



# The Study of Folk Language in Jia Pingwa's *The Earthen Gate*

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**How to cite this paper:** Deng, L. and Yuan, J.J. (2024) The Study of Folk Language in Jia Pingwa's *The Earthen Gate*. *Open Access Library Journal*, 11: e11738.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111738>

**Received:** May 24, 2024

**Accepted:** July 20, 2024

**Published:** July 23, 2024

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## Abstract

Under the promotion of the strategy of “going global” of Chinese culture, more and more literary works have been published overseas, and some literary works with local themes have gradually gained popularity. The English translation of Jia Pingwa's *The Earthen Gate* (translated by Prof. Hu Zong-feng) came out in 2017, which is of some significance to the overseas promotion of regional literature. This study takes the translation of the vernacular language in this work as the main research content, takes the theory of Skopos theory as the theoretical support, and analyzes the Chinese and English vernacular language. It is found that there is a certain rationality and practicability in exploring the translation strategies, methods and techniques in the English translation of *The Earthen Gate* with the Skopos theory, which can help readers better understand the unique regional culture of Shaanxi.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics

## Keywords

Skopos Theory, Jia Pingwa's *The Earthen Gate*, The Translation of Folk Language in Shaanxi

## 1. Introduction

The story of *The Earthen Gate* is based on the devouring of the countryside by the city and the annihilation of traditional civilization by modern civilization, depicting the perseverance and concessions of the villagers whose lives are based on the land, showing the contradiction between the urban way of life and the conservative mentality of the countryside under the inevitable trend of national industrialization and urbanization. Against the backdrop of the city devouring

the countryside and modern civilization annihilating the traditional civilization, the story of *The Earthen Gate* depicts the perseverance and concession of villagers who make their living from the land, and expresses the contradiction between the urban lifestyle and the conservative mentality of the countryside, and so this work is undoubtedly a translation of Shaanxi's vernacular culture as well. Since the 18th National Congress, as China's international status continues to rise, the state has taken "telling Chinese stories and spreading China's voice" as a major national strategy, which puts forward higher requirements for the majority of literary and art workers, and likewise puts forward higher requirements for translators.

On December 29, 2017, the world premiere ceremony of Jia Pingwa's English-language long novel *The Earthen Gate* was held at Northwestern University. The novel was jointly translated by Hu Zongfeng, dean of the School of Foreign Languages at Northwestern University, Robin Gilbank, a foreign expert at Northwestern University, and He Longping of Changsha Teachers College, and published and distributed by Canyon Press in the UK. Since 2008, Hu Zongfeng and Robin Gilbank have been working on the English translation of literary works, which is "to let the world readers know Chinese novels and Shaanxi writers go to the world". They have been translating and polishing Jia Pingwa's novel *The Earthen Gate* for nearly two years, always adhering to the idea that "translation is not only about a book, but also about how to disseminate Shaanxi culture to the world and tell a good Chinese story to the world in the process of translation."

For the translation of Shaanxi dialect, the English translation of *The Earthen Gate* is very representative. The translator, through bilingual comparative analysis, has applied a lot of skills and injected a lot of effort into the translation of the vernacular language, preserving a lot of cultural elements of the source language, in order to maximize the promotion of the culture of Guanzhong in Shaanxi, which not only enhances our understanding of the translation of the vernacular language of Shaanxi, but also, more importantly, provides opportunities for the dissemination of the culture of Shaanxi to the outside world. However, for overseas readers, some of the translations have certain limitations. There are too much heterogeneous information in the translations, which is not in line with the reading habits of overseas readers, and it is easy to cause reading interference. It can be seen that the study of English translation of vernacular literature in China is still in the exploratory stage, and it needs to be further practiced and summarized to form a relatively mature translation theory and strategy guide.

## 2. Stylistic Features

The stylistic style of the novel is very realistic: with the real social life as the background, it depicts the life scenes and the fate of the characters in the Chinese countryside, and shows the survival status and social reality of the peasants. At the same time, the novel portrays several complex characters, meticulously describes the inner world and life details of the characters, allows readers to

deeply feel the emotions and destinies of the characters, and shows the intricate relationships and psychological changes among them, making the whole story more colorful.

Most of the characters in *The Earthen Gate* come from the countryside, and their language is obviously influenced by the local language habits, using a lot of local dialects and vernaculars, such as “gejiu [1]” (圪蹴), “yanchuan [1]” (言传), “xianpian [1]” (闲篇), etc., with a strong sense of humor. The language is simple and natural, close to life, allowing readers to feel the real atmosphere of rural life, reflecting the folk perspective and folk care of Jia Pingwa’s folk literature. These linguistic features play an important role in portraying characters, enhancing the narrative function of the novel, adding regional flavor and highlighting the theme of the novel. In general, the stylistic and linguistic features of *The Earthen Gate* reflect Jia Pingwa’s profound observation of real life and delicate depiction of human nature.

### 3. The Analysis of the Folk Language in *The Earthen Gate*

Most of the characters in *The Earthen Gate* come from rural areas, and their language is obviously influenced by local language habits and is highly representative of folk language. The use of folk language becomes a distinctive mark of Jia Pingwa’s works, reflecting the folk perspective and folk care of his folk literature, and plays an important role in portraying characters, enhancing the narrative function of the novel, adding regional atmosphere, and highlighting the main subject of the novel.

The content of this study is the folk language in *The Earthen Gate*. Folk language is a part of Chinese expression and an important symbol for identifying a successful folk literary work, as well as an important part of the development strategy of Chinese culture “going abroad”. The folk language in *The Earthen Gate* is extremely rich and connotative, reflecting the ecological, material, social and linguistic culture of the Guanzhong region of Shaanxi. According to his principles of material selection, Professor Hu Zongfeng has adopted various translation strategies for the translation of the folk language in this book, such as direct translation, free translation and paraphrase translation, but in order to maximize the folk culture of the original work, the largest proportion of the full translation is the strategy of dissimilation. The content of this study is the vernacular language, in which is extremely rich in connotations, reflecting the ecological, material, social and linguistic cultures of the Guanzhong region of Shaanxi. By analyzing these aspects of Shaanxi dialect translation, appreciating the translators’ translation skills, and summarizing their strengths and weaknesses in spreading the Shaanxi dialect, hoping to make a small contribution to the translation of Shaanxi dialect works in the future.

### 4. Case Study

Many of the dialects of Shaanxi are ancient words preserved in a special way in folklore. With a little knowledge of ancient Chinese literature, you will be able to

read and understand Shaanxi dialects. And this is undoubtedly a big challenge for foreign readers. In order to solve this challenge, the case study in this paper divides Shaanxi's dialectal vernaculars into three categories: ecological culture, material culture and social culture, which can help foreign readers better appreciate the connotation of Shaanxi dialects.

#### 4.1. Translation of Ecological Culture

Ecological culture includes factors such as geography, climate, flora and fauna, which make ecological culture territorial. In addition, the vernacular language of ecological culture also includes proverbs, idioms, and hermetic phrases containing these factors, which have quite distinctive regional characteristics and reflect the profound local culture.

For example, the novel said “Ren huo yi shi, Cao mu yiqiu. [1]” (人活一世，草木一秋。) and the translation is: “Man has only one life, grass has only one autumn.” After checking, it is a metaphor for the fact that time flies and life is as short as one autumn of grass and trees. The original text in *The Earthen Gate* is from the villagers' words, which lacked rigor due to their low cultural level, but expressed their lamentation of the shortness of life in a very delicate and vivid way. The translation faithfully and directly conveys the surface meaning of the original text, reflecting the principle of fidelity in teleology. However, the foreignization here is likely to cause confusion to the target language readers, who may not be able to associate the connection between life and autumn, thus causing interruption of reading and not knowing what is going on.

#### 4.2. Translation of Material Culture

Material culture refers to the artifacts unique to different cultures, involving clothing, food, housing, transportation and other aspects. The development process of local culture also reflects the continuous development of material culture, and people's thoughts are influenced by the material things of the time to a certain extent, and a culture with regional characteristics is formed over time.

For example, the translation of “gulu [1]” (轱辘) is “windlass handle [2]”. “Windlass” refers to a Han Chinese folk facility for lifting water, popular in the north and also in Shaanxi in the last century. It consists of a windlass head, a stand, a well rope and a bucket, and is a lifting device that utilizes the principle of the wheel and axle to draw water from a well. The translator adopts the literal translation of “gulu” (轱辘) and translates it as “windlass” so that foreigners can better understand the unique material culture of Shaanxi. This embodies the principles of purposiveness and fidelity in Skopos theory, and skillfully promotes the Shaanxi culture. And “ma huahua pai [1]” (码花花牌), the translation is “play sliver cards [2]”. In Shaanxi dialect, playing cards is not called “dapai” (打牌), but “ma pai [1]” (码牌). The translator adopts the strategy of domestication in the translation process, translating “ma [1]” (码) to “play”, which is very

evocative and picturesque, conveying the rich recreational life of the old villagers at that time, and conforming to the principle of purposive coherence. “Huahua pai” (花花牌) is a very popular card game in Guanzhong area of Shaanxi Province, especially among the elderly. There are 48 cards in total, with basic, special and derivative types. The translator translated it as “sliver cards”, without adding or interpreting, failing to emphasize the unique characteristics of “huahua pai” (花花牌), and failing to stimulate the curiosity of Chinese and foreign readers, which is not conducive to the dissemination of the Chinese language, and greatly reduces the effect of spreading Shaanxi’s unique material culture.

### 4.3. Translation of Language and Culture

Linguistic culture refers to culturally distinctive expressions, phonetics, vocabulary and idioms. Each settlement, whether provincial or regional, has different dialects, phonetics and intonations. These languages, though common, are the most symbolic representation of a region’s culture.

For example, “Er ganzi [1]” (二杆子), the translation is “headstrong prick [2]” It’s a Shaanxi dialect meaning “fool”. The characters in the novel are full of local color, which is not difficult to understand for Shaanxi readers, but for foreign readers it is completely unknown, so the translator used the translation technique of free translation method. This kind of translation technique adapts to the writing style and language expression of foreign readers, and makes the original text better accepted and understood by foreign readers, following the coherence rule of the theory of Skopos. Another example is “Xian pian [1]” (闲篇), which translation is “idle talk [2]”. “Xian pian” (闲篇) is a dialect of Guanzhong in Shaanxi Province, meaning idle talk, with no limit on the content or form of the conversation, and is considered a form of daily recreation for people. In the translation, the translator uses the translation strategy of foreignization and uses “idle” to express the state of triviality and boredom, which reflects the translator’s realistic translation attitude. Another example is “Zuo cu de [1]” (做醋的), which translation is “vinegarmaker [2]”. This is a sarcastic remark made by villager Lian Ben to the old village head after learning that he betrayed Renyi Village without regard to the villagers’ interests. In the Shaanxi dialect, “Zuo cu de” (做醋的) refers to a useless person who is in a high position but does not fulfill the duties of his position, letting it go. The translator translates it into “vinegarmaker” to express the villagers’ anger and sarcasm towards the village headman for not defending his hometown and not thinking about the villagers. In the translation, such a translation retains the cultural elements of the source language to the greatest extent possible, reflecting the principle of fidelity in the Skopos theory. However, from the point of view of British and American readers, this translation strategy is too alienating, only translating the surface meaning of the original text, not translating the emotional elements of the characters in the original text, which not only creates cultural distortion, but also makes the translation obscure and difficult to understand, violates the principle of cohe-

rence in the Skopos theory and affects the reading fluency of foreign readers [3].

## 5. Conclusion

“Folk language refers to all forms of linguistic expressions that have local characteristics, are passed on by word of mouth, are popular and refined, and are handed down in the folklore, which to a certain extent reflect the local customs, habits and cultural traditions” [4]. Through the case study, it is not difficult to find that although the translators use a variety of translation strategies and techniques in their folk translations, on the whole, there are more direct translations of vernacular literature and fewer Italian translations. Most of the translations highlight the culture and vernacular colors of Guanzhong in Shaanxi, but for foreign readers who are not familiar with the vernacular regional culture of Shaanxi, it is still difficult to read, which may lead to interruptions and affect the readers’ interest in reading [5]. There are great differences between the two languages of English and Chinese, and the language in folk vernacular studies has strong local characteristics, so how the translation can maximize the understanding of foreign readers on the basis of keeping the original flavor of the folk language is a problem worth thinking about. To sum up, in the future translation of such works, translators should not only deepen their understanding of the elements of vernacular culture in the original works, but also pay more attention to the choice of translation strategies and techniques.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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