

A Critical Assessment of An Investigation of Chinese Undergraduates' Ability to Translate Chinese Cultural Items into English and Predictors of Such Ability

Lizhen Liu (No. 2008001)

An Investigation of Chinese Undergraduates' Ability to Translate Chinese Cultural Items into English and Predictors of Such Ability was published in *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics* in Mar. 2020. The authors Haiyang Sun & Yuan Gao come from University of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which is one of the top 200 world famous universities according to the latest U.S. News & World Report.

Dr. Sun & Gao applied iceberg theory to investigate 82 Chinese non-English major undergraduates' competence in translating Chinese cultural items into English and explored some significant predictors of such cross-cultural competence.

1. Problem Statement

The thesis begun a phenomenon among Chinese non-English major undergraduates, that is, “aphasia of Chinese culture”. Too many teachers and students focused on learning English cultures, but they neglected to be more familiar to their home culture. When they were required to translate some home cultural items to foreigners, their translation ability was much refined for they did well just in translating the surface layer cultural items,

but their sub-surface and deep layer cultural translation tasks were far less than satisfactory. Based on this problem, the thesis explored on how to improve these students home cultural awareness of learning Chinses culture in English and what were the significant factors that affected these students' translation ability, which plays an important role in teaching cross-cultural communication in EFL classes home and aboard.

2. The Investigation of Chinese Undergraduates' Home Cultural Translation Ability and its Factors

Culture is a complex whole, discovered or invented by human beings. As a member of a social group, we should acquire it, obey it, and apply it, to a large degree. According to the iceberg theory, cultural model can be divided into three layers: surface culture, sub-surface culture and deep culture. Surface culture is on the upper side of the iceberg, which can be seen clearly and directly, for example, food, clothes, holidays etc.; Sub-surface culture is just very closely near the surface of water, so it can viewed a rough shape with blurred details, for example customs, gestures, etiquettes, behaviors, etc.; Deep culture lays at the bottom of the iceberg, for it is so deep under the water, we cannot even seen it, but it is the core of collective ideas, such as values, philosophy, ideology, etc..

The three-layer cultural model of iceberg theory is designed like a pyramid. It clearly divided three layers of culture and has a significant meaning in learning a new language and culture.

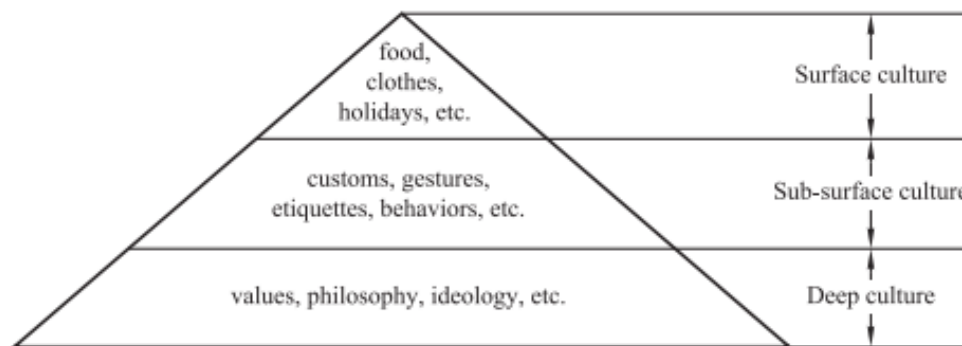


Figure 1. Components of the three-layer cultural model

It is wise to apply iceberg theory in developing a language skill (take translation for example) in learning practice. But we are too focused on how to translate a target cultural element into the target language, while ignoring how to translate a home cultural item into the target language. So, Dr. Sun and Gao started this investigation of Chinese non-English major undergraduates' competence in translating Chinese cultural items into English and concerned its factors.

Sun & Gao (2020, p110) pointed out that there were direct factors (such as target language proficiency, knowledge of home culture, translation strategies, etc.), indirect factors, (such as motivation of target language learning, attitude towards home culture, awareness of importance of home culture in target language learning, etc.) and external factors (such as coverage of home culture in foreign language textbooks, teaching of home culture in the foreign language, test of home culture in foreign language exams). All these three are very adaptive to the three-layer cultural model of iceberg theory.

3. Methodology and Results

More than 100 non-English major undergraduate students had done their translation tasks and questionnaires in this investigate, but 82 valid data had been collected. In examining these students' translation competence of home cultural competence, the data collected in this study had undergone a careful analysis with both a qualitative study and a quantitative study.

Three main questions had been raised. They are:

- (1) What are Chinese university undergraduates' abilities to translate Chinese surface, sub-surface and deep cultural content into English? What are the students' difficulties in doing the translation?
 - (2) Do grade, gender, and major have effects on students' performance in the translation tasks?
 - (3) What are the significant predictors of students' culture-specific translation competence?
- (Sun & Gao, 2020, p110)

With a mix methodology, the results are:

- (1) The students are good at translating Chinese surface cultural content into English, but they have difficulties in translating the sub-surface and deep cultural contents, due to their high requirement in the comprehension of Chinese culture. In addition, students are relatively hard to translate Chinese unique items into English, such as *Shan rang zhi* (禅让制). 禅让制, abdicating and passing down the throne, means

never passing down the throne to his own son, instead, it encourages ancient sages to pass their thrones to whom wisely enough to take the country to be more promising. As to these unique Chinese cultural items, on the first hand, students have difficulty to understand them by themselves; on the other hand, students are uncertain whether their translation is acceptable for native speakers to understand.

(2) Grade has little effect on students' translation performance, but gender and major do have a great effect on students' translating Chinese cultural items. To a great degree, it is thanks to students' differences in language proficiency and cultural knowledge. Girl students get a higher score than boy students in their NMET score ($t(80) = 2.38, p = 0.02$) and sub-surface cultural explanation task ($t(80) = 2.17, p = 0.03$). This suggests that female students' advantage in the two tasks can be attributed to their advantage in English proficiency and their Chinese cultural knowledge. (Sun & Gao, 2020, p115) Not considering the effect of grade and gender, science majors did significantly better than engineering students in translating deep cultural sentences. This can be attributed to science students' advantage in cultural knowledge ($Z = 2.50, p = 0.013$), rather than the two majors' difference in NMET scores ($Z = 0.28, p = 0.78$). (Sun & Gao, 2020, p116)

(3) What can significantly predict students' ability to translate Chinese culture into English are their Chinese cultural knowledge and their

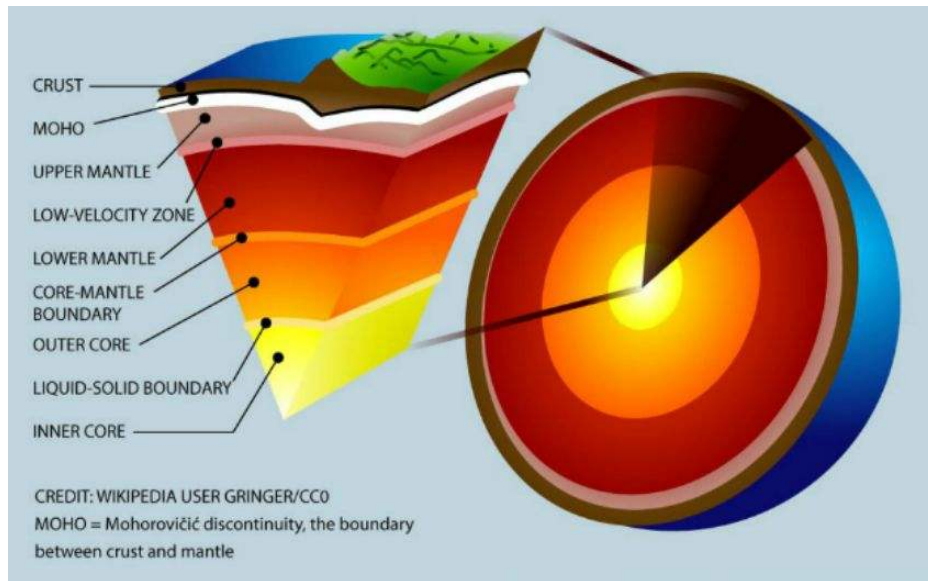
awareness of the importance of learning Chinese culture in English. (Sun & Gao, 2020, p120) If the translation materials about Chinese culture are familiar to these students, they will be energetic and vivid in translating their sub-surface and deep cultures. If these students are unfamiliar with the culture embedded in the translation materials, they will just translate their surface culture. Thus, it is advisable to integrate Chinese culture with English language learning to enhance students' awareness and motivation to export Chinese culture to foreign friends, and ultimately improve their cross-cultural competence.

4. Limitations and Further Studies

An Investigation of Chinese Undergraduates' Ability to Translate Chinese Cultural Items into English and Predictors of Such Ability is a good thesis with a mixed methodology, otherwise, it will not be published in one of Chinese top journals in 2020, but it has two main limitations:

(1) A Critical thinking on Iceberg theory

Iceberg theory is good at dividing the three layers of cultural model. Surface culture, sub-surface culture and deep culture are elegantly implanted, but their relationship is never in a pyramid way. Because an iceberg shape will misguide us to think that surface culture is at the top, then it should be less than sub-surface culture, and deep culture occupies so large a space at the bottom, so it is more than surface culture and sub-surface culture. These are all misleading information.



It would much better to draw a ball-like picture to help students acquire the three layers of cultural model. If we apply the construction of earth's crust into analyzing three layers of cultural model, we will find the surface culture is just on the surface of the cultural ball, while the deep culture is the core of the cultural ball. In this way, it is easy to interpret: (1) Surface culture is the outside of a kind of culture, so it can be clearly and obviously seen in the form of all sorts of cultural physical objects, such as food, clothes, and so on. Therefore, surface culture occupies a relatively larger space for it has the most colorful forms of demonstration. (2) Sub-surface culture is in the middle, and it can be felt in the form of customs, etiquettes and so on. It can be viewed as a bridge rather than a gap between surface culture and deep culture. It has some features of surface culture, such as it can be behaviors relating to a physical object, and it has also some features of deep culture, such as it can be etiquettes as a social skill to demonstrate its cultural values or philosophy. (3) Deep culture lays in

the core. It is the concentration of a culture's values, ideology, philosophy, and so on. It cannot be seen like the surface culture. Nor can it be felt like the sub-surface culture. But it can be concentrated as a national wit in a nation's worldview and be passed as a nation's key component from one generation to another. It is embedded in the heart of a culture. It is much stable and important.

For example, a dragon boat is a physical object we used in the Dragon Boat Festival, so a dragon boat belongs to the surface culture in China. But when we hold a dragon boat race to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival in May 5th of the Chinese lunar calendar every year, the dragon boat race, as a custom in memory of Qu Yuan (屈原), a great poet in ancient China, belongs to the sub-surface culture. If we learn and cherish Qu Yuan's patriotic spirit behind the Dragon Boat Festival, then we come to realize the devotion to our country and the love to our people. This ideology belongs to the deep culture.

All in all, the ball-like model is more suitable, acceptable, and adaptive than the iceberg model.

(2) A Critical thinking on its Small Sample and Elite Representative

The students participated in this investigate is only more than 100, and 82 students handed out their valid data for analyzing. It is too small as a test group in an investigate, so it cannot be titled as *An Investigation of*

Chinese Undergraduates' Ability.... Further, there were 54 male students and 28 female students, which was not a gender balanced group. So, its result about how gender had its effect on participants should be questioned. In addition, all the participants came from a national key university in Beijing. In other word, they just tested some elites or top students in a small number, and these students were naturally performing better in cultural translation competence than the vast ordinary students in China. It is not right to let elites represent the whole group while the vast ordinary students became invisible in this article. Besides, it handed out more than 100 pieces of questionnaire, but only got 82 valid back. There was a silent and mute group existing, but neither Sun nor Gao realized the importance of this mute group, let alone to find the reasons why they were not so cooperative or whether it was a silent rebellion. To sum it up, when we are doing an investigation, we should investigate the whole group in an objective and comprehensive way. A minimal deviation may lead to a wide divergence. Solid data speak louder than its methodology.

Bibliography:

[1] Haiyang Sun & Yuan Gao. (2020) An Investigation of Chinese Undergraduates' Ability to Translate Chinese Cultural Items into English and Predictors of Such Ability. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics* Volume 43 (1), 105-125. DOI 10.1515/CJAL-2020-0007