

CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATING CHINESE FOOD-RELATED REALIA INTO ARMENIAN: A CASE STUDY OF YU HUA'S TO LIVE

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Abstract. This article explores the linguistic and cultural challenges involved in translating Chinese food realia into Armenian, with a focus on literary texts. Food-related expressions in Chinese literature often carry deep cultural significance, historical context, and emotional resonance, making them difficult to render into another language without loss of meaning. The article examines specific examples of Chinese food realia found in Yu Hua's novel *To Live* (《活着》), analyzing how these culturally bound items are treated in Armenian translation. By highlighting the translators' choices and the cultural gaps they must bridge, this study sheds light on the broader complexities of translating realia between two linguistically and culturally distant languages.

Keywords: realia, food-related terms, translation methods, strategies, Chinese food culture.

Introduction. Non-equivalent vocabulary has always been a key topic in translation studies and remains important today. Among these, realia—words that reflect the unique cultural elements of a nation—are seen as especially interesting in linguistics. Understanding realia is essential when learning a country's language and culture. Among the various types of realia, food-related or culinary terms hold a special place due to their deep cultural significance and frequent untranslatability. Food-related realia not only refer to specific ingredients, dishes, or preparation methods, but they also reflect a nation's traditions, values, social customs, and even historical memory. As such, food terminology presents unique challenges in translation—particularly when the target culture lacks the equivalent items or practices.

In the context of Chinese-to-Armenian translation, these challenges become even more pronounced. Chinese cuisine is characterized by an incredibly rich vocabulary shaped by regional diversity, philosophical thought (such as yin-yang and the Five Elements), and centuries of cultural evolution. Many of these food-related terms—ranging from everyday dishes to symbolic or ceremonial foods—have no direct equivalents in Armenian, making their accurate and culturally appropriate translation a complex task. This article aims to explore the specific difficulties associated with translating Chinese food *realia* into Armenian and to analyze possible strategies that preserve both meaning and cultural depth. While *realia* and food translation have been explored in several language pairs, there is a complete lack of academic research dedicated to the translation of Chinese food-related *realia* into Armenian. This study addresses that gap by offering a focused analysis of lexical, cultural, and semantic challenges that arise in the Armenian translation of Chinese culinary terms. It also draws attention to the symbolic meanings embedded in Chinese food references, which are often overlooked in literal translations. By combining theoretical approaches with practical examples from modern Chinese literature (e.g. Yu Hua's novels), this article contributes new insights to the under-researched field of Chinese–Armenian translation studies.

The translation of *realia* has long been a topic of discussion within translation studies, with various scholars proposing different classifications and methods to tackle the distinctive challenges these culture-specific terms pose. In translation studies, **realia** refers to words and expressions that denote culturally specific material objects or concepts. The term originates from medieval Latin, where it meant "real things"—that is, tangible, physical items as opposed to abstract ideas. The term *realia* was popularized by Bulgarian scholars S. Vlahov and S. Florin, who developed a systematic approach to their classification and translation. They distinguished *realia* by type—geographical (including names of countries, cities, rivers, mountains), ethnographic (including food items, clothing, festivals, customs, daily life practices), and political (including institutions, titles, legal and administrative terms)—and emphasized the importance of preserving cultural identity in translation (Vlahov & Florin, 2012: 63). Soviet linguists S. Vlahov and S. Florin were pioneers in defining and organizing the concept of *realia* in translation. They described *realia* as lexical items that refer to objects or concepts unique to a particular culture and lacking exact equivalents in other languages. Their framework highlights three primary strategies for translating *realia*:

- Transcription or transliteration, where the original term is kept phonetically intact.
- Literal translation (calque), which involves translating word-for-word.
- Descriptive translation, where the meaning is conveyed through explanation.

They also recommended the use of footnotes or additional commentary when necessary, and their approach remains foundational in the field (Vlahov & Florin, 2012). L.S. Barkhudarov in the monograph "Language and Translation" treats *realia* as "words denoting objects, concepts and situations that do not exist in the practical experience of people speaking a different language" (Barkhudarov, 1975: 95). This idea highlights the translator's task not only as a linguistic converter but also as a cultural mediator. When translating *realia*, especially those tied to national identity or daily life, the translator must weigh the trade-off between preserving foreignness and ensuring comprehensibility.

Peter Newmark expanded on translation strategies to include methods such as naturalization, shifts (transpositions), transference, modulation, recognized translation, descriptive equivalents, componential analysis, synonymy, through-translation, cultural equivalents, functional equivalents, compensation, couplets, paraphrasing, and annotation (Newmark, 1988).

A.V. Fedorov argued that ‘translation’ of realia is somewhat misleading, since realia represent extralinguistic realities and cannot be translated in the strict sense. Instead, he suggested focusing on translating the names of realia, or culture-bound words. He identified four main techniques for this: transliteration or transcription (either complete or partial), creation of new words or compounds, approximate translation, and translating using a more specific term or hyponym (Fedorov, 2002).

According to Armenian scholar A. Qamalyan, culture-specific terms or realia are generally translated using several approaches:

- a) Transliteration or transcription, adapted to the target language’s phonetics and cultural norms.
- b) Calquing or semantic translation, where the term is translated literally or partially, but still recognized as culturally specific.
- c) Using approximate equivalents that convey a similar concept.
- d) Employing descriptive translations, where the item is explained through a phrase or sentence in the target language—sometimes alongside transliteration—and these explanations may appear either within the text or as footnotes. Furthermore, some culture-specific terms become gradually assimilated into the target culture’s everyday language, losing their foreignness and becoming standard loanwords. This phenomenon is particularly common with food names, fruits, vegetables, and spices, such as pelmeni, cognac, khachapuri, and pizza (Qamalyan, 2020: 69-70).

The main criteria for assessing the translation of a particular realia are the transfer of semantic information and the preservation of national and historical colour of these language units. Studying the features of the translation of culture-bound words, it is necessary to remember that they are a component of background knowledge and language competence. When transferring realias, it should be taken into account that the recipient of the translation does not have necessary background knowledge, so certain transformations are required to be made in the text of the translation (Pavlova, Bogachenko, Bazhenov, Vashkyavichus, 2019).

Methods and material. To illustrate the challenges of translating food-related realia, this article draws on examples from the novel *To Live* (《活着》) by renowned Chinese author Yu Hua. The novel vividly depicts the hardships and transformations of ordinary Chinese people throughout the 20th century, with food playing a symbolic and practical role in the characters’ lives. Through its detailed references to traditional meals, famine experiences, and culturally significant dishes, *To Live* offers a rich source of culturally embedded vocabulary. Analyzing the translation of these food-related terms into Armenian sheds light on the broader complexities of rendering Chinese cultural realia across linguistic and cultural boundaries giving Armenian readers opportunities to get acquainted with the unique Chinese culinary culture. In *To Live* (《活着》), Yu Hua masterfully integrates food not just as a part of daily life, but as a deeply symbolic element that reflects the shifting social, political, and emotional realities of 20th-century China. Throughout the novel, food serves multiple functions: it marks social class, symbolizes survival, and becomes a silent witness to personal and historical trauma. At the beginning of the novel, Fugui’s wealthy family enjoys an abundance of food, which is

described in rich detail—roasted meats, fine wine, and extravagant banquets. These images represent a life of privilege, indulgence, and detachment from the hardships of ordinary people. However, as the family loses its fortune, food gradually disappears from the narrative, symbolizing their descent into poverty and their confrontation with the harsh realities of life. During the famine and the Cultural Revolution, simple foods like sweet potatoes, gruel, or a bowl of rice took on profound significance. They become symbols of endurance, humility, and shared suffering. In one key scene, a small meal eaten in silence reflects both the characters' emotional pain and their will to continue living. Here, food is not only physical sustenance but also emotional sustenance—a reminder of dignity in the face of despair.

Moreover, the absence or presence of food often mirrors the emotional state of the characters. A full table may still feel empty when surrounded by loss, while a single sweet potato can represent a moment of connection and humanity. Yu Hua's use of food realia goes beyond realism; it transforms food into a narrative tool that deepens the reader's understanding of character psychology and historical context.

In this sense, translation means more than merely translating the Chinese dish. It also means to transfer between cultures. The translation of one language into another is far more complex than most people believe. Most people assume that text in one language can be accurately translated into another language, so long as the translator uses a good bilingual dictionary. Unfortunately, language is not so simple and direct translation in many cases which are difficult, such as: Fried rice Yangzhou style, fresh mushroom and sliced pork and so on (Yang, 2017).

For translators, these food references present a dual challenge: they must convey not only the literal meaning of dishes and ingredients but also the emotional and symbolic resonance those food realia carry in Chinese culture. In Armenian, where many of these food items may be unfamiliar or lack direct equivalents, the translator must make careful choices to preserve both the semantic content and cultural undertones.

Results and discussion. This section examines the challenges involved in translating food-related realia from Chinese into Armenian, using Yu Hua's novel *To Live* as a case study. As previously discussed, food in this work is not only a reflection of everyday life but also a powerful symbol of memory, suffering, survival, and social change. The translation of such culturally loaded terms requires careful attention to both linguistic accuracy and cultural resonance. In the following analysis, selected examples of food realia from the original Chinese text are presented alongside their Armenian translations, with a focus on semantic, cultural, and contextual difficulties that may arise.

1. “豆腐是家里最普通的食物，那个时候，吃上一块豆腐就是最大的幸福。”

Translation:

«Այդ տարիներին ամենատարածված կերակուրը տոֆուն էր, և անգամ մեկ կտոր տოֆու ուտելը համարվում էր մեծագույն երջանկություն:»

Symbolism:

Tofu symbolizes simplicity and humble survival during hard times. It reflects the poverty and resilience

of ordinary people in mid-20th-century China, where even simple foods like tofu were treasured. This everyday food stands for endurance and modest comfort in harsh conditions.

Transliteration with explanation in footnote: In this translation, the Chinese word 豆腐 (tofu) is preserved through **transliteration** (“տոֆու”) rather than being replaced with an Armenian cultural equivalent. This strategy is chosen to maintain the cultural authenticity of the original text, as tofu is a specifically Chinese food product without a direct Armenian equivalent. To avoid misunderstanding, the transliteration is supplemented with a **footnote** explaining that tofu is a soybean-based, white, cheese-like food common in Chinese cuisine. This method allows the Armenian reader to grasp both the cultural specificity and the symbolic meaning of simplicity and modest survival conveyed in the novel. This translation strategy combines cultural adaptation and preservation, making the cultural context accessible while maintaining the symbolic connection to family and homeland embodied by the food.

Footnote:

Տոֆու – սոյայի պանրից պատրաստված չինական ափանդական ուտեստ է, որը հաճախ օգտագործվում է որպես հացատրամի փոխարինում՝ սուղ պայմաններում ապրող ընտանիքներում:

2. “偶尔一家人能吃上**红烧肉**，那就是节日的喜庆了。”

Translation:

«Հավաղեալ, երբ ընտանիքը կարողանում էր ուտել խոզի միս կարմիր քաղցր-աղի սոուսով, կարծես տոնական օր լինէր:»

Symbolism:

Braised pork is a rich, luxurious dish associated with celebration and prosperity. In the novel, its rarity highlights the economic hardship of the characters. The dish symbolizes fleeting joy and the aspiration for a better life.

Several strategies were used to convey both the **denotative** and **connotative** meaning:

- **Descriptive translation:** Since “**红烧肉**” has no direct Armenian equivalent, it was rendered descriptively as “*խոզի միս կարմիր քաղցր-աղի սոուսով*” (pork in red sweet-salty sauce) to inform the Armenian reader about its nature.

- **Cultural adaptation:** The phrase “*դա իսկապես հիշեցնում էր տոնական օր*” (“that truly reminded of a festive day”) captures the **emotional value** of the meal for the family, adapting the cultural nuance to Armenian readership without literal translation.

Together, these strategies help Armenian readers grasp both the **material reality** and **emotional resonance** of the scene, preserving the symbolic depth of the original.

3. “在饥荒的日子里，一碗**热粥**是最珍贵的食物。”

Translation:

«Սովի տարիներին մի աման տաք բրնձի շիլան ամենաթանկարժեք ուտելիքն էր:»

Symbolism:

Porridge symbolizes survival and nourishment during famine and hardship. It evokes the vulnerability and suffering of the common people. As a simple but life-sustaining food, it represents endurance and the bare minimum for life.

Descriptive cultural substitution: The Chinese word 粥 (zhōu) was rendered as *բրնձի շիս* ("rice porridge") to specify what kind of porridge is meant. While 粥 in Chinese may be made of various grains, rice is the most common and recognizable.

Literal translation with adaptation: The sentence structure is translated fairly literally but adapted to sound natural in Armenian. For example, “սովի տարիներին” corresponds to “在饥荒的日子里,” preserving both time and context.

Semantic emphasis: The phrase *ամենաթանկարժեք ուտելիքն էր* ("was the most precious food") reflects the emotional and symbolic weight of the porridge in those times, staying faithful to the original tone.

4. “一碟咸菜陪伴着一碗白饭，是最普通不过的饭菜。”

Translation:

«Մի փոքր ափսե թթու դրած բանջարեղեն և մի բաժին սպիտակ բրինձ՝ սա էր ամենասովորական սնունդը:»

Symbolism:

Pickled vegetables symbolize everyday life and continuity despite hardship. It reflects how simple flavors sustained families, embodying cultural persistence and simplicity in times of scarcity.

Literal translation with adaptation: The overall sentence structure was adapted to suit Armenian stylistic flow, maintaining the simplicity and tone of the original without sounding overly formal or unnatural. This translation uses a cultural equivalent strategy, adapting the Chinese 咸菜 (salted/pickled vegetables) into an Armenian familiar concept, which helps preserve the sense of simplicity and modesty in the meal. This approach respects the cultural specificity of the original while making it relatable and vivid for Armenian readers, emphasizing the shared symbolism of humble, nourishing food in difficult times.

5. “那个年代，馒头是家中最基本的主食。”

Translation:

«Այդ տարիներին ցամաք հացը ընտանիքի ամենահիմնական սնունդն էր:»

Symbolism:

Steamed bread represents sustenance and the daily struggle for survival. It is a symbol of the proletarian diet during times of scarcity, embodying the resilience of ordinary people.

Cultural equivalence: In this version, instead of transliterating 馒头 (mantou), the phrase **ցամաք հաց** (literally “dry bread”) is used to represent a kind of simple, staple bread familiar to Armenian readers. This **descriptive equivalent** bridges cultural understanding by linking mantou to a similar local food, thus preserving the idea of a basic, everyday staple without confusing the reader. The phrase **ամենահիմնական սնունդ** clearly conveys that this was the most fundamental food in the household diet, maintaining the original symbolism of sustenance and simplicity during difficult times. This approach follows translation strategies that favor functional equivalence and cultural adaptation to maintain the meaning and emotional impact for the target audience.

6. “端午节的粽子是家的味道。”

Translation:

«Վիշապաձև նավակների տոնի ժամանակ պատրաստվող ծոնձը տան համն ու հոտն ունենք:»

Symbolism: Zongzi symbolizes tradition, family unity, and cultural continuity. They evoke nostalgia and the importance of festivals as cultural anchors.

Transliteration with explanation in footnote: the festival name 端午节 is translated descriptively as **վիշապաձև նավակների տոն** (“Dragon-shaped boat festival”), which provides Armenian readers with an immediate cultural reference to the Dragon Boat Festival without relying on transliteration. The food name 粽子 is kept as **ծոնձը** (transliteration) accompanied by a footnote explaining it. This translation strategy combines cultural adaptation and preservation, making the cultural context accessible while maintaining the symbolic connection to family and homeland embodied by the food.

Footnote:

Բամբուկե տերևներով փաթաթված կաչուն բրնձե խավարտներ, սովորաբար օգտագործվող Վիշապաձև նավակների տոնի (端午节) ժամանակ: Այն խորհրդանշում է ընտանիքի միասնականությունը և հայրենիքի համը:

7. 那几年吃的是红薯，红薯吃多了拉肚子。

Translation

«Այդ տարիներին հիմնականում քաղցր կարտոֆիլ էին ուտում, իսկ այն շատ օգտագործելու դեպքում փորլուծություն էր առաջացնում»:

Symbolism:

In the context of *To Live*, **sweet potato (红薯)** symbolizes poverty and food scarcity. It was a cheap, filling staple for poor families in mid-20th-century rural China. The fact that eating too much of it caused diarrhea underscores both the **lack of food variety** and the **harsh reality of survival**, where people had no choice but to rely heavily on a single, nutritionally imbalanced food source. Thus, sweet potato stands for both sustenance and suffering — a bitter reminder of hunger years.

Functional equivalence: In the Armenian translation, **քաղցր կարտոֆիլ** is used as a direct equivalent for 红薯, since sweet potato is also known and consumed in Armenia, especially in recent years, though it is not traditionally a staple food. This choice ensures **comprehensibility** for Armenian readers while preserving the cultural reference without transliteration. The sentence structure is kept simple to reflect the plain tone of the original. The translation uses **functional equivalence**, making the meaning accessible while maintaining the symbolic undertone of poverty and overreliance on a single food.

8. 人们上山找野菜，连树皮也剥下来煮。

Translation

«Մարդիկ լեռներ էին բարձրանում վայրի խոտեր փնտրելու համար, երբեմն նույնիսկ ծառերի կեղևն էին քերում ու եփում»:

Symbolism:

This sentence reflects the **extreme desperation of famine years**. The search for *wild vegetables* (野菜) and even the boiling of *tree bark* (树皮) symbolizes the **limits of human endurance** and the **dehumanizing effects of hunger**. Food here is no longer nourishment but a matter of bare survival, highlighting the **harsh socio-historical reality** of scarcity in rural China. It also conveys how natural resources, even those not intended for human consumption, became substitutes for food in times of crisis.

Literal translation strategy combined with cultural equivalence: In Armenian, **վայրի խոտեր** is chosen as the equivalent for 野菜, since Armenian readers can easily relate to the idea of gathering wild edible greens (common in rural traditions). The phrase **ծառերի կեղև** directly translates 树皮, making the harshness of the image understandable without cultural loss. The translation applies a **literal translation strategy** combined with **cultural equivalence**, ensuring the vividness and desperation of the original scene is preserved. The simplicity of the wording mirrors the raw tone of the Chinese sentence.

9. 她炒菜舍不得放猪油，说留着给孩子补补。

Translation

«Նա ճաշ պատրաստելիս խոզի յուղ չէր օգտագործում, պահում էր այն երեխաներին բուժելու համար»:

Symbolism:

Pork fat symbolizes frugality, care, and parental love. It reflects the resourcefulness of families during hard times and the cultural practice of using food to nourish and strengthen children.

Literal translation: The translation uses **literal rendering** for 猪油 as *խոզի յուղ* to maintain cultural specificity. The phrase about saving it for the children is translated with **functional equivalence**, conveying the original meaning and cultural context to Armenian readers while preserving the emotional nuance.

10.那天吃的是玉米面糊糊，吃不饱但也不能饿着。

Translation

«Այդ օրվա կերածը ընդամենը եգիպտացորենի ալյուրից պատրաստված շիլան էր, որը չէր հագեցնում, բայց սոված էլ չէին մնում:»

Symbolism:

Cornmeal porridge symbolizes scarcity, resilience, and sustenance during difficult times. It reflects the simplicity of life in periods of hardship, highlighting the struggle for survival and the cultural emphasis on making do with what is available.

Descriptive translation: In this version, 玉米面糊糊 is rendered as *եգիպտացորենի ալյուրից պատրաստված շիլա*, which is a **descriptive translation** that clearly conveys to Armenian readers the type of food while maintaining cultural specificity. The phrasing *չի հագեցնում, բայց սոված էլ չէին մնում* uses **functional equivalence** to preserve the sense of insufficiency yet basic sustenance implied in the original sentence.

As a result, authors mainly used literal translation strategies with cultural equivalents, which allowed them to preserve the cultural nuances of the source material and ensure its comprehensibility and emotional resonance for the target readers. This dual method ensures that readers gain a deeper insight into both the literal and the underlying cultural meanings and symbolism, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the material. Transliteration accompanied by footnotes was also frequently employed. The footnotes compensate for the absence of direct equivalents in the target language, helping readers grasp the cultural reference without changing the original meaning.

Conclusion. The analysis of Yu Hua's *To Live* demonstrates that Chinese food-related realia are deeply embedded with cultural, historical, and emotional meanings, which pose significant challenges when translating into Armenian. Through the examination of specific food-related examples, such as tofu, braised pork, sweet potato, rice porridge, and zongzi, it becomes clear that these culinary terms are not mere lexical items—they convey symbolism, social context, and lived experiences that are essential to the narrative's emotional and cultural depth.

Translators of Chinese literary texts must carefully negotiate between preserving the foreignness of these items and ensuring comprehension for Armenian readers. The strategies employed—ranging from transliteration with explanatory footnotes, descriptive translation, functional equivalence, to cultural adaptation—allow the Armenian reader to access both the literal and symbolic dimensions of these foods. Some items, like tofu or zongzi, retain their Chinese identity through transliteration and contextual explanation, while others, such as mantou or wild vegetables, are adapted into culturally familiar equivalents to maintain relevance and readability.

This study highlights that translating food realia is not merely a linguistic task but a process of cultural mediation. It shows that translation must encompass semantic accuracy, cultural resonance, and symbolic fidelity to convey the full meaning of the source text. By focusing on Chinese–Armenian translation—a largely underexplored area—this article contributes to the broader field of translation

studies, offering practical insights and methodological guidance for handling culture-bound culinary terms in literary texts. Ultimately, the translation of food realia serves as a bridge between cultures, allowing readers to engage with the social realities, historical experiences, and emotional landscapes of another society.

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