

A Comparative Study of the English Translations of Idioms in the Novel *Guisheng* from the Perspective of Translator Behavior Criticism

Zhu Keyan ^{1*}

¹ College of Foreign Language, Hengyang Normal University, Hengyang, Hunan Province, China

*Corresponding author Email: Cara09500@163.com

Received 16 November 2025; Accepted 16 January 2026; Published 10 March 2026

© 2026 The Author(s). This is an open access article under the CC BY license

Abstract: Shen Congwen's literary works are renowned for their distinctive Xiangxi (West Hunan) setting, with idioms serving as a defining characteristic of his novels. The novel *Guisheng* stands as a quintessential example of his style, rich in local expressions that pose significant challenges for translators. This study conducts a comparative analysis of the English translations by Gladys Yang and Jeffrey C. Kinkley, examining their approaches from both intra-translational and extra-translational dimensions, with a specific focus on the rendition of two-part allegorical sayings, common sayings, and nicknames. The findings indicate that, from an intra-translational perspective, Gladys Yang consistently adopts a reader-oriented approach. She effectively conveys the original meaning while ensuring the fluency and accessibility of the target text, often simplifying complex cultural references to enhance readability. This approach achieves a notable balance between "truth-seeking" (adherence to the source text) and "utility-attaining" (serviceability for the target reader). In contrast, Jeffrey C. Kinkley prioritizes maximum fidelity to the source text, leaning decisively toward the "truth-seeking" end of the spectrum by meticulously preserving the original structure, linguistic features, and cultural imagery, even at the expense of immediate reader comprehension. From an extra-translational perspective, the study explores the translators' professional roles, translation philosophies, and the substantial influence of patronage systems. It demonstrates that translator behaviors and translation strategies were shaped and constrained by a complex interplay of subjective and objective factors. Yang's position with China's Foreign Languages Press and Kinkley's academic background emerge as crucial determinants in their respective approaches, highlighting how institutional contexts and personal scholarly commitments fundamentally guided their translation decisions and ultimately shaped the reception of Shen Congwen's work in the English-speaking world.

Keywords: Translator Behavior Criticism; *Guisheng*; English translations comparison; Idioms

1. Introduction

The subjectivity of translators has gained significant attention in translation studies following the "cultural turn." The focus has shifted from linguistic conversion at the textual level to the cultural influences on translation, and further to the translators themselves, who were once hidden behind the text. This evolution highlights the growing recognition of translators' importance and confirms their central role. In the translation process, translators' education, social influences, and personal factors can lead to distinct tendencies and variations in their translated texts. These objective and subjective factors also shape translators' behaviors, a concept known as "translator behavior." This concept can be defined broadly or narrowly. Broadly, it includes both linguistic translation actions and social non-translation actions beyond the act of translating. Narrowly, it refers solely to translation actions performed within the scope of the translator's identity and role[1].

Shen Congwen's literary construction of the Xiangxi world is characterized by its rich, distinctive, and naturally vivid language, which is particularly prominent in representative novels such as *The Border Town*, *Xiaoxiao*, and *Guisheng*. *Guisheng*, a short story written by Shen Congwen in 1937, depicts the love tragedy between Guisheng, a youth from the lower strata of society, and Jin Feng, the daughter of a grocery store owner at the bridgehead. The story is notable for its abundant use of culturally loaded expressions, including two-part allegorical sayings, common sayings and nicknames, all of which reflect the strong local flavor of Xiangxi.

Vernacular refers to all orally transmitted, concise, and popular expressions with local characteristics, circulating among the people and reflecting, to some extent, the local customs, traditions, and cultural practices[2]. Undoubtedly, vernacular is an inseparable part of Shen Congwen's works. Its rich connotations and strong local color pose challenges for accurate transmission into the target language. Therefore, in the process of English translation, translators must handle dialects with care, striving to convey their original essence and cultural authenticity. At the same time, translators also need to consider the target-language readers, ensuring that the translated dialects communicate the original meaning without causing reading difficulties. The translators' inclinations and chosen strategies in this process can be analyzed using the "truth-seeking and utility-attaining" continuum evaluation mechanism within the framework of Translator Behavior Criticism. This study compares the translations by Gladys Yang (1981) and Jeffrey C. Kinkley (1995) to analyze their intra-translational and extra-translational behaviors in translating idioms. Through this analysis, the characteristics of translator behavior are summarized to clarify the social constraints influencing such behavior.

2. Analysis of Intra-Translational Behavior: The "Truth-Seeking and Utility-Attaining" Continuum Evaluation Mechanism

The concept of translator behavior primarily involves the translator's pursuit of fidelity and pragmatic adaptation in language, with a focus on the linguistic aspects of translation itself, such as the conveyance of style, rhetorical devices, syntax, vocabulary, as well as the specific translation strategies and methods employed. Translator constantly navigates between "fidelity" and "pragmatic adaptation". They may lean toward "fidelity" by orienting themselves toward the source text/author or toward "pragmatic adaptation" by prioritizing the reader/society. Alternatively, they may strive to maintain an ideal balance between these two poles, harmonizing the "linguistic" and "social" dimensions[3]. When oriented toward the source text/author, the translator emphasizes the accurate transmission of the original meaning, tending toward fidelity. When oriented toward the reader/society, the translator centers on the reader, aiming for clarity, readability, adherence to target language conventions, and meeting reader expectations, thus leaning toward pragmatic adaptation. Both approaches describe the translator's choices in translation strategies and methods, interpreting the tendencies in their behavior.

This study applies the translation strategies of culture-specific Items proposed by Spanish scholar Aixela[4] to identify and analyze the translation strategies for idioms in *Guisheng*. The methods primarily employed in this paper include: orthographic adaptation; linguistic translation; intratextual gloss; absolute universalization; autonomous creation; and deletion. Among these, orthographic adaptation, linguistic translation, and intratextual gloss fall under conservation strategies, reflecting a translator behavior tendency toward the "fidelity" end of the spectrum. Absolute universalization, autonomous creation, and deletion belong to substitution strategies, indicating a tendency toward the "pragmatic adaptation" end. In the text, Gladys Yang frequently employs methods such as deletion and autonomous creation, making her translation more reader-oriented. In contrast, Jeffrey C. Kinkley predominantly uses linguistic translation and intratextual gloss, focusing on conveying the original meaning and serving the author and source text.

This paper selects idioms from the novel *Guisheng*, including two-part allegorical sayings, common sayings and nicknames as research cases. Idioms are a crucial reflection of the novel's linguistic style. The dual-segment structure of two-part allegorical sayings, the metaphorical nature of common sayings, and the regional

characteristics of nicknames, along with the numerous culture-specific terms contained within these idioms, create a translation conflict between “fidelity” and “pragmatic adaptation.” When handling such translation challenges posed by idioms, the two translators clearly demonstrate their choices of translation methods and behavioral tendencies. Therefore, by analyzing the two-part allegorical sayings, common sayings and nicknames in the text, this study compares and examines the translator behaviors of Gladys Yang and Jeffrey C. Kinkley, summarizes the characteristics of their approach, and delves into the social determinants underlying their actions.

2.1 Two-part allegorical saying

Two-part allegorical saying often consist of two parts: the first part acts as a riddle, while the second part conveys the actual meaning. Closely tied to everyday life, two-part allegorical saying reflects working people’ s observations and humorous perspectives, expressing profound ideas through concise and vivid language. In the novel *Guisheng*, the author employs several two-part allegorical saying that carry distinct local flavor and rustic charm. The two translators adopted different approaches when rendering these expressions.

Example 1: 热米打粑粑，一切得趁早

Gladys Yang’ s translation: Strike while the iron’ s hot. No more delay[5].

Kinkley’ s translation: Shape your baba biscuits while the rice is still hot[6]!

Example 2: 花脚狗不是白面猫，各有各的脾气

Gladys Yang’ s translation: People are made differently.

Kinkley’ s translation: A spotted-leg dog’ s not a white-faced cat. Each has his own temper.

Example 3: 天上野鸭子各处飞，捞到手的就是菜

Gladys Yang’ s translation: Wild ducks fly all over the sky, but only good archers can have them.

Kinkley’ s translation: Wild ducks fill the sky; reach up anywhere, and you can pull down a tasty morsel for yourself.

In comparing the translations of two-part allegorical saying, from the perspective of conveying the original meaning, Gladys Yang tends to generalize the overall meaning. She primarily translating the latter part of the two-part allegorical saying while downplaying the detailed and specific descriptions in the first part. In Example 1, the original Chinese sentence blends folklore and philosophy, incorporating the concrete scene of folk labor. “粑粑” (a type of biscuit) represents the daily sustenance of rural people, while Gladys Yang’ s translation applies autonomous creation to replaces the original cultural items. Although this conveys the intended meaning, it overlooks the original imagery. In Example 2, the original Chinese sentence uses the contrasting patterns of two animals as a metaphor for differences in individual character. But her translation only the implied meaning of the two-part allegorical saying and delates the unique expression and cultural connotations. However, her translations are more fluent and readable, making it easier for target-language readers to accept and understand the original meaning. These adaptations indicate that her translation strategies and methods lean more toward the “utility-attaining” end, prioritizing the reader’ s experience.

In contrast, Kinkley focuses on convey the original meaning and specific imagery, he tends to use the linguistic translation method. For example, in Example 1, he directly translates “热米打粑粑” (Shape your baba biscuits while the rice is still hot), preserving the original meaning and imagery more completely. Example 2 further highlights the differences in the translators’ approaches. Kinkley translates terms like “花脚狗” (spotted-leg dog) and “白面猫” (white-faced cat), which describe animals with specific physical features in rustic language, conveying the original expressions into the target language. However, in his effort to remain faithful to the original, the word order and phrasing sometimes appear unnatural and do not conform to English conventions. For instance, in Example 3, Kinkley retains the original expression, but the translation may be difficult for target-language readers to comprehend. To some extent, he sacrifices fluency and readability in favor of preserving the original style, leaning more toward the “truth-seeking” end.

2.2 Common Sayings

Common sayings are linguistic units created by the masses and circulated in colloquial speech, characterized by their oral and popular nature[7]. The novel *Guisheng* contains many amusing local sayings. The two translations differ significantly in their treatment of these sayings. To enhance reader comprehension and acceptability, Gladys Yang generally adopts a “utility-first” approach. In contrast, Jeffrey Kinkley employs a foreignizing strategy, maintaining sentence structures largely equivalent to the Chinese original to highlight the rustic flavor of the text, thus leaning toward the “truth-seeking” end of the “truth-seeking and utility-attaining” continuum.

Example 4: 两手一肩，快乐神仙

Gladys Yang’ s translation: With strong shoulders and hands, you can live on the fat of the land.

Kinkley’ s translation: With strong arms and a good bod’ , you can be as happy as a little god.

Example 5: 牛肉炒韭菜，各人心里爱

Gladys Yang’ s translation: Each to his own fancy.

Kinkley’ s translation: Some like leeks, and some like meat; it all depends on what’ s your treat.

Example 6: 认货不认人

Gladys Yang’ s translation: She has eyes, but hasn’ t seen through him.

Kinkley’ s translation: Good things they can see fine; it’ s good people they’ re blind to.

Example 7: 命里注定它要来，门板挡不住；命里注定它要去，索子链子缚不住。

Gladys Yang’ s translation: If something’ s fated, there’ s no way of stopping it with a gate or keeping it back with a chain.

Kinkley’ s translation: These people are rich without a lick of work; their fortune’ s in their fate. If your fate tells the money to come, even a door plank won’ t block it.

In translating common sayings, Gladys Yang’ s versions are notably more concise and often use English equivalents to convey the original meaning. When translating “快乐神仙,” Gladys Yang use absolute universalization method, explicates the intended meaning clearly. Kinkley retains the original imagery and literal phrasing. The former is easier to accept and understand but diminishes the vividness and imagery, reducing the cultural distinctiveness. The latter better preserves the original charm and local flavor.

In Example 6, Gladys Yang deviates from the original imagery and meaning. The saying “认货不认人,” which implies “judging things by their intrinsic value rather than personal relationships,” is translated as “hasn’ t seen through him,” fully adopting English expressions and thought patterns. This translation delates the original expression and results in a vague meaning that significantly diverges from the original. Kinkley’ s translation more accurately conveys the original intent with higher fidelity, maintaining the original sentence structure while considering reader comprehension, thus meeting both “truth-seeking” and “utility-attaining” standards.

In Example 7, Gladys Yang accurately conveys the core idea of “the inevitability of fate,” translating “门板” and “索子链子” as “gate” and “chain” respectively, demonstrating high fidelity. Kinkley, however, overly emphasizes the original sentence structure and style, causing the translation to deviate from the core theme of fate’ s unchangeability. The latter part of his translation reverts to the original meaning but appears loose, incoherent, and logically fragmented. In common saying translation, Gladys Yang’ s tend to use intratextual gloss, absolute universalization and deletion methods. Her version better achieves the balance between truth-seeking and utility-attaining. Kinkley’ s overly literal approach compromises both the original meaning and the readability of the translation, leaning more toward the “truth-seeking” end.

2.3 Nicknames

Nicknames in literary works are often closely linked to characters’ images and personalities. They are summaries formed by others through long-term interaction and observation, capable of accurately and intuitively reflecting a person’ s characteristics in a certain aspect. Authors use well-chosen nicknames to quickly shape character portrayals and convey their own evaluative attitudes toward the characters. In the novel *Guisheng*, the nicknames often carry a strong sense of the era and rustic flavor, with some closely tied to the cultural and historical

background of the story. The two translators demonstrate distinct preferences and strategies in their approaches to translating these nicknames.

Example 8: 癩子

Gladys Yang' s translation: Imp

Kinkley' s translation: Scabby

Example 9: 鸭毛伯伯

Gladys Yang' s translation: Uncle Yamao

Kinkley' s translation: Uncle Duck

Example 10: 卖油郎

Gladys Yang' s translation: Oil-vendor in the old story who won a courtesan' s heart

Kinkley' s translation: Oil peddler

Example 11: 杨半痴

Gladys Yang' s translation: Yang Banchi

Kinkley' s translation: Half idiot Yang

Example 12: 王财主

Gladys Yang' s translation: Moneybags Wang

Kinkley' s translation: Rich man Wang in town

Example 13: 观音

Gladys Yang' s translation: Guanyin

Kinkley' s translation: Guanyin, the goddess of mercy

Based on the translations of multiple nicknames, it can be observed that Gladys Yang' s approach achieves a better balance between the standards of truth-seeking and utility-attaining. For example, the nickname “癩子” was given because the character has a lively disposition in the original text. Gladys Yang uses autonomous creation method. She opts for the neutral term “Imp,” which describes someone lively, clever, or even mischievous. This aligns with the original text' s use of the nickname to imply personality traits. In contrast, Kinkley translates it literally as “Scabby,” describing an unhealthy skin condition. This fails to achieve the author' s purpose of using the nickname to implied personality traits, not only inaccurately conveying the original meaning but also potentially misleading readers.

In terms of translation methods for nicknames, Gladys Yang frequently employs orthographic adaptation, such as “Uncle Yamao” “Yang Banchi” and “Guanyin.” These nicknames carry rich cultural connotations and require contextual understanding from the original text, making them difficult to explain concisely. Orthographic adaptation preserves the conciseness of the original nicknames. In comparison, Kinkley' s translation of “杨半痴” as “Half idiot Yang” uses linguistic translation. While this allows readers to grasp part of the nickname' s meaning, it still fails to fully and accurately convey the cultural implications. Readers may not understand that “杨半痴” refers to a fortune-teller in a rural setting. Similarly, “Guanyin” in the original text is used to describe the heroine' s beauty, likening her appearance to that of the Goddess. Although Kinkley translation helps readers recognize the cultural background of the goddess, it does not convey the intended meaning of beauty. This could lead to misinterpretations of the character' s image, reflecting a translation behavior leaning toward the truth-seeking end.

The nickname “卖油郎” alludes to a literary allusion from Feng Menglong' s *Stories to Awaken the World*, which tells the story of an oil seller from a humble background who wins the heart of a celebrated courtesan. It represents a young man from a poor family who achieves a fortunate marriage, carrying a teasing connotation. In the text, it refers to a young laborer working in Jin Feng' s household, who might become her marriage partner. Gladys Yang' s translation employs intratextual gloss method, fully explains the cultural connotations of the cultural item, incorporating background story and emotional context. This not only sparks readers' interest but

also strikes a balance between truth-seeking and utility-attaining, making the original meaning accessible while ensuring readability. In contrast, Kinkley's translation provides only the literal meaning (the oil peddler) without supplementary information, losing the symbolic meaning of the original. Readers are unable to grasp the deeper cultural implications or fully understand the text's intended message, reflecting a tendency toward the truth-seeking end.

3. Extra-Translational Factors Influencing Translator Behavior

The comparative analysis of the translated texts reveals that Gladys Yang demonstrates a stronger reader-oriented focus, frequently employing domestication strategies and striving to balance "truth-seeking" and "utility-attaining" within the evaluation framework. In contrast, Kinkley places greater emphasis on conveying the original text's structure and style, serving the author's voice and leaning more toward the "truth-seeking" end. However, translation does not occur in a vacuum; translators are inevitably influenced by multiple external factors during the process. Extra-translational behavior refers to the study of a translation's utility beyond the text itself, it means the extent to which the translation serves society. It addresses the relationship between the translation and society, focusing on the various factors that constrain and shape translator behavior[8]. The extra-translational behaviors of the two translators will be analyzed primarily from the perspectives of their roles, translation philosophies, and patronage factors.

First, the two translators held distinct identities beyond their roles as translators. Translators with different educational backgrounds and social identities often produce translations with varying characteristics. Gladys Yang had extensive translation experience, having collaborated with Yang Xianyi on numerous works by Chinese writers and produced many independent translations. Kinkley, on the other hand, conducted in-depth research and interviews on Shen Congwen himself. From his doctoral dissertation to his 1987 biography *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*, Kinkley developed a profound understanding of Shen Congwen's style and works. Consequently, the two translators exhibited different tendencies when translating idioms in *Guisheng*.

Second, the two translators held different translation philosophies. Previous research generally agrees that Gladys Yang's independent translations prioritize acceptability, featuring fluent, natural language and strong readability[9]. In her solo translations, she often simplified or omitted Chinese cultural elements to avoid complexity and obscurity. In contrast, Kinkley viewed his target readers as scholars or students with certain cultural backgrounds and knowledge reserves. Thus, he aimed to preserve the original text as much as possible, minimizing omissions. In Kinkley's translations, idioms are often rendered literally with annotations. He placed great emphasis on conveying the original style and the unique language of the author.

Third, the two translators operated under different patronage influences. The theory of translation as rewriting posits that the production of translations is constrained by three factors: poetics, ideology, and patronage. According to Lefevere, patronage refers to "something like the powers that can further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature." The two translators were influenced by the institutions or patrons they were associated with. For instance, Gladys Yang worked for the Foreign Languages Press in China, which, to some extent, represented official translations and carried the responsibility of disseminating Chinese culture. Her translations were thus subject to certain constraints. Kinkley, however, was not a professional translator and had greater autonomy in selecting works to translate. His translation of *Guisheng* was included in *Imperfect Paradise*, published by the University of Hawaii Press, which primarily targets academics, students, and universities. As a result, Kinkley's translation placed greater emphasis on the original work and served the author's voice.

4. Conclusion

Shen Congwen's unique pastoral style has endeared him to readers, with the extensive use of vernacular language in his works serving as a vital manifestation of this style. From the perspective of Translator Behavior Criticism, this study conducted a comparative analysis of the English translations of such idioms Gladys Yang's and Jeffrey C. Kinkley's English translations.

General target-language readers are typically less concerned with the precise transmission of idioms and more focused on the artistic, literary, and aesthetic value of the translated work[10]. Consequently, Gladys Yang prioritized the acceptability of her translation, tailoring her efforts to the average target-language reader. For instance, in translating two-part allegorical sayings, she often employed deletion, conveying only the implied meaning to facilitate reader comprehension. Her diction is concise and idiomatic, aligning with English conventions while accurately conveying the original meaning in an accessible manner. Evaluated by the “truth-seeking and utility-attaining” framework, her approach strikes a balance between the two ends.

In contrast, Jeffrey C. Kinkley emphasized the transmission of the original text’s structure, style, and cultural connotations. His word choice and expressions tend to be more complex and less constrained, leaning more toward the truth-seeking end. His translation requires readers to possess a certain level of background knowledge to fully understand, making it more suitable for target readers who aim to learn indirectly from the translation or engage in translation studies.

The analysis of extra-translational behavior primarily examined factors such as the translators’ roles, their translation philosophies, and patronage. Gladys Yang was a professional translator, while Jeffrey C. Kinkley was an academic researcher with deep expertise on Shen Congwen. Their differing professional identities shaped distinct tendencies in their translation approaches. Furthermore, their translations were influenced by both subjective factors, such as their personal translation philosophies, and objective factors, including patronage.

This comparative study of the two English translations of the novel *Guisheng* reveals that translating idioms involves not only linguistic transformation but is also the result of multiple social factors. Translators should balance their different roles, considering both linguistic and social dimensions, to achieve an equilibrium between truth-seeking and utility-attaining.

Competing Interests Statement

All authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References

- [1] Zhou, L. (2013). 'Translation action' and 'translator behavior' in translator behavior criticism. *Foreign Languages Research*, (6), 72-76.
- [2] Zhou, L. (2016). The translation of 'vernacular language' and its critical studies. *Foreign Languages Research*, 33(4), 77-82.
- [3] Zhou, L. (2010). Translator' s behavior and the "truth-seeking – pragmatism" continuum evaluation model: A study of translator' s behavior (Part One). *Foreign Language Education*, 31(1), 93-97.
- [4] Aixela, J. (1996). Culture-specific Items in Translation. In R. Alvatez & M. Vidal (Ed.), *Translation, Power, Subversion* (pp. 52-78). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [5] Shen, C. (1981). *The border town and other stories* (G. Yang, Trans.). Beijing: Chinese Literature Press.
- [6] Shen, C. (1995). *Imperfect paradise* (J. C. Kinkley, Trans.). Honolulu: University of Hawai' i Press.
- [7] Feng, Q. (2014). The rhetoric of common sayings in A dream of red mansions and their English translation. *Studies on "A Dream of Red Mansions"*, (1), 286-305.
- [8] Zhou, L. (2025). Revisiting 'extra-translation' studies in translator behavior research. *Journal of Beijing International Studies University*, 47(2), 31-42.
- [9] Yu, J., & Liu, X. (2019). Telling China' s stories through translation: A study of Gladys Yang' s English translations of contemporary Chinese literature. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 40(6), 109-116.
- [10] Chen, J. (2024). A humanistic approach to the English translation of Chinese vernacular language: With comments on A critical study of the English translation of Chinese vernacular language. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, 45(2), 126-133.