

Translating Cultural Images in Yu Hua's To Live: English and Uzbek Perspectives

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A conceptual study of cultural reference and literary translation

Abstract

This article examines how culturally situated images associated with Yu Hua's *To Live* can be approached in English and Uzbek literary translation. It treats a cultural image as a relation between a concrete referent, its social associations, and its function within a narrative. The study combines a focused review of translation theory with qualitative analysis of selected translation problems: the title, personal names, the ox, agrarian social status, material culture, and political terminology. Michael Berry's English translation provides a bibliographic point of reference, while the Uzbek discussion offers explicitly proposed renderings rather than quotations from an unexamined published translation. The analysis argues that lexical familiarity does not by itself preserve cultural meaning. A familiar Uzbek expression can assist comprehension while introducing associations absent from the Chinese setting; retention can preserve a referent while leaving its narrative significance unclear. The article therefore proposes context-sensitive selection among retention, descriptive rendering, and limited explanation. Its contribution is a transparent framework for distinguishing cultural accessibility from cultural substitution. The conclusions are interpretive propositions for subsequent testing against aligned Chinese, English, and Uzbek passages, not measured findings about translation frequency or reader response.

Keywords: Yu Hua; *To Live*; cultural images; literary translation; English; Uzbek; cultural specificity; mediated translation

1 Introduction

Literary images acquire meaning through their location in a story. An animal, a household object, or a social designation may identify something concrete while also organizing relationships between people, work, and memory. Translating such an image requires decisions about the referent and about the associations that a reader can reasonably infer. These decisions become especially visible when a Chinese novel is discussed through both English and Uzbek, because the available vocabulary and the histories attached to familiar words do not coincide.

To Live follows Fugui's movement from inherited privilege to rural hardship. The publisher's account identifies gambling, war, family separation, and his companionship with an ox as central elements of this trajectory (Yu, 2003; Penguin Random House, n.d.). These details make the novel suitable for examining how ordinary referents bear ethical and historical significance. The present article develops an analytical argument about translating those referents; it does not attempt to summarize every symbolic pattern in the novel.

The Uzbek context is substantive rather than hypothetical. An institutional catalogue records *Yashamoq* as an Uzbek-language book issued by Huzur in 2024, with 278 pages (IIAU Digital Library, n.d.). That record establishes an edition's presence but does not provide its text or identify a translator on the consulted page. Consequently, the article does not attribute any lexical choice to that edition. It distinguishes the existence of an Uzbek publication from the separate task of evaluating its translation.

Three questions guide the discussion. Which aspects of a cultural image should remain recognizable across languages? How can English and Uzbek wording differ without relocating the story to another culture? What information must be checked before an English rendering is used as an intermediary for Uzbek translation? The central argument is that referential precision and narrative function should be assessed together, with any explanatory addition justified by a specific interpretive need.

2 Theoretical framework

Aixelá's (1996) account of culture-specific items supplies a useful starting point: cultural difficulty emerges in the relation between a source reference and the resources of a receiving context. An item is therefore not difficult merely because it belongs to China. A word denoting a familiar animal may be easy to translate at

the dictionary level and still become difficult when it participates in a recurring narrative association. This article extends the unit of analysis from the isolated term to the term in its literary setting.

Venuti's (2018) discussion of the translator's visibility draws attention to the cultural consequences of fluent translation. For the present analysis, domestication and foreignization are treated as orientations rather than a rigid classification of every sentence. Retaining a Chinese name and translating the surrounding syntax idiomatically can operate together. Conversely, a superficially foreign word may be accompanied by an explanation that imposes an overly familiar interpretation.

Nida's (1964) attention to the receiving reader makes intelligibility an essential concern, but this concern does not require replacing every unfamiliar practice with a local counterpart. Katan (2004) similarly directs attention to the cultural frames through which expressions become meaningful. Read together, these approaches support an analysis that asks what a rendering enables the reader to understand and what additional assumptions it introduces.

A cultural image is defined here operationally as a textual referent whose interpretation depends on social associations or narrative recurrence. Three dimensions are distinguished: referential identity, contextual association, and narrative function. The distinction helps prevent a common analytical shortcut in which a proposed Uzbek equivalent is judged successful simply because it sounds natural. Naturalness is one criterion; preservation of the represented world is another.

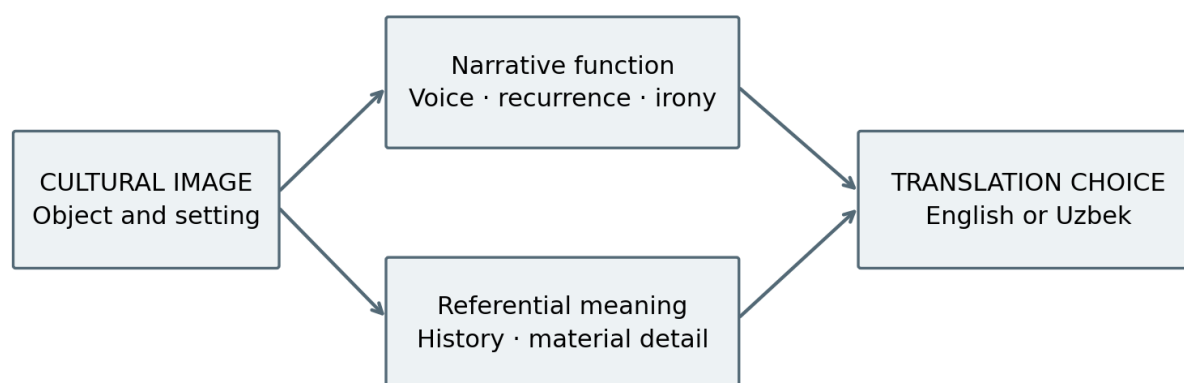


Figure 1. Analytical dimensions of a cultural image. Original conceptual diagram; the arrows represent interpretive relationships, not measured effects.

3 Materials and method

The study is a conceptual, qualitative analysis supported by verified bibliographic and paratextual sources. The English edition is identified as *To Live*, translated by Michael Berry and published by Anchor Books in 2003. Publisher information establishes the broad narrative context, while the Google Books record supplies bibliographic data and a searchable list of indexed English terms. Those indexed terms help identify candidate translation problems but cannot establish passage-level meanings or the translator's overall strategy. The Uzbek catalogue record is used only to document the presence of Yashamoq.

The analysis proceeds by selecting six problem areas, identifying the semantic distinction at risk, and proposing target-language alternatives. Each proposal is assessed through four questions: Does it identify the referent accurately? Does it preserve the Chinese historical setting? Does it maintain the likely register of the surrounding narration? Does it add an association that would require source-text evidence? These questions constitute an interpretive checklist, not a validated rating scale.

Table 1. Evidence boundaries and analytical uses

Material	Permitted use	Boundary
English edition metadata	Identify title, translator, year, and edition	Does not establish a complete translation strategy

Material	Permitted use	Boundary
Publisher synopsis	Establish broad narrative setting and central referents	Not a substitute for close reading
Indexed English terms	Select candidate lexical problems	Context and frequency remain unverified
Uzbek institutional catalogue	Confirm the recorded Uzbek edition	No attribution of wording or translator
Proposed Uzbek expressions	Compare semantic options and risks	Not quotations from Yashamoq

No aligned Chinese–English–Uzbek corpus was available for this study. Accordingly, no counts, percentages, inter-rater reliability values, or reader-response results are reported. English labels in the comparative table are analytical labels unless specifically identified as the published title. Uzbek examples are proposals created for the discussion. This separation allows a useful contrastive argument without presenting reconstructed expressions as documentary evidence.

4 Analysis and discussion

4.1 The title and the framing of survival

The published English title *To Live* places a verbal expression at the centre of the reader’s first encounter with the novel. The Uzbek catalogue title *Yashamoq* also uses an infinitival form. This observable grammatical parallel does not prove equivalence of literary reception, but it offers a precise point of comparison: both titles name living without explicitly explaining its purpose. An expanded alternative such as *Hayot uchun kurash* would introduce the idea of struggle into the title itself. That may be a plausible interpretation of the story, yet it is an additional framing decision.

For an analytical translation proposal, *Yashamoq* therefore has the advantage of semantic economy. *Tirik qolmoq* shifts emphasis toward remaining alive, whereas *Yashash* names living in a nominal form. The choice depends on the intended relation between existential breadth and physical survival. It should not be resolved by assuming that the most emotionally explicit title is the most faithful one. A title can preserve interpretive openness by leaving the reader to discover what living means through the narrative.

4.2 Personal names and cultural location

The protagonist’s name should remain identifiable across the translation. The form *Fugui* provides a practical reference point in English-language discussion, but the spelling used in an Uzbek edition requires an explicit transliteration policy. Replacing the name with an Uzbek personal name would change the cultural location of the character. Translating an inferred name meaning into an ordinary noun could likewise make the text read as allegory unless the source passage itself foregrounds that meaning.

The appropriate principle is retention with consistent orthography. Where name meanings are narratively relevant, an editor may provide a brief note after checking the Chinese characters and the immediate passage. Name etymologies should not be reconstructed from English spelling alone. This point illustrates a broader requirement: a translation through English must separate information encoded in the Chinese source from information that the intermediary version may have left implicit.

4.3 The ox and the precision of an ordinary noun

The publisher identifies an ox as *Fugui*’s companion in his final years. Read as a narrative image, this relationship can connect agricultural work with continued companionship after loss. That connection is an interpretation of the referent’s placement in the story, rather than evidence that the animal has one fixed symbolic meaning. A translation should leave room for readers to encounter the relationship through the narrative.

The lexical contrast is concrete. English *ox* and Uzbek *ho‘kiz* can identify a working bovine more precisely than the broader Uzbek *mol*; *buqa* ordinarily directs attention to a bull. Selecting the broader or different term may alter the image even when the sentence remains grammatically natural. In this proposed rendering, *ho‘kiz*

is preferable when the source context supports the working-animal sense. It should not be embellished into an explanatory phrase such as a symbol of patience within the fictional narration.

4.4 Landownership and social status

The transition from a landowner's son to a peasant creates a translation problem because social labels may carry historically specific connotations. In English, landlord can also suggest a person who rents out housing. Uzbek yer egasi describes ownership transparently, while zamindor may carry a stronger literary and agrarian resonance. Dehqon can identify agricultural occupation without necessarily specifying ownership. Each option therefore requires attention to who owns the land, who works it, and which period of the story is being described.

A familiar Uzbek designation should not silently convert Chinese agrarian relations into a Central Asian institutional system. For instance, boy may capture wealth in some contexts but can obscure whether landownership is the decisive feature. The proposed solution is to establish the relevant relationship plainly at its first consequential appearance and then use a consistent shorter designation. This preserves readability without assuming that wealth, occupation, and political class are interchangeable categories.

Table 2. Proposed English and Uzbek solutions for selected translation problems

Image or term	English perspective	Proposed Uzbek solution	Risk to control
Title	To Live is the published title	Yashamoq; also the catalogued title	Adding struggle or moral instruction
Protagonist's name	Retain Fugui	Retain the name under a consistent spelling policy	Invented etymology or local replacement
Working bovine	Ox	Ho'kiz, where context supports it	Mol generalizes; buqa changes the referent
Agrarian ownership	Landowner or landlord	Yer egasi; contextually zamindor	Confusing wealth, tenure, and class
Garment	Cheongsam is indexed in the English record	Retained garment name plus a brief description	Replacing it with a local dress
Political institution	People's commune is indexed	Xalq kommunasi with contextual clarification	Treating it as identical to kolxoz

Note. Except for the published title, these entries compare candidate solutions rather than aligned quotations. Indexed terms establish lexical presence only. The Uzbek column does not reproduce wording from a published translation.

4.5 Material objects and selective explanation

Material culture requires a distinction between identification and interpretation. The English book record indexes cheongsam, providing a candidate for garment terminology analysis. A target reader may need to understand what type of garment is meant, but that need does not justify replacing the garment with a familiar Uzbek national dress. A retained term accompanied by a short, accurate description can preserve cultural location. The precise description must be checked against the passage rather than supplied from a generalized image of Chinese clothing.

The same principle applies to food. A broad expression may communicate edibility while obscuring ingredients, preparation, or scarcity. A strongly local substitute can add associations with hospitality or celebration that the source does not invite. Translation should first determine which properties matter to the episode. If the scene depends on a small quantity of plain food, elaborating its ceremonial associations would redirect attention. If preparation is irrelevant, a lengthy culinary note may interrupt the narrative unnecessarily.

4.6 Political language and historical specificity

The English index also includes people's commune, Red Guards, and Cultural Revolution. These references require historical differentiation even when Uzbek offers familiar political vocabulary. A term such as xalq

kommunasi can preserve the institutional label while allowing concise explanation at first occurrence. Replacing it with kolxoz might appear accessible to some readers, but it risks presenting distinct institutions as equivalent. Familiarity with a word cannot establish identity between the social structures it evokes. Explanatory material should also be placed carefully. A short note can clarify a historical designation without transforming a character's speech into an academic account. Conversely, inserting information into dialogue may attribute knowledge or rhetorical sophistication to a character that the passage does not support. The decision between an in-text gloss and a note is therefore also a decision about narrative voice.

5 English mediation and Uzbek translation choices

The relationship between English and Uzbek must not be reduced to a fixed contrast between a distant Western reader and a culturally close Central Asian reader. Readers differ in historical knowledge, age, education, and reading experience. Uzbek expressions can provide useful semantic resources, but the existence of a familiar word does not demonstrate a shared interpretation. Claims that Uzbek readers necessarily understand family obligation, rural life, or suffering in one particular way would require reception evidence that this study does not supply.

English can help a translator formulate questions about difficult passages, yet it remains an interpretation of the Chinese text. If English leaves a family relation unspecified, an Uzbek translator may face choices that cannot be resolved from the intermediary wording alone. If English generalizes a material term, translating the generalized word may reproduce that loss. A mediated workflow should therefore identify uncertainty and return to the Chinese passage or obtain qualified linguistic consultation before selecting a narrower Uzbek expression.

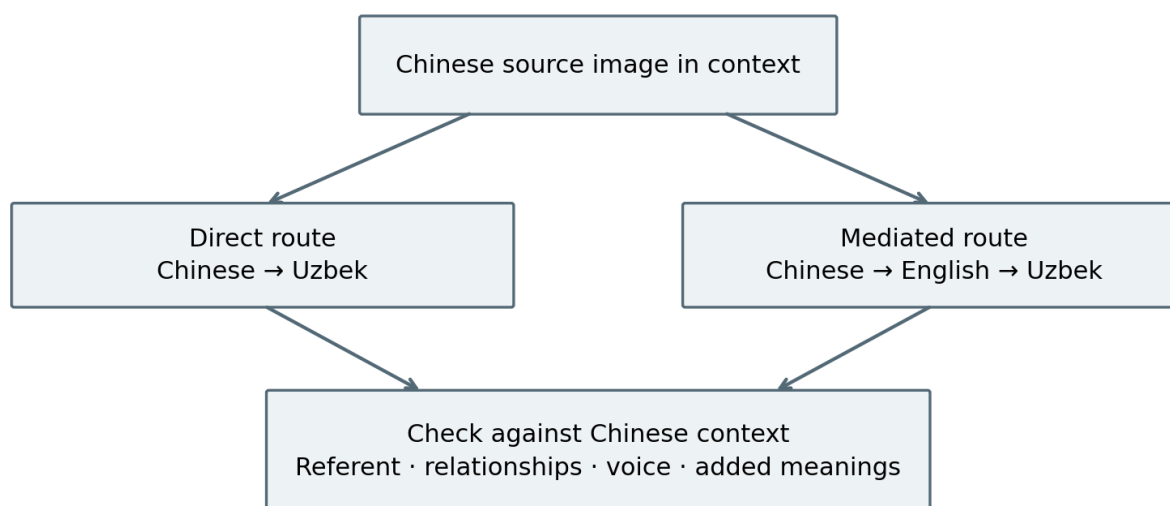


Figure 2. Direct and English-mediated routes to Uzbek translation. Original methodological diagram; neither route describes an established production history of the catalogued Uzbek edition.

The diagram distinguishes a proposed workflow from a bibliographic claim. The source language of the catalogued Uzbek edition has not been verified, so it would be inappropriate to label that edition an indirect translation. The comparison instead identifies where mediation can introduce additional decisions. Direct translation also requires interpretation; consulting the Chinese text is a way to examine those decisions, not a guarantee that a single correct solution will emerge.

Table 3. Qualitative criteria for evaluating a proposed rendering

Criterion	Question for analysis	Evidence needed
Referential precision	Does the expression identify the same entity or relationship?	Chinese passage and reliable lexical support
Historical location	Does wording preserve the relevant Chinese setting?	Contextual and historical sources

Criterion	Question for analysis	Evidence needed
Narrative voice	Does explanation change the speaker's register?	Surrounding narration and dialogue
Consistency	Is a recurring image recognizable across episodes?	Aligned occurrences across the text
Added associations	Does a familiar substitute introduce a local meaning?	Target-language usage and reader evidence
Accessibility	Can readers infer the necessary information?	Reader interviews or comprehension tasks

6 Implications and limitations

The analysis supports a practical sequence: identify the referent, determine its function in the episode, compare alternatives, and assess added associations. Retention is useful where recognition and cultural location matter; descriptive wording is useful where a term would otherwise remain opaque; explanation is warranted where misunderstanding would obstruct the scene. These are conditional recommendations. They do not establish that any one strategy is generally superior for the novel.

The main limitation is the absence of an aligned primary-text corpus. The study cannot assess Berry's overall fidelity, determine the dominant strategy of the published Uzbek translation, or measure the cultural knowledge of its readers. The indexed English vocabulary is an aid to selection rather than a substitute for textual evidence. The diagrams and tables organize an argument; they contain no empirical scores and should not be interpreted as experimental results.

A subsequent empirical study could select passages through a stated sampling rule, record the Chinese text alongside both published translations, and identify each edition and page. Independent bilingual analysts could compare classifications and explain disagreements. Reader tasks could then test whether concise glosses improve recognition without encouraging false cultural substitutions. Such work would convert the framework proposed here into a reproducible study of actual translation choices and their effects.

7 Conclusion

Translating cultural images in *To Live* requires attention to the relationship between a word and the world it represents. The comparative problems examined here show why accurate naming, historical location, and narrative voice should be evaluated together. A working animal, a garment, and a political institution call for different degrees of explanation, even when each appears to have a readily available dictionary equivalent. From an Uzbek perspective, semantic familiarity is a resource to be used with precision. It can make an image accessible while leaving its Chinese setting intact, provided that local substitutions and added interpretations are controlled. English provides an important comparative perspective, but uncertain meanings should be checked against the source context before they are carried into Uzbek. The resulting principle is selective explanation grounded in textual function. This remains a conceptual conclusion to be tested through close comparison of the relevant editions.

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