

Original Research Article

Study on translation deviation of labor class ethnic cultural words and cultural communication loss in different Chinese versions of Martin Eden

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Abstract: This article examines how labor class ethnic cultural words in different Chinese versions of Jack London's *Martin Eden* shift when translators recode class identity, ethnic naming, political tension, and colloquial register for Chinese readers. Translation deviation is treated as a layered cultural event: A word carries working-class experience in the source narrative, passes through a translator's interpretive frame, and becomes a social image in the receiving culture. By comparing literal retention, cultural substitution, register smoothing, and explanatory compensation, the article argues that cultural communication loss appears when translated wording preserves plot information while weakening class antagonism and group memory.

Keywords: Martin Eden; Chinese translation; labor class; culture-specific items; cultural communication loss

1. Introduction

Martin Eden is often read as a story of individual ambition, aesthetic awakening, and class mobility, yet its language is built from rough contact between the working-class world, immigrant urban life, socialist debate, and bourgeois literary taste. When the novel enters Chinese through different translations, the most delicate units are not only proper names or technical terms but the small words that mark labor, ethnicity, dockside speech, and the wish to cross social boundaries. These words place the speaker inside a social order. If a Chinese version chooses a smoother or more bookish expression, the reader may still follow the plot but may lose the pressure that makes Martin's self-fashioning painful. Translation deviation therefore needs to be examined as cultural displacement, not simply as inaccurate equivalence.

2. Labor class ethnic cultural words as narrative pressure

The labor class vocabulary in *Martin Eden* works through accumulation. Words related to work, bodily exhaustion, speech habits, neighborhood origin, and ethnic difference create an atmosphere in which Martin's desire for literature is never detached from shame and stubbornness. In Chinese translation, such words must remain understandable while retaining enough foreignness to show that the original class world is not a Chinese local scene. Recent research on culture-specific items in fiction stresses that translatability depends on whether the target text can rebuild the cultural function of an item rather than merely replace surface meaning^[1]. For *Martin Eden*, a translation may be lexically acceptable but culturally weak if it turns a rough group label into a polite category or removes tension between working speech and educated aspiration.

3. Lexical deviation in different Chinese versions

The most common deviation is lexical leveling. A term that originally carries a working-class edge may be translated with a standard Chinese equivalent that reports meaning but removes social temperature. Words of address linked to sailors, workers, or rough companions can be softened into general labels, even when the exact Chinese wording differs by version. This choice lowers awkwardness, but it weakens the class boundary. A more resistant translation would keep a visible trace of speech level, either by selecting a Chinese colloquial word with comparable social force or by adding a brief contextual cue. The issue is

whether the translated scene still lets the reader hear social distance.

Another deviation concerns ethnic and cultural labels. Some versions generalize culturally marked words into broad descriptive categories because the target reader may not share the same historical associations. This reduces reading difficulty, but it can turn a situated relation into flat background detail. In literary translation from English to Chinese, cultural and textual features need to be considered together because a culturally marked item performs through tone, speaker position, and scene rhythm rather than referential content alone^[2]. In *Martin Eden*, an ethnic label may expose prejudice, hierarchy, or limited imagination. If the Chinese wording removes discomfort, fluency is gained at the cost of cultural evidence.

4. Register smoothing and the loss of class voice

Register smoothing is more damaging than single-word inaccuracy because it changes who seems allowed to speak with authority. Martin's movement across class spaces is partly a movement across registers: The speech of laboring companions, the language of middle-class cultivation, and the abstract vocabulary of books compete inside the same consciousness. When a Chinese version consistently raises rough speech into elegant written Chinese, Martin's transformation seems less conflictual. When it lowers intellectual debate into plain exposition, the self-education drama loses intensity. The translator need not reproduce every social dialect mechanically, but must keep enough contrast between voices so that class mobility remains audible.

Different Chinese versions can be compared by asking where they place the boundary between readability and social marking. Literal retention may keep a foreign term visible, but without contextual support it can feel decorative. Cultural substitution may make the scene immediately readable, but it may import Chinese associations that do not belong to the American labor world. Explanatory wording can compensate for background loss, yet too much explanation interrupts narrative speed. **Figure 1** summarizes the main deviation types: Lexical choice and social register interact with literal retention and cultural substitution, producing class dilution, idiom neutralization, ethnic over-generalization, and softened political tone.

	 Lexical Choice	 Social Register
 Literal Retention	 Class marker diluted	 Worker idiom neutralized
 Cultural Substitution	 Ethnic term over-generalized	 Political tone softened

Figure 1. Main types of translation deviation in labor class cultural words.

5. Cultural communication loss in reader reception

Cultural communication loss does not mean that readers understand nothing; it means that they understand a reduced social relation. A Chinese reader may know that Martin comes from a lower class, but may not perceive how each word disciplines, humiliates, or energizes him. The loss begins with lexical selection, grows through register adjustment, and becomes visible in the reader's final image of the character. Comparative work on literary translation strategies shows that cultural content is transmitted through retention, adaptation, and narrative positioning rather than isolated lexical matching^[3]. For *Martin Eden*, serious loss occurs when translation turns class conflict into personal hardship and ethnic-cultural specificity into general background color^[4].

6. Compensation strategies for reducing loss

The first compensation strategy is controlled foreignization. Terms tied to labor, ethnicity, or political

debate should not be domesticated too quickly. A translator can preserve a foreign social signal while using syntax or nearby description to keep the sentence readable. The second strategy is register calibration. Instead of making all dialogue elegant or all rough speech colloquial, the version should establish a scale of speech levels and keep that scale stable across scenes. The third strategy is contextual rebuilding. When a word cannot carry the original cultural load by itself, the surrounding clause can restore class relation, speaker attitude, or social consequence.

Cultural adaptation remains necessary, but adaptation should be judged by whether it preserves the function of difference. Recent discussion of Chinese novels translated into English shows that cultural adaptation can work when it reconstructs context rather than replacing cultural texture with target-language convenience^[5]. The same logic applies in reverse to English-to-Chinese translation of *Martin Eden*. A translated labor term may sound natural in Chinese, but it should not become socially weightless. **Figure 2** shows the chain through which source class culture passes into Chinese wording and reader reception, and why compensation must rebuild context before loss becomes the reader's settled social image.

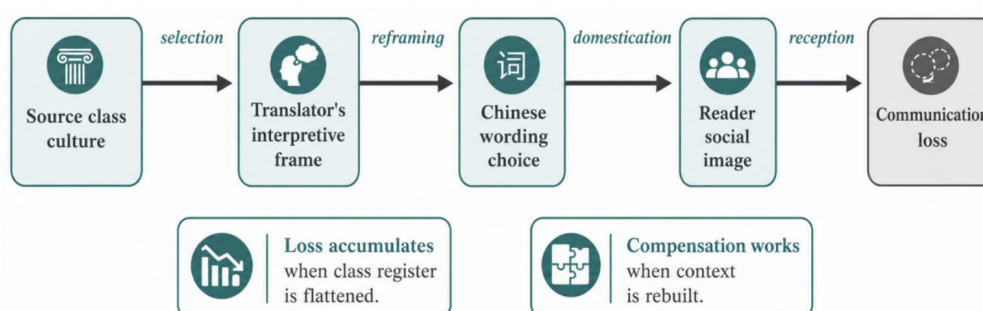


Figure 2. Cultural communication loss from source class culture to reader reception.

7. Conclusion

The translation of labor class ethnic cultural words in *Martin Eden* tests how Chinese versions handle the relation between lexical meaning and social force. Translation deviation appears when a version reports the plot but weakens class register, ethnic specificity, political tension, or rough working speech. Cultural communication loss then accumulates in reader reception: *Martin* becomes more generally inspirational, less socially wounded, and less historically embedded. A stronger translation does not need to preserve every foreign item literally, but it must keep the function of difference active through calibrated register, contextual rebuilding, and careful cultural adaptation. In this way, the Chinese version can transmit not only what the words denote but also what they do inside the novel's class imagination.

About the author

Xiang Zhang(1992.06-), her academic title is Lecturer, from Hunan Xiangxiang, Han Chinese. Her research interests are: translation studies; literary translation; English teaching.

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