

Research on Hetero-Cultural Translation Strategies in the Spanish Version of *The Three-Body Problem* from the Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory

Yueyang Zhang*

Department of Spanish, School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Normal University, Jinan 250358, China

*Corresponding author: Yueyang Zhang.

Abstract

Literary translation involves more than linguistic conversion; it also entails the reconstruction and re-encoding of cultural meanings. From the perspective of cultural translation theory, this study takes Liu Cixin's original Chinese novel *The Three-Body Problem* and its Spanish translation *El problema de los tres cuerpos* by Javier Altayó as the objects of analysis. Drawing on Nida's framework of cultural classification, culturally embedded elements in the source text are grouped into five categories: ecological, material, social, religious-philosophical, and linguistic. Through a comparative reading of the Chinese and Spanish versions, the paper examines the translator's shifting strategies among foreignization, domestication, and cultural negotiation. The analysis suggests that the translation does not rely on a single or fixed strategy. When dealing with culture-specific elements that carry strong historical or regional specificity, the translator is more likely to preserve foreignness through transliteration, literal translation, or brief explanatory additions. In contrast, for expressions that may hinder comprehension or lead to cultural misinterpretation, freer rendering, generalization, or contextual adjustment tend to be adopted in order to reduce the cognitive burden on target readers. Overall, the Spanish translation of *The Three-Body Problem* reveals a flexible negotiation process, in which cultural difference is retained to varying degrees while comprehension is facilitated and narrative flow is maintained. This case offers a useful reference for the Spanish dissemination of Chinese science fiction and more broadly for the cross-cultural transmission of heterogeneous cultural elements.

Keywords

cultural translation theory, *The Three-Body Problem*, Spanish translation, hetero-culture, translation strategies, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Literary translation has long functioned as a key channel for cross-cultural communication. In the broader context of globalization and increasing civilizational exchange, the translation of literary works is not limited to the transmission of textual information; it also participates, to some extent, in shaping how a culture is perceived abroad. In recent years, Chinese science fiction has attracted growing attention from international readers. Works in this genre, with their distinctive imaginative frameworks, engagement with history, and incorporation of culturally specific narrative resources, have gradually become an important component of the

overseas circulation of Chinese literature. Among these works, Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* stands out as a representative case. With its large-scale cosmic imagination, complex civilizational structures, and references embedded in Chinese historical experience, the novel has entered global science fiction discussions in a noticeable way. Its translation and reception therefore offer a useful entry point for examining how contemporary Chinese literature is mediated across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The Spanish translation of *The Three-Body Problem*, published by Nova (Penguin Random House Spain), is based directly on the Chinese original rather than mediated through English. Compared with indirect translation routes that pass through an intermediate language, this direct path makes it possible to observe more clearly how culture-specific elements in the source text are carried into the Spanish-speaking context. Existing research has noted that the novel has achieved relatively strong circulation in Spanish-speaking regions, as reflected in library holdings, sales data, and literary recognition, suggesting a certain degree of receptivity to Chinese science fiction in this linguistic sphere [1]. At the same time, the novel itself contains a wide range of culturally marked elements, including references to Chinese historical memory, everyday expressions, political and social terminology, mythological and philosophical ideas, as well as idiomatic language. These elements provide a concrete basis for examining how cultural meaning is mediated in translation practice.

However, most existing studies on the overseas reception of *The Three-Body Problem* still concentrate on its English translation and its influence in Anglophone contexts. Comparatively less attention has been paid to Spanish-language translation. In particular, at the level of textual detail, systematic discussion of how Chinese cultural elements are rendered in Spanish remains relatively limited. Against this background, and drawing on cultural translation theory, this study focuses on the Chinese original and its Spanish translation, examining how different categories of cultural elements are handled and what kinds of negotiation patterns can be observed in the translation process.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Research Methods

2.1 Cultural Translation Theory and Hetero-Culture

Since the 1970s, translation studies have gradually moved toward what is often called the “cultural turn.” Scholars such as Bassnett and Lefevere shifted attention away from translation as a purely linguistic issue, instead situating it within broader cultural, ideological, and literary systems of the receiving context. In Chinese scholarship, Xie [2] similarly notes that this shift encourages translation studies to be understood less as a problem of equivalence between languages and more as a form of cultural interaction and mediation across systems. Within this framework, cultural translation theory does not reject linguistic transfer, but it places stronger emphasis on the cultural meanings embedded in language. Words and expressions are not treated as neutral units; they are seen as carrying value systems, historical associations, and identity markers that are often not directly transferable.

From this perspective, the role of the translator also becomes more complex. Rather than simply transferring meaning from one language to another, the translator is often required to make continuous decisions: what cultural elements should be preserved in their foreign form, what needs clarification or adjustment to be intelligible to target readers, and what may be reshaped without fundamentally altering the function of the text. Venuti's discussion of domestication and foreignization remains one of the most frequently cited frameworks for describing these choices. Domestication tends to reduce linguistic and cultural distance in order to improve readability, while foreignization maintains elements of strangeness so that the source culture remains visible within the target text.

In practice, however, the boundary between the two is rarely clear-cut. Translators often move back and forth between them depending on context. A highly foreignized rendering may slow down comprehension, while an overly domesticated version risks flattening cultural specificity. Because of this tension, this study adopts the notion of “cultural negotiation” to describe a more flexible translational space between the two poles. In this sense, translation is not a fixed strategy choice, but a process of balancing recognizability and difference under specific reading conditions.

The term “hetero-culture” in this study refers to those cultural elements in the source text that differ significantly from the target cultural system and are closely tied to particular historical experiences, social

structures, or ways of thinking. Xu [3] suggests that the existence of such “hetero” differences is precisely what makes translation necessary in the first place. Liu [4] further points out that cultural heterogeneity is not a marginal issue but one that directly shapes translation ethics and decision-making. In literary texts, hetero-cultural elements may appear quite explicitly, for instance in place names, institutions, material objects, or mythological references. At the same time, they can also be more implicit, embedded in narrative logic, value orientations, or habitual linguistic patterns. These different layers of cultural difference are precisely what make literary translation both necessary and difficult.

2.2 Research Objects, Corpus Sources and Analytical Procedures

This study takes Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* in its original Chinese version and Javier Altayó’s Spanish translation *El problema de los tres cuerpos* as the main corpus. The analysis focuses on culturally loaded expressions in the first volume of the novel, particularly those that carry explicit Chinese cultural references and do not have direct or fully corresponding equivalents in Spanish. To avoid selecting isolated or overly idiosyncratic examples, the case selection follows three basic considerations: the presence of a clearly identifiable cultural reference in the source text; evidence of a distinct translational strategy in the Spanish version; and, to some extent, the potential to reflect differences in cultural understanding between Chinese and Western contexts. These criteria are used more as guiding principles than as rigid filtering rules.

For classification, the study adopts Nida’s [5] categorization of cultural factors and groups hetero-cultural elements in the novel into five types: ecological, material, social, religious-philosophical, and linguistic. Based on this framework, the analytical process proceeds in a relatively straightforward manner: culturally marked items are first identified in the source text, then compared with their Spanish translations, and finally examined in terms of the strategies employed—foreignization, domestication, or what this study refers to as cultural negotiation. The discussion also considers the possible effects of these translation choices, including cases where certain cultural nuances may be weakened or reinterpreted in the target context. Rather than attempting a comprehensive statistical survey of all cultural terms in the novel, this study adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on representative examples in order to illustrate typical patterns of translational behavior.

3. Hetero-Cultural Translation Strategies in the Spanish Version of *The Three-Body Problem*

3.1 Ecological Hetero-Culture: Retention and Explanation of Regional Markers

Ecological hetero-culture is mainly reflected in differences rooted in natural geography, climate conditions, biological resources, and local modes of production. In *The Three-Body Problem*, the opening scene is set in the Greater Khingan Range in Northeast China. Rather than functioning simply as a backdrop, this location also evokes a specific historical and social memory connected to large-scale forestry labor in that region.

Example 1:

Original: 两年以后，大兴安岭。(Two years later, Greater Khingan Range.)

Translation: Cordillera del Gran Khingan, dos años más tarde.

For Chinese readers, “大兴安岭” (*daxinganling*) is not just a geographical label. It is often associated with cold-temperate forest ecology, long and harsh winters, and the historical context of state-organized forestry work. These associations are not necessarily explicit in the text, but they tend to be activated through cultural familiarity. By contrast, Spanish-speaking readers are likely to interpret “cordillera” mainly as a neutral geographical term, without automatically linking it to the ecological or historical background of Northeast China.

In the Spanish translation, “Cordillera del Gran Khingan” combines a generic geographical descriptor (“cordillera”) with a phonetic transliteration of the proper name “Khingán.” The strategy does not replace the original toponym with a culturally familiar equivalent in the target language. Instead, it keeps the foreign place name while adding enough geographical clarification to make the reference readable. In this sense, the translation leans toward foreignization, but with a degree of explanatory adjustment that helps reduce cognitive distance for target readers.

3.2 Material Hetero-Culture: Attenuation, Compensation, and Transformation of Artifact Symbols

Material hetero-culture generally refers to culturally specific artifacts produced in particular social and environmental contexts, including clothing, food, and everyday tools. In translation, such items often pose practical difficulties. On the one hand, there may be no direct equivalents in the target language; on the other, literal translation can introduce unintended associations that shift attention away from the narrative context.

Example 1:

Original:狗皮帽上有冰碴子。(Ice chips hung on the dog-skin hat.)

Translation:témpanos de hielo colgándoles del ala del sombrero.

The “狗皮帽” (*goupimao*, dog-skin hat) is a type of winter headwear traditionally used in northern China, closely associated with extremely cold climates and outdoor labor conditions. In the source context, its relevance lies less in the material itself than in the sense of harsh weather and physical exposure it evokes. A literal rendering such as *sombrero de piel de perro* would foreground the material composition and might unintentionally draw attention to animal-related connotations that are not central to the scene.

In the Spanish version, the translator chooses a more generalized form, reducing the explicit reference to “dog skin” and retaining only the image of ice forming on the brim of a hat. What is lost here is the material specificity of the object, but the overall atmospheric effect of coldness and discomfort is preserved. The shift can be seen as leaning toward domestication, where readability and narrative flow are prioritized over cultural detail.

Example 2:

Original: 不到十分钟吧，告诉你，我是连里最快的油锯手，我到哪个班，流动红旗就跟我到那儿。(Probably less than ten minutes. I’m the fastest chainsaw operator in the company. Wherever I’m assigned, the mobile red flag for the model worker follows me.)

Translation: ¡Mi sierra mecánica es la más rápida de toda la compañía! Equipo que me asignan, banderín rojo al trabajador modélico que me gano.

“流动红旗” (*liudong hongqi*, mobile red flag) belongs to a system of collective evaluation and workplace honor typical of socialist-era labor organization in China. The symbol itself is simple, but its meaning depends on an institutional background of rotating awards and group-based competition, which may not be immediately accessible to Spanish-speaking readers if translated literally.

In the Spanish version, the translator retains the image of the red flag (*banderín rojo*), but adds *trabajador modélico* to clarify the evaluative meaning behind it. This addition partially compensates for the loss of institutional context, shifting the expression from a system-specific symbol to a more universally understandable idea of labor recognition. The result is neither fully foreignized nor fully domesticated, but rather a mixed solution in which the visual symbol is preserved while its social meaning is made explicit through explanation.

3.3 Social Hetero-Culture: Reconciliation of Historical Context and Value Misreading

Social hetero-culture involves socially embedded elements such as institutional practices, identity labels, and value systems. Compared with ecological or material culture, these elements tend to be more sensitive in translation, partly because they are closely tied to historical memory and collective experience, and partly because they may activate different interpretive frames in the target culture.

Example 1:

Original: “我们的要求很简单：让统帅走，然后咱们一起玩什么都行。”女孩接着说，样子有些娇嗔。(“Our demand is simple: let the commander go, and then we can do whatever you want.” the girl continued, her voice carrying a faintly petulant yet unafraid tone.)

Translation: —¡Nuestra exigencia es simple: dejen que nuestro comandante se marche! Después, jugaremos a lo que quieran. —El tono de la chica dejaba bien a las claras que no le tenía miedo a nada.

The term “娇嗔” (*jiaochen*) is difficult to pin down with a single equivalent. It can suggest mild reproach mixed with intimacy, or a softened but still assertive tone, depending on context. In this scene, it functions less as a description of emotional softness and more as a way of framing the character’s speech style under confrontation.

In the Spanish translation, the word itself is not rendered with a direct lexical equivalent such as *coqueta* or *mimada*. Instead, the translator shifts the focus toward the perceived attitude of the character, emphasizing that she “no le tenía miedo a nada” (was not afraid of anything). In doing so, the emotional nuance of *jiaochēn* is largely reinterpreted as confidence or fearlessness. What is gained is clarity of character stance in the dialogue; what becomes less visible is the subtle tonal ambiguity in the original expression, where softness and firmness coexist.

Example 2:

Original: 【批示】已阅，狗屁不通！大字报在地上贴就行了，不要发到天上去，文革领导组今后不要介入红岸。（“Reviewed. Nonsense! Big-character posters are enough when pasted on the ground; no need to send them to the sky. The Cultural Revolution leadership group should no longer intervene in Red Coast.”）

Translation: [Instrucciones] ¡Con empapelar de propaganda calles y avenidas de medio mundo debería bastarnos, no hace falta enviar esta mierda al espacio! A partir de este momento la dirección al mando de la Revolución Cultural queda desligada de toda relación con Costa Roja.

“Big-character posters” (*dazibao*) and the “Cultural Revolution” are both highly specific historical references embedded in China’s political history. In translation, however, they are handled in different ways, and this difference is quite noticeable.

For “大字报,” instead of retaining a transliterated form such as *dazibao*, the Spanish version paraphrases its function as a form of public propaganda display, expanding it into “empapelar de propaganda calles y avenidas.” This shifts the focus from the object itself to its social function in public space. By contrast, “文革” is translated more directly as “la Revolución Cultural,” relying on an already established historical term in Spanish.

The two choices do not follow the same logic. One leans toward functional explanation, the other toward terminological equivalence, suggesting that the translator adapts strategy according to what is already available in the target language rather than applying a uniform principle.

Example 3:

Original: “不了，谁都可以考，连村里‘黑五类’的娃都行呢！” (“No, anyone can take the exam, even the children of the ‘Five Black Categories’ in the village!”)

Translation: —¡Ya no! ¡Todo el mundo puede presentarse, hasta los hijos de familias de las cinco categorías!

The term “黑五类” (*hei wulei*, “Five Black Categories”) carries a strong historical specificity, referring to a period-based classification system associated with stigma and social exclusion. A completely literal translation of the character “黑” (*hei*, black) could easily lead target-language readers to interpret it as a reference to color or race, resulting in serious deviation. Conversely, complete deletion would erase the historical pressure carried by the term in the original text.

The Spanish translation renders it as “las cinco categorías,” which preserves the idea of classification but removes the evaluative color embedded in “black.” This choice avoids potential misinterpretation or unintended racial associations in the target language, but at the same time, the historical weight of stigma is also softened. Therefore, this treatment can be regarded as a compromise between generalization and cultural compensation: the main text ensures narrative readability, while the historical context requires further supplementation through readers’ background knowledge or explanatory notes.

3.4 Religious-Philosophical Hetero-Culture: Proper Name Retention and Conceptual Transformation

Religious-philosophical hetero-culture refers to culturally embedded ideas such as mythological figures, cosmological imagination, concepts of fate, and traditions of spiritual cultivation. In *The Three-Body Problem*, the “Three-Body Game” draws heavily on such resources from Chinese antiquity and philosophical thought, which requires the translator to constantly negotiate between preserving unfamiliar references and maintaining readability.

Example 1:

Original: “这是伏羲。”纣王对刚进来的周文王和汪森介绍那位黑衣人，仿佛他们一直就在那儿似的，而黑衣人才是新来的，“他认为，太阳是脾气乖戾的大神，他醒着的时候喜怒无常，是乱纪元；睡着时呼吸均匀，是恒纪元。” (“This is Fu Xi,” King Zhou said to King Wen and Wang Sen, introducing the man in black as if they had always been there and he were the newcomer. “He believes the sun is a great god with a volatile temperament. When it is awake, it is erratic and brings chaotic eras; when it sleeps and its breathing becomes steady, stable eras begin.”)

Translation: Este es Fu Xi —dijo el rey Zhou a Wang y al rey Wen, presentándose como si ellos siempre hubiesen estado allí y el recién llegado fuese el hombre de negro—. Según él, el sol es un dios temperamental e impredecible que, cuando vela, causa las eras caóticas, pero que, al dormir y bajar el ritmo de la respiración, provoca las eras estables.

Figures such as Fu Xi, King Zhou, and King Wen belong to well-established Chinese mythological and historical narratives. Fu Xi is often associated with cultural origins and early cosmological imagination, while King Zhou and King Wen are tied to the Shang–Zhou transition and later ethical-political traditions. For readers without prior exposure to this background, these names may initially appear as ordinary proper nouns rather than culturally loaded references.

In the Spanish translation, the proper name “Fu Xi” is retained in transliteration, while “King Zhou” and “King Wen” are rendered as rey Zhou and rey Wen, making their status more immediately recognizable. The phrase “大神” is translated as un dios temperamental e impredecible, which introduces a familiar religious category (“dios”) and is then qualified through descriptive adjectives. The overall effect is not a full cultural substitution, but a partial framing that helps readers follow the narrative while leaving the mythological specificity largely intact.

Example 2:

Original: “有些问题我能够回答，有些不能，但如果各位与三体世界有缘，总有一天所有的问题都能得到解答。” (“I can answer some questions, and others I cannot. But if you are fated to have a connection with the Trisolaris world, one day all questions will be answered.”)

Translation: —Hay preguntas que puedo responder y hay otras que no. Ahora bien: si Trisolaris está realmente en vuestro destino, llegará el día en que todas vuestras preguntas serán contestadas.

The term “缘” (*yuan*) carries a layered semantic field in Chinese, ranging from everyday notions of “chance encounter” to more philosophical or Buddhist-influenced ideas of karmic connection. It is often flexible in usage, and its meaning tends to remain somewhat open-ended rather than strictly deterministic.

In the Spanish version, it is rendered as destino. This choice strengthens the sense of inevitability and direction, while reducing the relational and contingent nuance embedded in “缘.” At the same time, given the absence of a compact equivalent in Spanish, destino provides a readily accessible framework for readers to grasp the tone of predestined connection in the dialogue, even if part of the semantic openness is flattened in the process.

Example 3:

Original: 大隐隐于市，要清静省心，自己就得空。(“True seclusion is found in the city; to achieve inner calm, one must empty oneself.”)

Translation: La verdadera paz se encuentra en las grandes ciudades, pero, para obtenerla, uno debe vaciarse.

The expression “大隐隐于市” (*dayinyinyushi*) comes from classical Chinese ideas of reclusion, suggesting that withdrawal from worldly disturbance does not necessarily require physical isolation. It can also be achieved within ordinary urban life. The term “空” (*kong*) is associated with Buddhist and Daoist thought, often referring to detachment or the reduction of mental attachment.

In translation, the first part is rendered as *La verdadera paz se encuentra en las grandes ciudades*, which generalizes the idea of “reclusion in society” into a more accessible formulation. “空” (*kong*) is translated as *vaciarse*, emphasizing psychological emptiness or inner cleansing. The resulting text preserves the general movement toward inner calm within everyday life, although the more historically layered notions of “reclusion” and philosophical “emptiness” become less explicit and rely more on contextual inference.

3.5 Linguistic Hetero-Culture: Localization and Reconstruction of Colloquialisms and Character Portrayal

Linguistic hetero-culture is mainly reflected in idioms, proverbs, colloquial expressions, and the compressed descriptive patterns typical of Chinese. These expressions often go beyond denotative meaning and contribute to character construction, spoken rhythm, and culturally specific ways of expression.

Example 1:

Original: “别误会，我要是直直开过去不就完了，讲个礼貌打个招呼你还当成驴肝肺了。” (“Don’t get me wrong. If I had just driven past, that would’ve been it. I stopped to be polite and say hello, and you treat it like I meant harm.”)

Translation: —No me diga esas cosas, hombre... Podía haber continuado mi camino tan tranquilo, pero no, he querido hacer lo correcto y pararme a saludarlo. ¿Así me lo agradece?

The expression “当成驴肝肺” (*dangchenglvganfei*) is a colloquial idiom meaning that someone has misread goodwill as malice or failed to appreciate a kind gesture. Its effect in Chinese relies heavily on metaphor and oral rhythm, rather than on the literal image itself.

In the Spanish translation, the metaphor is not carried over. Instead, it is replaced by a rhetorical question, *¿Así me lo agradece?*, which directly conveys the speaker’s dissatisfaction and sense of being misunderstood. The shift removes the image-based structure of the original idiom, but the pragmatic force—complaint mixed with frustration—remains relatively intact. At the same time, the Spanish version aligns more naturally with how interpersonal conflict is typically expressed in dialogue.

Example 2:

Original: 这人长得五大三粗，一脸横肉，穿着件脏兮兮的皮夹克，浑身烟味，说话粗声大嗓，是最令汪淼反感的那类人。 (“He was tall and heavily built, with a rough, fleshy face, wearing a dirty leather jacket. He smelled strongly of tobacco, spoke in a loud voice, and was exactly the type of person Wang Miao found most unpleasant.”)

Translation: Alto y corpulento, con cara de pocos amigos, iba enfundado en una mugrienta chaqueta de cuero. Todo él apestaba a tabaco y, en lugar de hablar, gritaba. Justo la clase de persona que Wang más detestaba.

Expressions such as “五大三粗” (*wudasancu*) and “一脸横肉” (*yilianhengrou*) function in Chinese as compact, evaluative descriptions that quickly establish a coarse and intimidating male image. Their impact lies partly in their density and partly in their colloquial negativity.

The Spanish translation distributes these condensed evaluations into several descriptive phrases: *alto y corpulento*, *cara de pocos amigos*, and additional sensory details such as *apestaba a tabaco*. The original’s compressed stylistic effect is expanded into a more linear description, which is more typical of Spanish narrative prose. While the form becomes less compact, the overall character impression and the narrator’s dislike of the figure are still clearly conveyed.

4. Conclusion

This study, grounded in cultural translation theory and drawing on Venuti's notions of domestication and foreignization as well as Nida's classification of cultural factors, examines five types of hetero-cultural elements—ecological, material, social, religious-philosophical, and linguistic—in the Spanish translation of *The Three-Body Problem*. What emerges from the analysis is not a consistent reliance on a single strategy, but rather a pattern of shifting choices that depend on the type of cultural element involved, the presumed knowledge of target readers, and the function of the expression within the narrative.

In the case of proper names and strongly localized cultural references, such as “Greater Khingan Range” and “Fu Xi,” the translation tends to preserve the original referents, sometimes adding general geographical or social markers to make them more accessible. By contrast, expressions that carry potential risks of misunderstanding or unintended associations, such as “dog-skin hat” or “娇嗔 (*jiaochen*),” are more often reduced, generalized, or rephrased so that the narrative remains smooth in the target language. Items with clear institutional or historical weight, including “Cultural Revolution,” “Five Black Categories,” and “mobile red flag,” show a mixed strategy: some elements are retained through established equivalents, while others are rephrased to make their social function more explicit. In addition, idioms and compressed descriptive phrases are generally not translated through image preservation, but through functional reconstruction in Spanish, with emphasis placed on speech tone and character positioning.

Seen as a whole, the Spanish translation does not operate through a binary choice between domestication and foreignization. The more visible pattern is a continuous adjustment between cultural distance and readability. Differences are maintained where they are central to cultural identity, while explanatory compensation is introduced where comprehension might otherwise be interrupted. At the same time, narrative flow and character voice tend to be prioritized when the original relies on highly condensed linguistic forms.

There are, however, limits to this study. The analysis relies mainly on selected representative cases rather than a full-scale quantitative mapping of all culturally loaded expressions in the novel. It also does not include empirical data such as reader reception studies, reviews, or questionnaires, which could help assess how these translation strategies are actually perceived in Spanish-speaking contexts. Future research could extend the scope by building a more systematic corpus of culturally marked items in different translations of *The Three-Body Problem*, and by conducting comparative studies across multiple languages such as English, French, and German. It may also be useful to incorporate reception-oriented approaches, especially reader-response perspectives, in order to better understand how cultural elements are processed and interpreted by target audiences

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