

# Kinkley's Translation Strategies of "Decolonization" on Folklore Culture in *Border Town*: A Postcolonial Perspective

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**Abstract:** This essay concentrates on the folklore translation in Kinkley's English version of Shen Congwen's masterpiece, *Bian Cheng (Border Town)* from the perspective of Postcolonialism. Folklore is very typical in this novel, the translation of which can be a gauge of a translator's attitude towards culture. Jeffrey C. Kinkley, an erudite American scholar, is regarded as "Other" in the view of Postcolonialism. During the process of studying Chinese culture and rendering this novel, he has cultivated a deep, pure love for Shen's literary work and Chinese culture. Therefore, he keeps an amiable attitude all the time when translating this novel, making strenuous efforts to display the otherwise marginalized culture of Xiangxi (western Hunan), which is also an important part of Chinese culture. It stands to reason that he strives to create an in-between place where the western readers can also find out the same feeling as it is acquired by the readers of the source language in this border town. This essay aims to analyze the translation strategies and methods driven by the translator's amiable attitude, together with the influences ensued, that is, a real Xiangxi world has been shaped, an "alien home" has been brought about, and a literary classic came into being, in the hope of drawing some observation and inspiration about how to promote our Chinese classic literature to go abroad and how to tell a true Chinese story.

**Key words:** *Border Town*; Jeffrey C. Kinkley; folklore translation; Postcolonialism

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## 1. Introduction

*Border Town* is a short novel written by a prestigious Chinese writer Shen Congwen which centers around the lives of a ferryman and his orphaned granddaughter Cuicui living by a riverbank outside a remote town in Xiangxi area. This bittersweet novel, featuring local folk customs, narrates the romances of this country girl and depicts a sublime landscape as an almost cinematic backdrop for the taciturn relationships between the characters. It has been translated into ten languages. Of the four English versions so far, the latest one by Jeffrey C. Kinkey has been highly commended.

Jeffrey C. Kinkley is an American translator and retired professor of history who served at St. John's University. As an expert specializing in Shen Congwen's

literary works, he visited Shen Congwen in China several times when translating this artistic creation, and even finished a book about Shen entitled *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. He recommended Shen as a Nobel Prize candidate twice, and indeed, Shen was chosen to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988, but he died before the October announcement; the prize necessarily went to another. Given that, Kinkley plays an essential role in introducing *Border Town* to the West. During the process of studying Chinese culture and rendering this novel, he has cultivated a deep, pure love for Shen's literary work and Chinese culture. He, therefore, keeps an amiable attitude all the time when translating *Border Town*, making strenuous efforts to display the otherwise marginalized Chinese culture in the

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English context.

Such endeavor to highlight the inferior Eastern culture in a translated work serves as an approach of decolonization from the perspective of postcolonialism. In the introduction of *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, the authors Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi regard the power relationships being played out in the unequal struggle of the East opposed to the West, and translation is the battleground of the Postcolonial context (2000: 13). As postcolonialism is an interdisciplinary body of work, which mainly studies the imbalanced power relationships between the colonized and colonizer (Munday, 2016: 208), translation from this perspective can be seen as an effective tool of decolonization, highlighting the culture of the colonized and rupturing the ideology of the colonizer. Douglas Robinson also points out that translation can act as (1) a channel of colonization for colonizers to stigmatize the dominated groups as Others, imposing their norms or identities on Others; (2) a “lightning-rod” for colonizers to maintain cultural hierarchy and inequalities; (3) a channel of decolonization for the colonized to escape the oppression forced upon them and to confer upon themselves a positive, autonomous identity (Robinson, 2016: 105-106). Therefore, through the analysis of Kinkley’s translation of this Chinese literary work, we can see how this translator deploys this channel of decolonization, presenting an idyllic, poetic border town inundated with local color to Western readers.

In this sense, based on the case study of Kinkley’s translation of *Border Town*, this essay concentrates on folklore translation and provides a comprehensive analysis of the translation strategies driven by the translator’s intention of decolonization, together with the influences ensued, that is, an “alien home” has been shaped, and a literary classic came into being, in the hope of drawing some observation and inspiration about how to promote Chinese classic literature to go abroad and how to tell a true Chinese story. This essay aims to answer two research questions: (1) what are the translation strategies Kinkley employs to “decolonize” the folklore culture depicted in this novel when translating them into English? (2) what are the consequences brought about by such translation strategies?

## 2. Analysis of Folklore Translation in *Border Town*

Folklore or folk customs has been playing a

significant part in culture, inevitably bearing the cultural imprint, the translation of which can be a gauge of the translator’s attitude towards local as well as Chinese culture. To fully figure out the employment of folklore translation in this English version, first of all it is of necessity to give a brief definition and classification of folklore.

Zhong Jingwen, a distinguished folklorist in China, has been dedicated in folklore studies for years. In his book, *The Introduction to Folklore*, he defines the folklore as the life and culture created, inherited, and enjoyed by a country or a nation. Apart from that, according to him, folklore can be divided into the following three aspects: folklore on material, folklore on spirit, and folklore on society (1998: 1-5).

With regard to this, this essay makes the following classification of the folklore translation in this novel. Given the limited space in this essay, the primary focus will be on the folklore translation on material and on spirit, hoping that by dint of the analysis of them, we can understand how this border town has been reconstructed in its integrity by this amiable translator’s efforts of decolonization.

Table 1 The Classification of Folklore

Folklore translation on material	1. Translation of material life
	2. Translation of natural scenery
Folklore translation on spirit	3. Translation of local vernacular
	4. Translation of folk rites
	5. Translation of folk songs and ballads
Folklore translation on society	6. Translation of beliefs
	7. Translation of festivals

### 2.1 Translation of Material Life

From the material life of local people, we can catch a glimpse of the folk customs in Xiangxi area. For having a deep understanding about Kinkley’s translation of material life, this essay selects Gladys Yang’s English version for comparison, and the differences between these two English versions can be demonstrated through the following table.

Table 2 Contrastive Analysis of Folklore Translation on Material Life

	Source Text (沈从文. 边城[M]. 南京: 南京译林出版社, 2015.)	Target Text by Kinkley (Kinkley, J. C. <i>Border Town</i> [M]. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009.)	Target Text by Gladys Yang (沈从文. 边城[M]. 南京: 南京译林出版社, 2015.)
Clothing	白家机布汗衫 (151)	plain white homespun undershirts (176)	dress in white (422)
	粽粑叶“斗篷” (87)	coolie hat made of phrynum fiber (107)	palm-fiber cape (8)
Food	粽子 (66)	Zongzi dumpling (83)	Zongzi (312)
	粉条 (20)	thin noodles made from bean starch (30)	vermicelli (239)
Transportation	方头渡船 (13)	a squared-nosed ferryboat (21)	ferry (238)
	蓬船 (22)	tiny boats with awnings (151)	craft (250)
	官路 (12)	an old imperial highway (20)	highway (237)
Housing	吊脚楼 (22)	dangling-foot houses, half on land, half on stilts built over the water (32)	houses (250)
	河街 (10)	river street (32)	waterfront (257)

From the above contrastive analysis, it could be argued that Kinkley's translation is visually more detailed in terms of length than Gladys', using a lot of modifiers to provide background information for the English readers. Not only that, but he also adds some annotations at the end of the book, including Zongzi (a traditional Chinese food), which is a strategy of thick translation. In Kinkley's translation, on the one hand, literal translation has been employed when tackling the cultural elements which are unique in this novel so that the Western readers can taste the flavor of the local folk customs. On the other hand, taking the readers' acceptability into consideration, he supplements necessary information and folk knowledge by using thick translation to put the translation under a given cultural and social context.

## 2.2 Translation of Natural Scenery

Natural scenery is also a particularly vital topic in folk customs for the reason that it vividly reveals the living environment of Xiangxi inhabitants and casts a glamour over this border town. Therefore, choosing the proper diction and grasping the aesthetic functions is of paramount importance for the translator. Here, this essay presents an example to elaborate how he reproduces the artistic and aesthetic concepts and recalls readers' imagination.

Source Text: 溪流如弓背, 山路如弓弦, 故远近有了小小差异。小溪宽约二十丈, 河床为大片石头作成。静静的水即或深到一篙不能落底, 却依然清澈透明, 河中游鱼来去皆可以计数。(沈从文, 2015: 5) (Literal Meaning: The stream is like a bow, and the mountain road is like a bow string, which causes this difference. The stream is about two hundred feet wide over a streambed of boulders.

The flowing water is quiet, deep and so clear that you can see fish swimming around.)

Kinkley's translation: The water path was bent like a bow, with the mountain path the bowstring, so the land distance was a little shorter. The stream was about twenty zhang wide—two hundred feet—over a streambed of boulders. Though the quietly flowing waters were too deep for a boat pole to touch bottom, they were so clear you could count the fish swimming to and fro. (Kinkley, 2009: 21)

Kinkley employs a poetic description and romantic tone in great numbers to portray a beautiful world for Western people. Throughout the musical effect brought by rhyme and rhetoric devices, the translation can also generate in readers of the target text a delightful sensation, same as what is obtained by readers of the source text. After reading the translation, the Western readers can also deeply appreciate the fascinating scenery. This reproduction of scenery, while achieving artistic effect, appears to become the very reason why people here lead a life of virtue in this border town. In this way, characters come out from the novel and become real. All their goodness and kindness seem reasonable and convincing, and this Oriental border town shaped by Kinkley's translation is no longer associated with the stereotypes of savagery, backwardness, violence (Bhabha, 1994: 72) or “the land of the barbarians” (Said, 1991: 41) in the colonial discourse but equally appealing even in Western context.

## 2.3 Translation of Local Vernacular

In the novel of *Border Town*, there are a myriad of dialects, idioms, and colloquial expressions rich in cultural connotations, which can rarely find an exact equivalent expression in English culture. Confronted with these cultural disparities, Kinkley inclines to adopt foreignization strategy to preserve their exotic flavor. For example:

Source Text 1: 无事不登三宝殿。(沈从文, 90) (Literal Meaning: One never goes to the temple for nothing.)

Kinkley's Translation: one does not go to the Temple of the Three Buddhist Treasures without a good reason. (Kinkley, 236)

Source Text 2: 你个悖时砍脑壳的! (沈从文, 24) (Literal Meaning: a dialect of abuse.)

Kinkley's Translation: You're headed for the executioner! (Kinkley, 74)

In the first example, “三 宝 殿” (Temple of the Three Buddhist Treasures) refers to three places where the Buddhist ceremony would take place, which is used in Chinese as a metaphor of paying a visit for a particular purpose. Kinkley's translation maintains the meaning of the original words and the original metaphors of “Three Buddhist Treasures”, deliberately breaking the conventions of English language, so that Chinese culture has been presented before the Western readers. Kinkley's translation strategy of foreignization can be further proven by the second example. A euphemistic swear with local color has been translated into “headed for the executioner” instead of the domestication of “To hell with this hooligan”, the latter of which is straightforward but more familiar to the target readers. That is because the protagonist Cuicui is a very kind, sweet girl with good manners and this swear she blurts out is just due to a trivial misunderstanding, vividly showing her anger and shame. For this purpose, a rather reserved and implicit translation has been used to maintain her much-acclaimed image. By doing so, the characters can be sketched out and the panorama of this border town can be captured by the Western readers. Such way of registering the foreignness could be recognized as an effective method to challenge the “ethnocentric movement” (Venuti, 1998: 82) into the law of one-master language in Postcolonial world—English.

In a nutshell, though this direct and faithful translation may increase the difficulty for target readers, this alien reading experience forces them to notice and meditate on the differences between Chinese culture and English culture. Just as Venuti claims, by registering the foreignness of the original work in the target language, a foreignizing translation makes visible its condition as a translation and thereby counteracts the violent erasure of cultural difference at the core of any translating process (2008: 16). In doing so, the value systems of the target language have been destroyed, and the value systems of the source language have been implanted into a foreign text.

#### 2.4 Translation of Rites

This novel depicts numerous rites with folklore features, bearing the imprint of this region (Hunan province). Here, this essay investigates the most iconic translation of the marriage ceremony, attempting to explicate Kinkley's translation strategy of hybridization.

Source Text: 车是车路，马是马路，各有走法。(沈从文，52) (The chariot and the horseman

are totally different things, having nothing in common.)

Target Text: In a game of chess, the chariot—the rook—moves one way and the horseman—the knight—another. (Kinkley, 142)

“马 路” (The horseman) in this region refers to free marriage and free courtship. When a boy finds a girl with whom he falls in love, he can sing a love song for her, and then get the response through the girl's song. In contrast, “车 路” (The chariot) is close to the marriage under parents' arrangements. Both of them originate from traditional Chinese chess, used as a metaphor to indicate these two different ways of marriage.

As for Kinkley's translation, he makes use of analogy with the game of international chess that the Western readers familiar with, selecting “the rook” and “the knight” that share the same roles with the Chinese so as to deepen the understanding of such metaphor and enhance the liveliness and artistry of the language. Absorbing foreign elements of Chinese chess to integrate with target culture, this conscious and deliberate decision also mirrors translator's intent of hybridization. Just as Bhabha reckons that hybridity can reverse effects of the colonialist disavowal (Young, 2004: 632), Kinkley's translation strategy which hybridizes different cultures together is the way the marginalized culture enters upon the dominant discourse and estranges the authority.

#### 2.5 Translation of Ballads

One of the prominent features in the original novel lies in its local color. Keeping the prosodic features in the original text, Kinkley has created folk songs in the target language, which are enjoyable and readable as an independent literary text. Here are two examples:

Source Text 1:

“你大仙，你大神，睁眼看看我们这里人！  
他们既诚实，又年青，又身无疾病。

.....

关夫子身跨赤兔马，  
尉迟公手拿大铁鞭。

.....

慢慢吃，慢慢喝，  
月白风清好过河。  
醉时携手同归去，  
我当为你再唱歌！”

(沈从文，42-43)

Kinkley's Translation:

“Gods and immortals, open your eyes and



look at us down here!

Our young are honest and healthy.

...

Lord Guan, mount the Red-haired Steed,

General Weichi Gong, brandish the iron whip.

...

Eat and drink, please take your time,

Moon's up and breeze's down; fording the river will be just fine.

If you're drunk, I'll take your hand and lead you along,

So I can treat you to another song."

(Kinkley, 118-119)

In this folk song, the repetition of words like “大”, “既”, “又” aims to intensify the musical nature. With this in mind, Kinkley makes use of alliteration and end rhyme to achieve the same function. These words, such as “Gods”, “immortals”, together with “eyes”, bear the same phoneme “[z]”, which brings about a wonderful melody in this rendition.

Furthermore, when handling the historical figures like “关夫子” and “尉迟公” in Chinese culture, he adopts the method of transliteration without making any annotations since these figures have little or no relation to the plot and theme of the novel, and too many interpretations and annotations would only be the burden for reading. Such consideration is also driven by Kinkley's amiable attitude, as the Other, towards Chinese culture. What he has interpreted is meant to establish barriers or hindrance of understanding but to present the literary charm of the original novel to the readers in the English-speaking world.

Source Text 2: “大姐戴副金簪子，二姐戴副银钏子，只有我三妹没得什么戴，耳朵上长年戴条豆芽菜。”（沈从文，41）

Kinkley's Translation: “Sister No. 1 wears a pair of gold hairpins, Sister No. 2, a pair of silver bracelets, But Sister No. 3, little me, has no jewelry to be found; Just bean-sprout earrings, worn all the year round.” (Kinkley, 117)

In the novel, Cuicui uses this ballad to spill her inner voice. Here, “大姐”, “二姐” and “三姐” have been translated into “No.1”, “No.2”, and “No.3” respectively, as a way to show Cuicui's hazy understanding about the gap

between rich and poor, as well as her worries about rumor of “the mill for a dowry”. If Kinkley resorts to the strategy of domestication, translating it into “most girls”, it cannot guide the western readers to taste the cultural and social flavor in the original text.

### 3. The Influence of Folklore Translation

From the above analysis, it is not hard to observe that Chinese culture permeates the whole English version. With the effort of the translator, the realm of border town has gained its identity in which the norms are created according to the East rather than the West, thus in turn, coming into play, and leaving an alien home and literary classic to the Western people.

#### 3.1 The Image of an “Alien Home” of *Border Town*

As the “cultural turn” has indicated, among other things, culture is not as a stable unit but as a dynamic process which implies difference and incompleteness, so translation is not only a matter of transfer between cultures but also a place where cultures merge and create new spaces (Hermans, 2014: 187). In this translation, cultural differences are constantly being negotiated. In other words, Kinkley leaves no stone unturned to create an “in-between” space where divergent cultural values are negotiated (Bhabha, 1994: 2).

On the one hand, due to Kinkley's deep, pure love for Shen Congwen's literary works and Chinese culture, he needs to present Western readers with the panorama of this border town with its original flavor. Therefore, this border town he has reconstructed is foreign and alien to the Western mind for it abounds with unique folk customs and minority culture. On the other hand, though alien and foreign as it is, this world is still attractive, where readers can also find a sense of belonging, just like a home. Because by dint of the in-depth studies about Shen Congwen's works and great deliberation on translation strategies, he has successfully reproduced the folklore features and the pastoral artistic effect in the original text, thereby portraying for Western readers a utopian border town where people lead a tranquil and harmonious life. That is something deeply appealing to the foreign readers.

Kinkley also compares this world of Xiangxi to Yoknapatawpha which is replete with mappable literary landscape like Faulkner's (2009: 15), drawing a veil of romance and mystery over this Chinese frontier town. But how much is it like Yoknapatawpha? It is up to the readers themselves to grope for an answer.

In conclusion, the translator has inculcated readers with the idea that an alien, foreign country is home, and

home is alien and foreign.

### 3.2 The Image of a “Literary Classic” of *Border Town*

Literary classics take root in the authentic history and culture, and then generate endless influence and eternal vitality so that they can go on to inspire the later generations for years to come, leaving abundant heritage to people in different times and places. Kinkley was firstly astounded by this idyllic realm that Shen Congwen has painted, as well as the human spirit exhibited in this novel. Then, a profound resonance with the value system and Chinese culture began to sprout in his mind, which propelled him to translate this novel impregnated with folk customs, as a means of spreading Chinese culture far and wide.

With the development of Postcolonialism in modern society, especially after being influenced by the Deconstruction theory, the scholars of Postcolonialism advocate the elimination of cultural aggression of imperialism on marginal culture and the reposition of Eastern culture, hoping to create a world with diversity and coexistence, and equal communication between cultures. Kinkley is such a translator, who has a deep understanding about the value of Chinese literature. What he intends to do is to seek for an equal communication between English and Chinese, instead of using one center to replace the other. He, as an expert who has been engaged in academic studies of Shen Congwen and Chinese history, society, and culture for many years, can afford to convey Chinese culture in a brilliant and effective way. Apart from that, as a Western scholar through years of intense exposure to Western education and culture, he is also able to stand in Western readers' shoes and examine the whole work from their perspectives. Therefore, having meditated on the universality and individuality between Chinese literature and English literature, together with appropriate strategies, he recreates a compassionate and benevolent frontier town in which the characters and culture can still come alive in the English language.

In the preface of *Border Town*, Kinkley mentions that Shen Congwen wishes “to create a little Greek temple, in a design perhaps modest but not fastidious.”(2019: 15) Fortunately, Kinkley has noticed this and is willing to build this temple with the solidest stones.

### 4. Insights on Chinese Culture Going Abroad from Kinkley' Translation of *Border Town*

The West and the East differ greatly due to their cultural traditions, economic forms, and development of modernization, all of which are obstacles in the exchange

and communication between literatures. Besides, as in modern times China was subject to the butchering of the strong powers and successive civil strife and chaos, leading to the national failing, it has lost a lot of opportunities to carry out cultural exchanges and to spread Chinese culture. This causes the communication between the Chinese literature and Western literature being set up with an unequal footing. However, as China is evolving rapidly, Chinese literature and culture have been in an increasingly influential position in the world. Increasing Chinese “voices” can be heard throughout translation.

It is undeniable that Kinkley's English version of *Border Town* is a magnifying glass, through which we can draw some observation and enlightenment about promoting the spread of Chinese literature and culture. Since Kinkley's translation of *Border Town* was published in 2009, by Harper Collins Publisher, one of the world's largest publishing companies, this English version has gained in popularity overseas and made Shen's literary works receive wide attention and continuous comment. With this in mind, based on the analysis of the above-mentioned Kinkley's translation, we can also find out some useful methods on how to tell a true Chinese story.

To begin with, to tell a true Chinese story, this story should be a good one, which means we need to dig out those classic literary works that can truly represent our Chinese culture and core values. For that to happen, Chinese literature should be fully valued by Chinese people ourselves. Only when we Chinese people have a deep understanding about the literature of our own, can Chinese literature be brought to a wider expansion.

In addition, the differences between cultures and languages should be taken into consideration. By analyzing those good examples of literary works going abroad, we can figure out how they narrow the gap between different cultures and languages, and what else can be improved, thereby learning from experience, and making up for their deficiencies. And in the process of analysis, we are also sharing our own understanding about literature, which is also an activity of cultural exchange and transmission. Edward W. Said states that the construction of identity, whether it is the identity of Self or the identity of Other, is a process which involves establishing the opposites whose actuality is always subject to the constant interpretation of their differences from “us”. (1991: 34) In the view of Postcolonialism, the identification of Self or Other is by no means static, and the Self or the Other gains a more complete identification throughout the continuous communication and collision

with Other. In this sense, the English version of *Border Town* is not only tangible for English readers, but also more visible in Chinese culture. Likewise, Chinese culture can gain a more completeness and richness through the interpretation of translated works.

Last but not least, any translated literary work is presented by the translator after “reading”, but as Postcolonial translation suggests, translators are impossible to remain neutral, and translators are tools of power struggle, influenced by various factors while translators themselves are also a kind of power. Although Sinologists, as translators, enjoy the vastly great advantages of overcoming the difficulties of cultural communication, not every Sinologist can take in-depth understanding of the author and convey Chinese culture as effectively as Kinkley did. Therefore, the mode of cooperative translation between sinologists as well as native translators and literary researchers can yet be regarded as an efficient way to carry out an accurate, equal literary (cultural) communication.

## 5. Conclusion

This essay is a study of folklore translation in *Border Town* from the perspective of Postcolonialism, exploring the translation strategies being used by Kinkley and the ensuing influences of his translation, in the hope of drawing some inspiration about how to promote our Chinese classic literature to go to the global arena and how to tell a true Chinese story.

This present essay concludes that Kinkley is inclined to use the strategies of thick translation, reproduction of the aesthetic function, foreignization and hybridization when tackling the unique folklore culture in this novel, reviving a real border town in English-speaking world. From these strategies, it can argue that decolonization is not meant to indiscriminately display all unique elements in culture of low-status or to present foreignness for the sake of foreignness thus establishing barriers of understanding and alienating the works from the target readers. By using proper strategies, the literary charm of the novel which owns its independent identity can also be grasped by the Western readers.

By virtue of his splendid rendering, an alien home has been fostered in the West, breathing new life into the otherwise marginalized local culture. The reason why it is deemed to be a home is that the English translation endows the Western readers with the ability to experience the immersive and interactive living of border town in which they are deeply impressed by this harmonious and ethereal life. Moreover, this home is alien because it is

seething with unique Chinese culture which seems to be unfamiliar and strange to the Westerners. However, many of these seemingly strange and exotic things are exactly this translator deliberately intends to present, encouraging the Western readers to abandon their complacency and to take the initiative to fathom other's culture.

Overall, it stands to reason that Kinkley's English version is a successful one, leaving an indelibly imprint on Western readers' memory. Against the background of globalization, China is committed to vigorously forging ahead cultural communication and building stronger cultural confidence. We can gain some insights from this literary classic. To sum up, the thorough study of Chinese culture, and the proper and effective employment of the channel of translation, coupled with the equal and mutually beneficial exchange of culture will open many doors and will be the shortcut to lead Chinese culture to the global arena.

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