xun specialist, she emphasized the text’s universal literary merit over historico-political specificity. These factors collectively forged a reader-adaptive translational stance. At the intra-translational level, Lovell’s behavioral traces manifest through several ways, namely the lexical modernization, syntactic streamlining such as clause segmentation and rhythmic variation for enhanced readability, a strategic spectrum for culture-loaded terms (ranging from full domestication to calibrated foreignization), and paratextual minimalism (sparse annotations to preserve literary immersion). These linguistic choices collectively produce a translation that negotiates the “truth-seeking—utility-attaining” continuum, leaning toward pragmatism while retaining measured cultural fidelity. The Lovell translation neither fully domesticates (risking cultural erasure) nor excessively foreignizes (alienating readers), but carves out an operational middle ground. Lovell’s predominantly pragmatic yet culturally attentive approach offers

a replicable model for the global dissemination of Chinese literature and empirical development of translator behavior studies.

Translation is never merely an individual act, but rather a form of cultural production shaped by social forces. In translational practice, the translator's social identity and motivations manifest through concrete linguistic strategies, leaving observable and analyzable behavioral traces. The English translation of *The True Story of Ah Q* by Julia Lovell stands as a successful case of Chinese literature's global circulation in the new century, demonstrating how translators can creatively adapt within complex sociocultural contexts. In an era of globalized literary exchange, translators must make judicious strategic choices to negotiate an equilibrium between cultural authenticity and reader accessibility, enabling these seemingly competing demands to achieve a dynamic, harmonious coexistence.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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