

Faithfulness, Smoothness and Beauty: Lin Yutang's Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*

Qiao Zhang*

School of Foreign Languages, Yancheng Teachers University, Yancheng 224000, Jiangsu, China

*Corresponding author: Qiao Zhang, 873742886@qq.com

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Abstract: *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, an autobiographical prose work completed by Shen Fu in the early 19th century, is rich in culture-loaded words. This article examines Lin Yutang's English translation of these words from material, ecological, social, religious, and linguistic contexts against his own principles of faithfulness, smoothness and beauty. It shows that concise explanation works best when meaning is grounded in a visible object, image, or action. Honorifics, ritual beliefs, and classical allusions are harder to accommodate because they depend on knowledge beyond the sentence. Lin protects narrative flow by generalizing such expressions, though historical distinctions and associations may recede. Beauty emerges when a source image remains suggestive in English or when another phrase restores comparable force. Overall, smoothness determines how much detail is retained. These observations concern the sample and wording; they do not measure the translation as a whole or readers' responses.

Keywords: Lin Yutang; *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*; Culture-loaded words; Faithfulness; Smoothness; Beauty

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1. Introduction

Shen Fu completed *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* (Fusheng Liuji), an autobiographical prose work, in the early 19th century ^[1]. Its four surviving records move through wedding bliss, the little pleasures of life, sorrow, and the joys of travel ^[1]. Lin Yutang's English translation later brought the memoir to a wide Anglophone readership. Much of the book's cultural texture lies in ordinary details: food, gardens, family titles, rituals, poetry, and classical allusions. They do more than name things. They locate the narrative historically and help sustain its intimate, restrained voice. Many are described as culture-loaded words because no ready equivalent in another language carries the same reference and associations ^[2,3]. A translator must decide what each sentence can bear. Explanation can preserve a distinction but interrupt a recollection; familiar wording keeps the prose moving but may flatten the social setting. A literal image may retain poetic

form while leaving its allusion opaque. Lin's case is especially revealing because his practice can be read alongside the principles he himself proposed for literary translation.

Scholarship on Lin's version has explained his choices from several angles. Guan reads variations in the translation alongside Lin's views, his preface, and the conditions under which he worked ^[4]. Li approaches the text through translator-behavior criticism ^[5]. Li and Xu, concentrating on culture-specific items, find substitution especially prominent and argue that contextual connotations may survive even when culturally specific denotations recede ^[6]. Liu instead examines the balance between literary strangeness and familiarity ^[7]. This work supplies a useful account of substitution, explanation, and omission. Yet a procedural label does not show what has changed in a particular sentence. Explaining the ingredients of a food is a different problem from carrying a kinship hierarchy or a classical allusion into English. The question, then, is not simply which procedure Lin uses, but what that procedure allows him to keep when fidelity, fluency, and literary form pull in different directions.

That question defines the scope of this study. Lin's principles of faithfulness, smoothness, and beauty provide the terms of comparison, while five cultural domains organize the examples. The analysis asks what each expression is doing in its passage before judging what the English retains. Frequency is not the issue. Within the selected examples, the three principles sit most comfortably together when cultural meaning is carried by something visible: an object, an image, or an action. Institutional history and inherited allusion do not fit as readily into a brief explanation. Fluent English then more often gives up some specificity.

2. Analytical framework and method

2.1. Lin Yutang's translation principles

Lin's "*On Translation*" treats translation as an act of judgment rather than a word-for-word substitution. He links each standard to a responsibility: faithfulness to the source author, smoothness to the reader, and beauty to art ^[8]. The unit that matters most is the sentence. A translator must understand every word, but need not reproduce each one separately if the sentence's implications, emotional coloring, and spirit are better served otherwise. This emphasis also explains Lin's refusal to promise absolute faithfulness. Meaning, spirit, and form make different claims on a translation, and another language may not accommodate all three at once.

Smoothness begins, for Lin, with a translator's understanding of the source; the thought can then be recast as natural target-language prose. Most examples concern translation into Chinese, but the point also applies to English: an accurate sentence may still fail if it does not fit its context. Beauty raises another demand, since literary translation preserves more than information. Lin associates it with sound, meaning, spirit, verbal energy, form, and an author's distinctive manner. Later scholarship has emphasized the psychological and empathic strands of this account ^[9]. Elegant diction alone is not enough. The English needs literary life without losing contact with the source style. The three standards overlap without merging, and a gain in one may strain another.

For the close readings below, these broad principles are turned into three practical questions. First, what cultural meaning does an expression contribute in context, including its register or learned tone? Second, does the English read idiomatically, and does any explanation sit naturally within the narrative? Third, what happens to imagery, concision, poetic parallelism, and tone? These questions are derived from Lin's discussion rather than presented as his own fixed definitions. They also keep the claims within the limits of textual analysis. Smoothness here describes features of the prose; it is not evidence of how actual readers responded.

2.2. Text selection and procedure

All examples come from the bilingual edition of Shen Fu's work and Lin's translation issued by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. They were chosen because each brings a gain, a loss, or a tension among Lin's three principles into view. The sample is purposive rather than statistically representative. It nevertheless includes description, generalization, substitution, retention, contextual explanation, and omission. To make comparison possible, the examples are arranged under five familiar headings: material, ecological, social, religious, and linguistic culture ^[10].

The boundaries among these domains are not absolute. A wedding vessel has both material and social significance, a crane may carry ecological and religious associations, and a poetic line may combine natural imagery with literary convention. Each example is therefore grouped by the feature most relevant to its immediate context. The analysis first identifies the expression's role in the passage and then examines Lin's wording to determine what it preserves or reduces in relation to faithfulness, smoothness, and beauty.

3. Results and analysis

3.1. Material culture: Descriptive economy

Material culture includes food, clothing, vessels, buildings, and other objects of everyday life. Although these objects are concrete, their names may also convey information about preparation, place, status, season, or ritual use. Lin often selects a recognizable English category and adds a defining feature. His rendering of mabing (麻饼) as "sesame-seed cake" identifies both the ingredient and the type of food. The concise, natural phrase supplies the information needed in the scene. It leaves shape, texture, and regional variation unspecified, but a fuller explanation of a passing refreshment would slow the memoir's casual rhythm. The wording is faithful to the term's function in the passage, while its unobtrusive precision also serves smoothness and beauty.

Sumian (素面) poses a quieter version of the problem. "Vegetarian noodles" tells an English reader that the dish contains no meat without disturbing the scene. Su may also imply plainness and, in some settings, Buddhist dietary practice. The basic reference survives, but its associations contract. That loss matters differently across contexts. The English may suffice in a scene of modest domestic pleasure, but not where abstention or religious observance is central. Faithfulness depends on the work the meal performs in that setting, not only on the dictionary meaning of its name.

The phrase Su jiu zui xie (苏酒醉蟹) makes descriptive economy harder to achieve. Lin's "Soochow wine and wine-treated crabs" keeps the older regional name and lets readers see that wine is part of the preparation. What survives is useful factual information. What the wording lacks is the ease of an established food name: the two items sound explained rather than evoked. That distinction matters in literary prose, even if no present-day culinary label can fairly be projected back onto Lin's period. The translation is informative, but its information remains more conspicuous than the food in the surrounding scene.

Material objects often give a translator something concrete to work with. A few well-chosen words can identify the object and preserve the pace of the memoir, so the three principles need not compete. The balance becomes less secure when the name also marks a region, a ritual use, or a social position. Then a brief description must carry more than visible form.

3.2. Ecological culture: Image and association

In the memoir, plants, animals, seasons, and landscapes reflect culturally shaped ways of seeing nature. A flower or bird in Chinese literati prose may recall poetry, painting, or belief without stating the association. Lin often lets the image stand. Its beauty can survive even when English carries only part of its cultural history.

Xiangxue Hai (香 雪 海) becomes “The Sea of Fragrant Snow.” Nothing in the English identifies the “snow” directly as plum blossom, yet the metaphor still offers breadth, fragrance, and whiteness. Capitalization marks a place name, and the description around it gives the reader enough help to picture the scene. The phrase is slightly strange, but usefully so: its unfamiliarity opens an imaginative space instead of halting the prose. In this case, the same decision serves faithfulness and beauty.

Replacing the name with the label “a plum grove” would solve one problem and create another. The plants would be unmistakable, but the landscape would shrink from a sea into a botanical description. Lin’s metaphor preserves the act of perception, not merely the object perceived. Its local associations are less available in English, but its scale and suggestiveness remain.

A passage on gardening shows the cost of making natural imagery less visible. Shen Fu likens opposing branches to shoulders and arms and swollen joints to a crane’s knees. Lin gives the horticultural advice but drops the two bodily comparisons. The rule is clear in English; Shen Fu’s aesthetic response is not. Because the similes belong to that response rather than to ornamental detail, their absence changes the voice of the passage. Some strangeness would have preserved that voice better than a fully streamlined description.

3.3. Social culture: Explication and historical thinning

Social terms place people within institutions. Vocabulary for kinship, hierarchy, gender, marriage, work, and entertainment may show who owes deference or how custom organizes domestic space. A short English equivalent can identify a person or event while losing its position within the social order.

The bridal rite hejin (合 卺) is comparatively easy to unfold in the sentence. Lin describes the bride and groom drinking from paired cups. The classical name and the history of the divided gourd disappear, but the people, vessels, and action remain before the reader. More importantly, the action itself suggests marital union. Lin can therefore explain the rite without stopping the wedding scene for a note, and the central narrative function survives.

Yugui (于 归) and chuge (出 阁) do not yield as easily to a general marriage term. Each names the event from a gendered position: yugui refers to a woman’s marriage into her husband’s household, while chuge denotes her departure from the inner chamber of her natal household. Lin’s English makes clear that a marriage occurs, but not how the Chinese expressions map movement and domestic space onto a patriarchal order. What disappears is thus part of the memoir’s Qing social setting, not a minor shade of two otherwise interchangeable words.

A similar flattening occurs with forms of kinship and courtesy. Tangshang (堂 上) refers respectfully to parents through metonymy; zhesi (哲 嗣) honors another person’s son. Lin replaces both with neutral family nouns. Readers can still identify the people involved, but the exchange no longer carries the same distance, deference, or sense of relative position. The dialogue remains fluent, but its social register is less marked.

Forms of address express relationships within the exchange itself. When neutral nouns replace them, any sense of deference must be supplied by the surrounding passage, which may not do so. The omission therefore alters how the relationship is expressed as well as reducing its historical specificity.

Some operatic terms are also being generalized. Lin renders *liyuan danjue* (梨园旦角) and *nüling* (女伶) simply as an actress on the stage. That description identifies a female performer, but *dan* belongs to Chinese opera, with conventions of voice, gesture, costume, and gender, while *liyuan*, or Pear Garden, invokes the theatrical profession through a historical metonym. The general English term removes both the genre and the associations carried by its vocabulary. A short apposition after *dan* could have kept more of that information without turning the narrative into a note.

The contrast is now clearer. An action such as drinking from paired cups can be shown in a few words; an honorific, a gendered domestic space, or an operatic role depends on a wider institution. Lin usually compresses the latter. The sentence moves quickly, but Qing social life appears less sharply differentiated in English.

3.4. Religious culture: Explicating belief

Religious vocabulary matters because belief makes characters act. Cosmology, sacred power, and ideas about the dead supply reasons and expectations in these passages. Translating them merely as custom may preserve an event while obscuring what it means to those involved.

Kua he tengkong (跨鹤腾空) loses a culturally active image when Lin substitutes a stork for the crane. In Daoist and poetic traditions, riding a crane may suggest transcendence, immortality, or departure from the mortal world. A stork can still fly, but it does not carry the same religious and literary history. Nor does the substitution solve an English-language difficulty, since “crane” is already an ordinary word. The sentence remains vivid, but the image’s religious force is diminished.

Lin handles *yin and yang* (阴阳) by calling them female and male principles. This immediately gives English readers an opposition they can follow, avoiding an unexplained transliteration. The convenience has a price. Female and male invite a primarily biological reading, whereas the Chinese concepts participate more broadly in accounts of cosmology, time, and transformation. Lin keeps the relation between the two principles but narrows the conceptual field in which that relation operates.

Shenglao (牲牢) is reduced differently. Lin calls it a sacrificial offering, naming the ritual purpose but not the animals offered. Economy is difficult to defend here because “sacrificial animals” would be no less natural. The detail could have remained without burdening the sentence.

The animals present at a sacrifice may indicate its scale and solemnity. “Offering” leaves the substance unspecified and makes the rite less concrete. Naming the animals would restore this detail without requiring a footnote or a cumbersome sentence.

Huisha zhi qi (回煞之期) refers to the appointed time at which a dead person’s spirit was believed to return home. Lin first introduces it in the broad language of custom. The surrounding passage then supplies much of what the term withholds, describing the actions taken and the return that participants expect. Context partly repairs the generalization, but the belief is initially stated less directly than in Chinese. For the characters, this is not simply a customary occasion on which people happen to gather.

Describing a practice is not the same as conveying the belief behind it. Lin is more persuasive when English keeps both the visible act and the result participants expect. Words such as “custom” and “offering” move quickly past ritual explanation, but they may make the memoir’s world seem more secular than its actions suggest.

3.5. Linguistic culture: Form, function, and intertext

Linguistic culture appears where wording carries a history of other wording: in idioms, allusions, inherited metaphors, and poetic forms. These expressions strain Lin's preference for the sentence and its spirit. A paraphrase may convey a speaker's immediate purpose yet lose the form, register, or earlier text that gives it cultural resonance.

The couplet *Qiu qin renying shou, shuang ran juhua fei* (秋侵人影瘦, 霜染菊花肥) raises questions of poetic form as well as imagery. Lin translates it as "Touched by autumn, one's figure grows slender, Soaked in frost, the chrysanthemum blooms full". The English recreates the parallel between a thinning human figure and flowers in full bloom. Autumn and frost act on the two figures, and slenderness contrasts with fullness. The chrysanthemum's associations with endurance, reclusion, and literati self-fashioning remain unexplained, but adding them would compromise the couplet's concision. Lin therefore gives priority to formal and aesthetic faithfulness. The example belongs under linguistic culture because its effect depends on antithetical syntax, personification, and poetic compression. *Xiangxue Hai*, discussed earlier, depends more directly on a culturally informed perception of landscape.

Jiangqi (匠气) denotes an aesthetic fault in which mechanical craftsmanship lacks natural vitality. Lin replaces the artisan metaphor with "incurably vulgar." The phrase conveys the speaker's rejection of overtrained branches with force and naturalness in English. Although the contrast between fabrication and spontaneity disappears, Lin's alternative wording gives the judgment comparable rhetorical force. Its faithfulness lies chiefly in preserving that judgment, while its smoothness and literary effect arise from the English expression itself.

In "you yi fa, kong zuo yong zuiguo er" (有一法, 恐作俑罪过耳), the allusion to the first maker of burial figurines expresses guilt about setting a cruel precedent. Lin renders the line as "I know a way, except that I am afraid it would be too cruel". Yun's immediate moral hesitation is clear, but both the concern with precedent and the learned tone of her speech disappear. "Setting a cruel precedent" might have conveyed more of the allusion's function without requiring a footnote. Lin's paraphrase therefore preserves the immediate concern at the expense of these textual associations.

Qianche zhi jian (前车之鉴) invokes an overturned vehicle ahead as a warning to those who follow. Lin's "Mine is a case in point" reads naturally, but it turns a cautionary proverb into a statement offered as evidence. The rendering maintains the narrative connection while weakening the warning, the image, and the authority of a familiar saying. Its fluency makes this change in the utterance's force easy to overlook.

Retaining an image may create a different problem, as *yu sui xiang mai* (玉碎香埋) demonstrates. In Chinese convention, jade and fragrance may stand for a beautiful woman and, here, for her death. The English phrase "broken jade and buried incense" forms a striking parallel. Readers unfamiliar with the convention, however, may imagine damaged or buried objects without recognizing the reference to mourning. The wording closely reproduces the image but leaves its elegiac meaning uncertain. A brief contextual cue could clarify that meaning without sacrificing the image.

Neither literal translation nor paraphrase resolves every difficulty. A paraphrase may preserve an utterance's immediate purpose while altering its register or argumentative force; a retained image may reproduce formal beauty while leaving its reference unclear. The assessment must therefore consider both the form of an expression and its role in the passage.

4. Discussion

The five domains place different demands on translation. Material objects often permit brief description. Ecological expressions may preserve much of their effect through imagery even when some symbolic associations disappear. Social terms depend on knowledge of hierarchies and institutions, whereas religious terms often explain action through belief. Linguistic items combine an immediate purpose with poetic form or references to earlier texts. Lin's preference for concise English therefore has different consequences depending on which dimensions of meaning matter most in a passage.

The comparison suggests that Lin preserves cultural meaning more readily when an image or action can carry it within the narrative. Fragrant snow remains an unusual but interpretable place name, and drinking from paired cups communicates a marriage rite. Meanings grounded in institutional distinctions or inherited texts are more often reduced, as the gendered marriage terms, operative roles, honorifics, and classical idioms demonstrate. The difference partly reflects how much explanation each kind of cultural knowledge requires and how readily that explanation can be incorporated into the passage.

Smoothness shapes this balance most consistently. Generalization protects narrative movement, but its losses differ: an honorific becomes neutral, a gendered space disappears, an operative role loses its genre, and belief becomes custom. Lin's concern for sentence-level coherence makes these choices understandable, not equally satisfactory. When omitted information is incidental, brevity may aid all three principles. When it defines a relationship or explains a ritual act, brevity removes part of the source setting.

Beauty does not arise from one kind of correspondence. The Sea of Fragrant Snow and the chrysanthemum couplet carry an image or formal relation into English. In "incurably vulgar," Lin abandons the artisan metaphor and finds force in an English judgment. Both choices enliven the prose, but they preserve different features. Verbal closeness may keep an image while hiding its reference; smoothness may cost historical detail; a freer phrase may recover tone. Lin's English can be admired without treating those losses as irrelevant.

The evidence sets clear limits on this argument. These passages reveal particular gains and losses; they are not a statistical sample and cannot show how often a procedure occurs. Close reading also cannot establish what Lin's historical or present-day readers understood. The narrower claim is that narrative concision repeatedly competes with cultural specificity in the examples examined.

5. Conclusion

The selected passages do not support a single verdict on Lin's treatment of culture-loaded words. Where an object, action, or image can carry its own explanation, his English often preserves cultural meaning without losing narrative ease or literary effect. Material objects, landscapes, and visible rites provide several such cases. Terms grounded in deference, gendered institutions, cosmology, opera, or classical allusion are less accommodating. Lin's generalizations usually keep their immediate narrative function in view, but historical distinctions and intertextual links recede.

Lin's faithfulness is selective and sentence-centered. Smoothness often decides how much cultural detail the English will admit. Beauty may come from retaining a source image or from a new phrase that restores rhetorical force differently. Across the five domains, the principles do not produce a score; they expose trade-offs within particular choices. This is the framework's main use. It acknowledges the fluency and literary vitality of Lin's prose while showing where that fluency thins the cultural world of a passage.

Disclosure statement

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