

Hybrid Strategies and Cultural Negotiation: Untranslatability in the Chinese Translation of Harry Potter

Xu Chen

School of Languages and Cultures, Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, Shanghai, 201701, China

ABSTRACT

Fantasy literature translation, characterized by dense cultural references and invented lexicons, presents unique challenges beyond conventional paradigms. This study examines untranslatability in Chinese versions of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, integrating Venuti's domestication/foreignization (1995), Nida's dynamic equivalence (1964), and theories from cognitive translatology (Halverson, 2017) and postcolonial studies (Spivak, 2013). Through comparative analysis, corpus data (Zhang, 2021), and ethnographic insights (Pérez-González, 2021), it demonstrates how hybrid strategies—foreignizing iconic terms (e.g., "Patronus" with footnotes) while domesticating wordplay (e.g., Chinese homophone puns)—balance fidelity and readability. Technological tools (e.g., AI glossaries) and interdisciplinary collaboration are highlighted for mitigating cultural-semantic gaps. Departing from binary approaches, the study proposes a "third path" emphasizing creative negotiation to reconcile source-text authenticity with target-culture resonance, advancing ethical and equitable frameworks for global fantasy translation.

KEYWORDS

Harry Potter; Untranslatability; Hybrid Strategies; Cognitive Translatology; Cultural Equity

1 Introduction

With the advancement of globalization, the demand for cross-cultural literary exchange has grown steadily. Fantasy literature, characterized by its universal themes and imaginative appeal, has emerged as a critical domain for translation studies. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series—translated into over 80 languages and selling more than 500 million copies worldwide—exemplifies both the opportunities and challenges of translating culturally dense narratives. While the series has achieved commercial success in China, its translation reveals persistent struggles to reconcile linguistic creativity, cultural depth, and narrative coherence, particularly in the face of untranslatability.

Previous scholarship (Dong, 2021; O'Sullivan, 2019; Munday, 2016) has established that untranslatability in fantasy literature transcends linguistic barriers, encompassing mythological allusions, socio-historical references, and intertextual layers. In the Chinese context, however, research has predominantly focused on critiquing isolated lexical errors (Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2021) rather than proposing systemic strategies to address multifaceted untranslatability. This gap underscores the need for a holistic framework that integrates theoretical rigor with practical adaptation.

This study addresses two research questions:

- ① What cultural-linguistic elements in *Harry Potter* resist direct translation into Chinese?
- ② How can translators employ adaptive strategies to minimize semantic loss while preserving narrative coherence?

To answer these questions, the paper synthesizes Venuti's (1995) domestication/foreignization framework, Nida's (1964) dynamic equivalence, and insights from cognitive translatology (Halverson, 2017) and postcolonial theory (Spivak, 2013). Through comparative textual analysis of Chinese editions and corpus-based findings (Zhang, 2021), it evaluates how hybrid strategies—such as foreignizing culturally iconic terms (e.g., retaining Patronus with annotations) while domesticating wordplay (e.g., reconstructing puns through Chinese homophones)—mediate untranslatability. The study further explores the role of technology (e.g., AI-assisted glossaries) and interdisciplinary collaboration in bridging cultural-semantic gaps.

By reframing untranslatability as a site of creative negotiation rather than a limitation, this research contributes to both theoretical and practical advancements in fantasy literature translation. It challenges binary approaches to fidelity and fluency, advocating for a "third path" that harmonizes source-text authenticity with target-culture resonance.

2 Literature review

2.1 Evolution of untranslatability in translation studies

The concept of untranslatability has shifted from early linguistic limitations (Catford, 1965; Jakobson, 1959) to a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by cultural, ideological, and cognitive factors (Bassnett & Trivedi, 2019; Tymoczko, 2014). In fantasy literature, genre-specific challenges emerge in translating invented lexicons (e.g., spells in *Harry Potter*) and culturally embedded mythologies (O'Sullivan, 2019; Desjardins, 2021). For example, O'Sullivan's (2019) cross-lingual

analysis of *Harry Potter* revealed that 72% of neologisms underwent domestication (e.g., replacing cultural references with target-language analogs), while only 28% retained foreignization (e.g., Latin spell names). In China, fantasy translation research has grown with the commercial success of *Harry Potter*, though early studies focused on isolated lexical errors (Wang, 2020; Zhang, 2021). Recent corpus-based work (Wu, 2020; Liu, 2023) highlights systemic issues, such as over-reliance on phonetic transliteration for culturally dense terms, risking both readability and cultural fidelity.

2.2 Theoretical frameworks for adaptive strategies

Contemporary approaches to untranslatability emphasize hybridity and interdisciplinary collaboration:

(1) Venuti's domestication/foreignization:

While Venuti's (1995) dichotomy remains foundational, scholars increasingly advocate hybrid strategies to balance fluency and fidelity (Chen, 2020). For example, retaining iconic terms like "Patronus" with footnotes (foreignization) while adapting wordplay via Chinese homophones (domestication) reconciles authenticity and readability.

(2) Cognitive translatology (Halverson, 2017):

This framework prioritizes reducing reader cognitive load through strategic domestication, such as simplifying puns or idioms to enhance comprehension without sacrificing narrative flow.

(3) Postcolonial Theory (Spivak, 1993; Bhabha, 1994):

Critiquing cultural erasure via excessive domestication, these theories advocate for "ethical translation" that preserves source-culture alterity. For instance, Spivak warns against subsuming non-Western mythologies (e.g., Chinese "qílín") under Eurocentric equivalents ("unicorn").

2.3 Methodological innovations

Empirical and technological tools now enhance untranslatability analysis:

(1) Corpus linguistics:

Tools like AntConc reveal trends in translation decision-making. Zhang (2021) found Chinese *Harry Potter* translations overused domestication for cultural references, aligning with global fantasy localization patterns.

(2) Reader reception studies:

Eye-tracking experiments (Wu, 2020) showed a 22% comprehension boost for domesticated idioms, while surveys (Pérez-González, 2021) highlight the role of crowdsourced feedback in refining localized terms.

(3) AI and machine learning:

While NMT tools like GPT-4 assist in phonetic mimicry (e.g., spell translations), they struggle with cultural accuracy (Li & Zhou, 2024), necessitating human-AI collaboration.

2.4 Genre-specific theories

(1) Functional skopos theory (Vermeer, 1978): Prioritizing translation purpose, this theory informs choices like adapting Western magical hierarchies to resonate with Confucian values (domestication) or preserving exotic terms for narrative cohesion (foreignization).

(2) Transmediation theory (Jenkins, 2006): In transmedia contexts (e.g., *Harry Potter* mobile games), spell translations prioritize brevity and gameplay consistency over literary nuance, diverging from print editions (Liu, 2022).

3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Untranslatability: definitions and dimensions

Untranslatability, as conceptualized by Nida (1964), arises when linguistic or cultural disparities impede full equivalence between source and target texts. In fantasy fiction, this phenomenon manifests across three dimensions:

(1) Cultural untranslatability: References to source-culture mythology (e.g., Arthurian legends), idioms (e.g., "touch wood"), and societal norms.

(2) Linguistic untranslatability: Wordplay (e.g., puns, anagrams), phonetic creativity (e.g., spells like *Expecto Patronum*), and culturally loaded names (e.g., Remus Lupin, alluding to Latin *lupus* for "wolf").

(3) Genre-Specific untranslatability: Unique elements of fantasy, such as invented lexicons (e.g., Muggle) and world-building terminology (e.g., Horcrux).

3.2 Strategic frameworks for adaptation

(1) Domestication vs. foreignization (Venuti, 1995):

- Domestication: Adapts texts to target-culture norms (e.g., replacing British idioms with Chinese equivalents like “天老爷” for “Merlin’s beard”).

- Foreignization: Preserves source-text exoticism (e.g., retaining Latin spells like Wingardium Leviosa).

(2) Dynamic Equivalence (Nida, 1964): Prioritizes reader response over literal accuracy, ensuring the translation evokes equivalent emotional and cognitive effects.

(3) Paratextual Interventions (Genette, 1997): Utilizes footnotes, glossaries, or prefaces to bridge cultural-linguistic gaps (e.g., explaining Patronus’s Roman mythological roots).

3.3 Methodological Innovations

(1) Ethnographic Approaches: Recent studies employ ethnographic methods to observe translators’ negotiation of cultural gaps. For example, Pérez-González (2021) documents how translators engage with online fan communities to test localized terms, a practice termed “crowdsourced cultural mediation,” enhancing cultural resonance.

(2) Neural Machine Translation (NMT): While tools like DeepL and Google Translate expedite translation, their limitations in handling puns and cultural references necessitate human oversight. For instance, Li and Zhou (2024) evaluated GPT-4’s performance in translating fantasy neologisms, finding that while it achieved 72% accuracy in phonetic mimicry (e.g., spells like Lumos), cultural accuracy lagged at 48%, underscoring the need for human-AI collaboration.

4 Cross-cultural translation challenges and strategies in the Chinese edition of *Harry Potter*

4.1 Cultural Context Fractures and Translation Compromises

(1) Semantic Erosion of Mythological Symbols

① Localization Dilemmas in Western Allusions

The spell “Expecto Patronum” (rooted in the Latin “patronus”, meaning “guardian”) is transliterated as 护卫神咒 (Hù wèi Shén Zhòu) in Chinese. While footnotes explain its connection to Roman mythology, the cultural symbolism remains inaccessible to readers unfamiliar with Western traditions. Similarly, “Azkaban” (derived from the Hebrew “Abaddon”, “place of destruction”) is rendered as 阿兹卡班 (Āzik ā bān), which readers perceive as a generic fantasy term rather than a metaphor for existential dread (Zhang, 2021).

(2) Cultural and Linguistic Onomastics

② Ideological Negotiations in Naming A localized translation of “Muggle” as 麻瓜 (máguā, “hemp melon”) trivializes non-magical identity through playful phonetics, while the mainland term “凡族” (fānzú, “ordinary clan”) reflects sociopolitical marginality via lexical gravity (Tian, 2019). These choices embody implicit negotiations with target-culture power dynamics, illustrating how naming conventions encode ideological priorities.

③ Narrative Disruption in Mythological Onomastics Names like Remus Lupin (Latin lupinus, “wolf”) lose their foreshadowing as “莱姆斯·卢平” (Láim ě s ī Lúpíng), obscuring the character’s lycanthropic subtext. Similarly, Narcissa Malfoy (alluding to Greek narcissism) becomes “纳西莎·马尔福” (Nàxīshā Mǎ ě ěrfú), erasing mythological symbolism tied to self-obsession. Hybrid annotations such as “卢平 [狼裔]” (Lúpíng [lángyì], “wolf lineage”) have been proposed to preserve intertextuality through paratextual interventions (Chen, 2020), bridging the gap between phonetic transliteration and cultural meaning.

4.2 Creative losses in linguistic structures

(1) Neutralization of political wordplay

The Weasley twins’ slogan “U-NO-POO” (a pun on “You-Know-Who”) is translated as 便秘仁 (Biànmì Rén, “Constipation Sensation”), mimicking phonetic play (秘 ≈ “mysterious”; 仁 ≈ “benevolence”), but erasing its anti-authoritarian satire (Halverson, 2017). Similarly, Tom Marvolo Riddle → I Am Lord Voldemort loses its anagrammatic cleverness in Chinese. An alternative transliteration “汤姆·瑞斗·佛地魔” (Tom Riddle Fúdimó) phonetically approximates “Voldemort” but sacrifices narrative foreshadowing. A proposed solution uses homophonic characters (e.g., “伏地魔” [Fúdimó]) paired with footnotes explaining the original wordplay.

(2) Phonetic-aesthetic trade-offs

The incantation “Wingardium Leviosa” becomes 羽加迪姆·勒维奥萨 in transliteration, which the readers find forgettable compared to the semantic translation 飘浮咒 (Piāofú Zhòu -Levitation Charm) (Liu, 2023). AI tools like DeepL

offer "adaptive pun generation," though human oversight is crucial to avoid nonsensical outputs (e.g., translating "U-NO-POO" as 你知道谁没屎).

(3) Onomastic discontinuities in worldbuilding

Beyond mythological names, invented terms like Horcrux (魂器 Húnqì, "soul vessel") demonstrate genre-specific challenges. While the translation captures the object's function, it lacks the portmanteau's macabre resonance (horror + crux). Corpus studies show such compromises are systemic: Zhang (2021) found 65% of invented lexicons in Chinese *Harry Potter* undergo semantic domestication, prioritizing readability over lexical innovation.

4.3 Interdisciplinary strategies for genre-specific translation

(1) Cultural transcoding of mythical beings

Fantasy creatures like Hippogriffs (eagle-horse hybrids) are translated as “鹰头马身有翼兽” (Yīngtóu Mǎshēn Yǒuyì Shòu), which disrupts narrative flow. Simplified terms like “天鹰兽” (Tiānyīng Shòu, “celestial eagle-beast”) reduce reading friction, while anthropological analogies to 乘黄 (chéng huáng, a winged creature from Shanhaijing) bridge cultural gaps through annotated parallels (Zhao, 2023).

(2) Hybrid strategy efficacy

Table 4.3 Hybrid strategy efficacy

Strategy	Case Study	Impact
Foreignization	Patronus → 护卫神咒 + footnote	Preserves exoticism but raises cognitive barriers (Zhang, 2021)
Domestication	"touch wood" → 敲木头	Enhances fluency, obscures origin
Creative Adaptation	"U-NO-POO" → 便秘仁	Retains humor, loses political critique (Halverson, 2017)
Tech-assisted	AI-generated puns + human editing	Boosts efficiency, risks semantic drift (Chen, 2023)

(3) Paratextual innovations

A 2023 survey by Wu et al. found that 74% of readers preferred glossary appendices over inline footnotes. For example, Quidditch (“魁地奇” Kuídìqí) was supplemented with a glossary entry explaining its hybrid rugby-broomstick rules, improving comprehension by 33% (Wu et al., 2023).

4.4 Toward a "third path" in fantasy translation

(1) Contextual hybridity

① Retain culturally loaded terms like Patronus with footnotes (e.g., “呼神护卫 (Expecto Patronum)”) to foster “controlled estrangement.”

② Domesticate linguistic play: Reconstruct puns using Chinese homophones (e.g., 便秘仁) to prioritize readability and humor.

(2) Interdisciplinary collaboration

Translator-linguist-anthropologist networks are developing “cultural equivalence models.” For instance, Dementors are annotated with comparisons to 聊斋志异 (Liáozhāi Zhìyì) ghosts, contextualizing existential dread within Chinese literary traditions (Tian, 2019).

(3) Technology-driven experience design

Eye-tracking studies reveal readers spend 42% more time on footnoted terms (Wang, 2023). Augmented reality (AR) tools overlay translations with contextual animations (e.g., a 3D stag projection for Expecto Patronum), enhancing cultural resonance.

5 Adaptive strategies and empirical validation

5.1 Hybrid approaches

(1) Cultural anchoring: For terms like Patronus, combining transliteration (“护卫神” Hùwèi Shén) with visual icons (e.g., stag emblems in illustrated editions) reinforces cultural symbolism. A 2023 experiment by Wang et al. demonstrated that such multimodal approaches increased reader engagement by 27% compared to text-only translations (Wang et al., 2023).

(2) Dynamic footnotes: Digital editions utilize hyperlinked footnotes that expand on hover, reducing page clutter. For example, hovering over “梅林” (Mélín, “Merlin”) displays a pop-up comparing the character to the Daoist figure 太上老君 (Tàishàng Lǎo jūn), contextualizing Western mythology within Chinese spiritual frameworks (Liu, 2022).

5.2 Technology integration

(1) AI tools:

GPT-4 assists in generating context-aware translations, such as adapting U-NO-POO to “伏地魔没屎” (Fúdimó Méi Shǐ), which phonetically mimics the original while incorporating localized humor. However, human editors are essential to avoid semantic drift (Chen, 2023).

(3) Corpus software:

AntConc analysis of Harry Potter translations revealed a 9% increase in foreignization strategies when footnotes were added, prioritizing cultural fidelity without compromising readability (Zhang, 2021).

(4) Augmented reality (AR):

The 2023 *Harry Potter* AR app overlays translations with contextual animations (e.g., a 3D stag projection for Expecto Patronum). User tests showed a 33% improvement in cultural nuance retention compared to static text (Li & Zhou, 2023).

(5) Blockchain for consistency:

Blockchain-based glossaries standardize terms across collaborative projects. For example, “Muggle” is locked as “麻瓜” (máguā) in all regional editions, preventing discrepancies (Tencent AI Lab, 2022).

5.3 Collaborative models

(1) Cross-Disciplinary Teams: Linguists and cultural experts collaborate to address intertextual references, such as Dickensian motifs in the Dursleys’ portrayal, ensuring contextual coherence (O’Sullivan, 2019).

(2) Crowdsourcing: Platforms like Weibo allow readers to vote on localized terms. A 2022 pilot study reported a 28% increase in reader engagement for crowdsourced translations (Wu et al., 2022).

(3) Fan-translator co-creation: A 2023 localized edition integrated fan-sourced terms like “佛地魔” (Fúdimó) for Voldemort, which outperformed publisher-proposed terms by 22% in readability surveys (Chen, 2023).

(4) Academic-industry partnerships: Collaborations with Tencent AI Lab enabled real-time translation adjustments based on reader feedback, reducing revision cycles by 45% (Tencent AI Lab, 2022).

6 Extended discussion: emerging trends and ethical considerations

6.1 AI’s role in fantasy translation

While AI enhances efficiency in tasks like phonetic mimicry (e.g., spell translations), human oversight remains critical for preserving cultural nuance. A 2023 experiment by Li and Zhou evaluated GPT-4’s performance in translating fantasy terms, finding that while it achieved 68% accuracy in rhythmic similarity (e.g., spells like Lumos), cultural accuracy lagged at 52% compared to human translators (Li & Zhou, 2023).

6.2 Ethical balances

(1) Cultural authenticity: Debates persist over terms like “Christmas” translated as “圣诞节” (Shèngdàn Jié), which prioritizes source-culture fidelity but risks overwriting pagan origins (Wang, 2023).

(2) Reader cognition: Cognitive translatology (Halverson, 2017) warns against overloading readers with foreignized terms. Domestication reduces cognitive load but may diminish intertextual depth, as seen in the translation of Dementor as “摄魂怪” (Shèhún Guài, “soul-sucking creature”) (Chen, 2020).

6.3 Linguistic imperialism in fantasy translation: the case of “Qilin” vs. “Unicorn”

The dominance of English-to-Chinese translation often marginalizes indigenous symbols, exemplified by equating the Chinese mythical creature 麒麟 (qílín) with “unicorn.” While unicorns symbolize purity in Western contexts, the qílín embodies East Asian values of wisdom and divine authority. This mistranslation erases cultural specificity and reinforces Eurocentric narratives (Tian, 2019).

Solutions from Practice and Scholarship:

(1) Transliteration with context: Professional translators now standardize “Qilin” with brief descriptions (e.g., “a Chinese celestial creature symbolizing auspiciousness”) to preserve alterity (CTA, 2020).

(2) Avoiding false equivalents: Works like *Investiture of the Gods* retain “Nezha” instead of substituting it with “rebel god,” prioritizing cultural authenticity (Liu, 2021).

(3) Reader education: Annotated editions and digital resources (e.g., *Chinese Mythological Creatures Explained*) help audiences grasp qílín’s nuanced symbolism without oversimplification (Wu, 2023).

7 Conclusion

Translating fantasy fiction like *Harry Potter* requires strategic cultural negotiation, where untranslatability becomes a site for creative bridge-building. The Chinese edition demonstrates this through hybrid strategies: foreignizing iconic terms (Patronus with footnotes) to preserve exoticism, while domesticating wordplay (e.g., “便秘仁” for “U-NO-POO”) to maintain readability. Technological innovations (AR annotations, AI glossaries) and cross-disciplinary collaboration (linguists + anthropologists) further mitigate cultural-semantic gaps, offering a “third path” that balances source-text authenticity with target-culture resonance.

● Core contributions:

(1) Hybrid strategy framework: Merging Venuti’s domestication/foreignization with Nida’s dynamic equivalence to resolve binary tensions in fidelity and fluency.

(2) Tech-ethics integration: Demonstrating how AI tools (e.g., GPT-4 for pun generation) and blockchain glossaries enhance efficiency while requiring human oversight to prevent cultural erasure.

(3) Cultural equity advocacy: Advocating for transliterations (e.g., “Qilin”) and annotated paratexts to resist linguistic imperialism and honor non-Western mythologies.

● Future Directions:

(1) Refining AI for context-aware cultural accuracy in neologism translation (Li & Zhou, 2023).

(2) Exploring transmedia adaptation challenges in gaming/VR, where interactivity reshapes translation norms (Jenkins, 2006).

(3) Developing frameworks for translating indigenous cosmologies (e.g., qílín, Nezha) without Eurocentric homogenization.

About the Author

Xu Chen, MA, Lecturer, Translation.

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