

# Aesthetic Reproduction in Cross-Cultural Teaching of Dialectal Expressions: A Case Study of Talking of Hometown Wherever I Go

Liu Qiong

Changsha University of Science and Technology, Changsha, Hunan 410015, China

**Abstract:** Teaching the translation of dialectal expressions in prose can be genuinely tricky. The discussion begins by untangling a basic distinction—‘translation teaching’ versus ‘teaching translation’—and argues that handling dialect in prose clearly falls under the former. Drawing on Liu Miqing’s translation aesthetics, and working closely with examples from the English version of *Talking of Hometown Wherever I Go*, this paper explores how an instructor might guide students toward aesthetic reproduction. The three principles of ‘imitation’, ‘reconstruction/compensation’, and ‘harmonization’ inform the analysis of cases like *ke hu-er*, *ruá*, and *yi mai* (mai, pulse/vein) *xiang cheng*. Out of these cases several classroom moves are identified: transliteration with annotation, in-text explanation, grammatical restructuring, and textual coordination. The paper also weighs what AI can contribute in dialect translation teaching—and where it still falls short. The view here is that effective teaching in this area has to go beyond techniques; it needs to cultivate students’ alertness to formal aesthetics, their capacity for cultural interpretation, and a habit of thinking holistically about the whole text.

**Keywords:** translation teaching; dialect translation; aesthetic reproduction; folk culture; *Talking of Hometown Wherever I Go*

## 0. Introduction

The prose piece *Talking of Hometown Wherever I Go* bristles with dialect and archaic expressions—*ke hu-er*, *ruá*, *yi mai xiang cheng*. These are not just regional markers; they carry the emotional and cultural memory of a place. As Liu Miqing reminds us in *An Introduction to Translation Aesthetics*, the aesthetic object in translation has both a formal system (sound, lexicon, syntax) and a non-formal one (emotion, imagery, artistic conception) (Liu, 2012: 78). That dual nature is exactly where the difficulty lies: dialect terms bundle together formal features and deep cultural connotations. How to preserve their sound, meaning, and liveliness in a cross-cultural setting is what makes prose translation teaching so demanding.

Before going any further, it helps to sort out what is meant by ‘translation teaching’ versus ‘teaching translation.’ The latter uses translation as a language-learning aid; the former aims to build professional translation skills. The moment dialect in prose enters the picture, the work is firmly in the territory of translation teaching. This is not a language drill—it is a skill that needs deliberate, systematic training.

This article draws on Liu Miqing’s aesthetics to focus on teaching dialect translation, walking through examples from the English rendering of *Talking of Hometown Wherever I Go* to show how an instructor might guide students to use imitation, reconstruction/compensation, and harmonization. These principles help tackle phonological and formal features, unpack cultural meanings, and weave aesthetic functions into the larger text. Along the way, the discussion also touches on where AI can help—and where it falls short.

## 1. The Difficulties of Translating Dialectal Expressions in Prose and Their Pedagogical Positioning

### 1.1 The Dual Challenges of Translating Dialectal Expressions

Wang Enke (2015) makes a useful distinction in his “Rethinking Dialect Translation in Literary

Works”: should dialect be translated at all, and if so, how? Much of the confusion in earlier research, he suggests, comes from mixing up these two levels. That distinction matters a good deal for teaching.

One major headache is the cultural load these expressions carry. Their local colour does not travel easily. Hu Zongfeng, who has worked extensively on Shaanxi dialect, notes that terms like *dei shi* (right?), *a da* (where), and *pian xian chuan* (chat) leave outsiders baffled. Translating them demands a flexible mix of strategies—sometimes transliteration, sometimes free translation—to get the connotation across.

There is also the aesthetic tangle. In Liu’s framework, dialect items are loaded with concrete aesthetic data—sound, script, word choice—and more elusive qualities: emotion, intent, imagery, artistic conception. Translators have to step in actively: first grasp and appreciate that beauty, then find ways to compensate and recreate it in another language.

## 1.2 The Pedagogical Positioning of Prose Translation

Prose sits somewhere between everyday talk and literary polish, and its dialect bits are often saturated with the author’s feelings and sense of place. Talking of *Hometown Wherever I Go*, with its thick layering of dialect, is exactly the kind of text that works well in a translation classroom.

The position taken here is squarely within “translation teaching”. That goes beyond just swapping linguistic items; it involves grasping cross-linguistic patterns, cultural gaps, reader expectations, and the purpose of the target text. Teaching how to handle prose dialect is a classic case of that broader competence.

## 2. Teaching Strategies: Addressing What AI Cannot Solve

AI has gotten impressively good at churning through general texts. But when it comes to the local memories and aesthetic charge packed inside dialect words, it stumbles. Ren Wen points out that large language models still miss context and fail to convey cultural imagery—human translators are still the ones who can recognise intent, interpret culture, and make value judgments. Hu Zongfeng echoes this: handling cultural connotation calls for emotional, high-level processing that only a human brain can manage. So, in teaching, it is necessary to be honest about what AI can and cannot do. Some tasks can be offloaded; for others, the translator’s own feel and judgment remain indispensable.

### 2.1 The Auxiliary Role and Limitations of AI in Translating Dialectal Expressions

On the plus side, AI has made real strides. The Miao language model built by Kaili University and iFlytek, with 400,000 annotated entries, now hits 80% accuracy in long-sequence speech recognition. That is a clear sign of AI’s potential for dialect speech recognition and simple conversion.

Yet the limits are just as obvious. Ren Wen draws on semiotics to distinguish three layers of meaning—textual, intentional, and interpretive. AI does okay with the textual layer, but it rarely catches what the author intended, and it cannot begin to construct meaning from the reader’s angle. Take dialect in prose: AI can recognise the sound *ruá*, but it does not get the cultural metaphors of “slow work” and “temperament”. It can spit out a word-for-word rendering of *yi mai xiang cheng*, but it misses the pun on ‘wheat’ (*mai*) and “pulse/vein” (*mai*).

### 2.2 Pedagogical Approaches for Cultivating Students’ Cultural Discernment

Given where AI falls short, the real heart of teaching dialect translation lies in building students’ cultural discernment—the ability to spot, understand, and transform the cultural charge packed into a single dialect expression.

### (1) Imitation module: Exoticising sound and script

Take ke hu-er, a Shaanxi term layered with history. It is not just a label for “outsider”; the sounds and the word formation—ke (guest) plus hu-er (something like “barbarian child”)—are part of its aesthetic punch.

Original text: 如陕西人称外地人为“客胡儿”……

Translation: …such as Shaanxi people calling outsiders “ke hu-er” (guest Hu-er)……

In class, the approach is to walk students through a transliteration-plus-annotation strategy. First, there is a discussion of why transliteration matters: it drops the dialect term as an intact cultural sign straight into the target text, creating a deliberate foreignness. Then the focus turns to how the bracketed gloss explains the literal components. The aim is to show how imitation and explanation work together. What students gain is an ear for the phonological shape of dialect and a sense of why preserving formal texture is so basic to aesthetic reproduction.

### (2) Imitation module: Transposing rhythm

Duan duan zheng zheng in Guanzhong dialect means something like “proper and dignified”, but the real force comes from the reduplication—it hammers home a tone of emphasis and solemnity. This is Chinese using morphological repetition for rhetorical weight.

Original text: 陕西人认为这种女婿才是端端正正的女婿。

Translation: Shaanxi people consider this kind of son-in-law to be the properly dignified one.

Here students are pushed to go beyond word-for-word matching. The English phrase “properly dignified” does not reduplicate, but it does create a similar gravity: “properly” intensifies “dignified”, and the two words together pack semantic density and a steady rhythm. It is a functional imitation. When direct formal copying is not possible, students learn to reach for creative equivalence using the resources English actually has.

### (3) Cultural interpretation module: In-text explanation and thick translation

The classical phrase sui xia bi yi packs a lot into four characters. It captures a Confucian ideal: even with those closest to you, observe ritual propriety. Affection and ritual are held in tension.

Original text: 虽狎必揖，就是再熟悉亲近的人，在仪式场合也要按礼数作揖。

Translation: “Even with those most familiar, a bow must be made” means that even with the most intimate and familiar people, on ritual occasions one must bow according to ritual propriety.

Two translator moves deserve attention. First, making “on ritual occasions” explicit. Second, the phrase “ritual propriety”, which lifts a simple bow into the whole Confucian ethical framework. This is thick translation at work. Students practise spotting layered cultural meanings and deciding when to unpack them with explanatory additions.

### (4) Cultural interpretation module: Image distillation and grammatical stretching

The verb ruá is a compact powerhouse. A single syllable, yet it layers a concrete action (knead gently), a metaphor for being shaped by fate, and a broader life philosophy of dissolving hardness with softness.

Original text: 揉，是慢功夫，是心性……每个人一生，最终都被生活和命运揉下了。人人被人揉，人人又揉人。

Translation: Ruá is slow work, a matter of temperament…… Everyone is ruá-ed by others, and everyone also ruá-s others.

This is taught as a three-step move: transliterate the core term (Ruá) to signal its cultural otherness; immediately gloss it with appositives (slow work, a matter of temperament) to open up its emotional and philosophical depths; then activate it grammatically by inflecting it as an English verb—ruá-ed, ruá-s. The passive “ruá-ed” neatly captures that sense of being kneaded by life and fate. The exercise trains students to handle terms that have no ready equivalent, using multiple techniques to rebuild a missing cultural image.

### (5) Textual coordination module: Lexical choice in folk-cultural texture

Ku sang, or ritual wailing, is not just a noun for an action. The text treats it as an aesthetic object, a custom with “its own rules and artistry”. It carries tonal patterns, improvised words, repetitive structures, and a shared emotional space.

Original text: 哭是有章法的……今日年轻妇人也有孝在身而需要哭丧的，或闻嚶嚶，如猫叫一般，不成体统。

Translation: Weeping has its rules and artistry… Today’s young women who are in mourning and need to wail, perhaps a faint whimpering is heard, like the mewing of a cat, which is altogether improper.

Notice how the translator renders “哭是有章法的” as “Weeping has its rules and artistry”. That one added word, “artistry”, does heavy lifting: it reframes weeping as cultural performance, a kind of folk art, not just spontaneous tears. This is the kind of global aesthetic tuning students need—noticing an emotional-cultural attitude in the source and carrying it over through deliberate word choice and texture.

### (6) Textual coordination module: Weaving a cultural semantic field

Song duanwu, kan maishu, hua mo, yi mai xiang cheng—these terms do not stand alone. Together they form a web of local relationships and cultural transmission. A literal, item-by-item translation would snap those threads.

Original text: 花馍要一代一代传下去，这就叫“一麦（脉）相承”。麦子是做花馍的原料，血脉是亲族延续的根本，二者同音，意思却都揉进了这块面团里……

Translation: Flower buns must be passed down from generation to generation. This is called “one wheat (脉 mài, pulse/vein) carries on.” Wheat is the raw material for making flower buns, bloodline is the foundation of clan continuity. The two are homophonic, yet both meanings are kneaded into this lump of dough.

The translator here braids together several moves: a literal core image (one wheat), a bracketed gloss that unlocks the homophonic link (脉 mài, pulse/vein), and an explanatory sentence that joins material and bloodline. This turns hua mo into a cultural token. The bigger lesson? When dealing with a cluster of culture-heavy terms, coordinate them so readers sense the ritual, the emotional ties, and the continuity they embody.

## 2.3 Distinctive Features of the Pedagogical Strategies

A few features stand out. The framework rests squarely on translation aesthetics, with Liu Miqing’s three principles—imitation, reconstruction/compensation, harmonization—woven through every case. The emphasis throughout is on building cultural discernment, on learning how to ‘read’ culture. The approach also takes a clear stance on human-AI collaboration: the tasks AI can handle are handed over, but intention recognition, cultural interpretation, and value judgment remain the province of the human translator. And the six cases are not random; they systematically cover formal, semantic, and textual levels, forming a coherent training arc.

## 2.4 Classroom realities: what tends to happen

In practice, these strategies often prove trickier in the classroom than they appear on the page. A session that comes to mind involved a passage dense with dialect terms, including *ruá*. Almost everyone immediately consulted an AI translator. The output was smooth but flat—“knead” for every instance. When asked to read the original aloud, to let the sound and rhythm sink in, a few students began to notice what was missing. One tentatively offered “molten patience”, not a direct translation but evocative in its own way. That small shift—from relying on a tool to trusting a sensory response—felt like the real starting point of aesthetic awareness.

Another common observation: students often treat “thick translation” as a licence to over-clarify, burying the text’s voice under layers of parentheses and footnotes. Teaching them where to stop—when the bridge becomes scaffolding that blocks the view—requires repeated, often messy, feedback. Oddly enough, the most effective moments have arisen when they were asked to translate for a specific person, a classmate from another part of the country, rather than a faceless reader. Suddenly, their explanatory choices became sharper and more purposeful.

It has also been noticed that when students later compare their own attempts with a published translation, they engage far more critically, arguing over choices instead of passively accepting them. That sort of active debate is exactly what is needed. Ultimately, the aim is for students to see AI as a research assistant, not a substitute—a tool that can retrieve idioms and provide literal glosses, but one that cannot weigh the weight of a single syllable in a lament. Teaching aesthetic reproduction is as much about creating the right itch as it is about handing over techniques. AI can draft; it cannot create that quiet urgency to make someone else feel what the original makes you feel.

## 3. Conclusion

Drawing on Liu Miqing’s aesthetics and the English version of *Talking of Hometown Wherever I Go*, this study has explored how the aesthetic reproduction of dialect in prose might be taught. After teasing apart “translation teaching” and “teaching translation,” the discussion has examined the double difficulty of dialect translation and suggested strategies that revolve around building students’ cultural discernment. What seems clear is that teaching in this area has to reach beyond mere technique. It needs to foster aesthetic sensitivity, cultural interpretation, and a habit of thinking about the whole text. In an age of AI, those are precisely the human competencies that still cannot be automated.

### References:

- [1] Liu, Miqing. (2012). *An Introduction to Translation Aesthetics* (rev. ed.). Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.
- [2] Liu, Miqing. (2016). *A Outline of Cultural Translation*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing House.
- [3] Mu, Lei, Liang, Weiling, & Liu, Xinyuan. (2024). Translation Education in China in the New Era: Conceptual Connotations and Research Framework. *Foreign Language World*, (4), 67–74.
- [4] Wang, Enke. (2015). Rethinking Dialect Translation in Literary Works. *Foreign Language and Literature*, 31(4), 83–90.
- [5] Zhang, Baohong. (2018). Folk Aesthetic Space and the Translation of Local Literature. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (6), 59–64.
- [6] Yu, Qiangfu, & Wang, Xinyue. (2025). Aesthetic Exploration of Shaanxi Dialect Lexis in the English Translation of Qin Opera Scripts. *Journal of North China University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)*, (3), 103–111.

- [7] Ye, Zinan. (2017). *Theory and Practice of English–Chinese Translation*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [8] Yang, Fan, & Li, Xiaoqing. (2022). Theoretical Construction and Path Exploration of Folk Culture Translation Studies. *Minority Translators Journal*, (4), 23–29.
- [9] Wang, Jin'an, & Liu, Jia. (2023). Translation Strategies for Intangible Cultural Heritage Cultural Images from the Perspective of Cognitive Framing. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (5), 102–109.
- [10] Hu, Zongfeng. (2024, May 10). Translation and Dissemination of Chinese Regional Culture and Literature: A Case Study of Shaanxi Literary Circle. Academic Lecture, Shaanxi University of Technology.