

English Translation Strategies for Tea Ancestor Culture in Jingmai Shan: Gu Cha Mang Lin from the Perspective of Thick Translation

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Keywords: Thick Translation; Tea Ancestor Belief; Jingmai Mountain; Heritage Translation; Culture-Specific Terms; English Translation

Abstract: Tea Ancestor belief is central to the cultural landscape of Jingmai Mountain, yet its local meanings are distributed among named trees, ritual structures, ancestral figures, and festivals. This article examines how those meanings may be carried into English through selected passages in Fan Jianhua, Deng Zixuan, and Zhou Li's *Jingmai Shan: Gu Cha Mang Lin* (2024). It situates the study in thick translation theory and the Jingmai Mountain heritage context, then uses close textual analysis to develop three connected strategies: retaining culturally distinctive names with concise classification, embedding ritual context in the surrounding narrative, and clarifying relationships among people, places, and changes in ceremonial location. Attention to the Blang and Dai names for a protected tea tree, to the spatial symbolism of an altar, and to the distinct roles of a temple, pagoda, and festival shows why an isolated glossary equivalent is insufficient. Thick translation, understood as selective contextualization, can preserve the specificity of local belief without turning a readable heritage narrative into a sequence of explanatory notes. The study offers a source-grounded account of translation decisions; reception effects remain to be tested.

1. Introduction

In 2023, the Cultural Landscape of Old Tea Forests of the Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er entered the World Heritage List. UNESCO's account identifies the Blang and Dai peoples' long-standing cultivation practices and describes Tea Ancestor belief as a central part of ceremonies and festivals associated with the forests [1]. The English label "Tea Ancestor belief" conveys the broad subject, but a sustained account of Jingmai Mountain also names the particular trees, sites, ritual objects, and ancestors through which this belief is enacted. Their meanings are rarely contained in a single noun phrase.

The present article examines selected passages from *Jingmai Shan: Gu Cha Mang Lin*, a Chinese book on the mountain's old tea forests, villages, and cultural traditions [2]. The question is how an English translation can retain the specificity of terms such as tea soul tree or tea soul altar while making their roles intelligible to readers unfamiliar with Jingmai Mountain. A second question follows: how much explanatory information should enter the translated sentence, and when should

the narrative itself carry that information? The inquiry concerns a particular cluster of Tea Ancestor-related expressions rather than the translation of all the book's cultural vocabulary.

The article uses thick translation as its analytical perspective. It first reviews relevant scholarship and introduces the source text, then defines a workable account of contextualization. The main discussion follows three strategy choices across printed pages 105, 118, 122, and 128–131 of the book.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction of the Author and the Book

Jingmai Shan: Gu Cha Mang Lin was written by Fan Jianhua, Deng Zixuan, and Zhou Li and published by Yunnan People's Publishing House in 2024. It combines descriptions of the old tea forests with accounts of the World Heritage nomination, traditional villages, local histories, tea practices, and religious life. The discussion here concentrates on the section titled Under the Gaze of the Tea Ancestor: Scenes from the Ancient Villages, especially its treatment of a pagoda in Jingmai Village, an altar on Aileng Mountain, a Tea Ancestor Temple, a protected tea tree, and the Shankang Tea Ancestor Festival[2].

The book identifies Pa Aileng in passages on Blang Tea Ancestor worship and Zhao Nuola in a Dai-associated account of the pagoda in Jingmai Village[2]. It also describes both the spiritual status of an old tea tree and concrete rules governing its harvest. Such passages move between a physical landscape and the beliefs that organize conduct within it. The translator must keep a ritual site distinct from a living tree, and an ancestor's name distinct from a generalized idea of “tea culture.”

The source's combination of travel description and cultural explanation matters for method. It sometimes supplies a term before explaining its role, and sometimes builds a cultural relationship across a paragraph. In this setting, an English translation can use the text's own explanatory movement. Adding a separate note to every unfamiliar expression may obscure that movement. Conversely, removing the local names and substituting broad words such as “shrine” or “festival” would diminish the book's account of how a particular community recognizes a particular place.

2.2 Thick Translation and the Translation of Tea Ancestor Culture

Appiah proposes thick translation as a way to make culturally situated expressions intelligible through contextual explanation. For the present study, this perspective draws attention to what readers need to know about a named tree, ritual site, or ancestor when they encounter its English rendering. The aim is to retain local distinctions while supplying only the information needed to understand each referent and its role in the narrative[1].

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.) describes Tea Ancestor belief as part of the ceremonies and festivals associated with the old tea forests of Jingmai Mountain. Its English terminology helps identify the wider cultural landscape, but it does not provide translations for all the particular names in Jingmai Shan[3]: Gu Cha Mang Lin. The book's descriptions of trees, altars, temples, a pagoda, and festival activities therefore provide the immediate context for the translation choices examined here[2].

This article applies Appiah's account of contextual explanation to those selected passages. It asks which local names should remain visible, which category words clarify their referents, and where the source narrative itself can explain ritual relationships. This focused approach connects the theoretical perspective to the book's tea ancestor material without treating every unfamiliar term as requiring a separate note.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Thick Translation and Cultural Context

This article uses “thick translation” to mean a translation in which the wording and its immediate context together give readers enough information to understand a culturally specific referent. The context may consist of a category word, a short apposition, a contextual clause, or an occasional note. The concept draws on Appiah[1]. The extent of explanation is therefore judged by its relevance to the passage and its placement, rather than by the number of words added.

Three principles guide the analysis. First, retain a recognizable local distinction when names identify different communities, ritual locations, or kinds of object. Second, make the relationship between a name and its practice explicit when the Chinese text itself supplies that relationship. Third, avoid adding interpretations that the primary text and reliable parallel materials cannot support. UNESCO's “Tea Ancestor belief” is adopted as a landscape-level English expression, while the book remains the authority for how its particular terms function in context.

3.2 Analytical Scope and Principles

The selected passages are read closely rather than counted as a corpus. The discussion checks each term against the surrounding account and considers what an English reader can infer from a proposed rendering. Because no readership study has been conducted, judgments of clarity here are analytical arguments, not measured reception results. The strategy categories below are tools for comparing choices across passages, not labels claimed to have been formulated by Appiah or Hermans.

4. English Translation Strategies for Tea Ancestor Culture

4.1 Retaining Names While Identifying Their Referents

The book states that the Blang designate the largest and most vigorous old tea tree in each garden as a tea soul tree, while the Dai call it a tea deity tree[2]. A uniform “sacred tea tree” would convey reverence but erase the difference in naming. At first mention, “the tea soul tree, the old tea tree designated by the Blang in each garden” offers an English category and the act of designation; the same sentence can identify “tea deity tree” as the Dai name. Later references need only “tea soul tree” where the community and referent are already clear.

The book's account of fencing the tree, selecting an auspicious day for the first harvest, and making an offering to Pa Aileng supplies the relevant context for “soul”[2]. These practices keep the term from sounding like a fanciful botanical name. They also show why the explanation should be attached to the tree's treatment, rather than to an unsupported general statement about what all Blang people believe. The strategy joins a distinctive label to a concise account of what people do with its referent.

A similar combination works for the festival called Shankang Tea Ancestor Festival. “Shankang Tea Ancestor Festival” retains the name's local marker and identifies its type. A nearby clause can specify that villagers visit the altar to honor Pa Aileng during the five-day celebration [2]. The source prints an alternative character in parentheses; a scholarly edition may record that textual variation without presenting pinyin based on Chinese characters as a definitive Blang-language etymology. The ceremonial actions explain the festival more securely than an invented derivation of its name.

4.2 Embedding Ritual Meaning in Spatial Description

The tea soul altar on Aileng Mountain shows why a short lexical gloss needs help from a longer

description. The term tea soul altar identifies a site of honoring the Tea Ancestor and invoking the spirit of tea. The altar's square plan is associated in the book with a pairing of round heaven and square earth. "Tea soul altar" gives a usable site name, while a following sentence can link its shape to this cosmological explanation. An isolated "soul platform" would supply neither ritual function nor the significance of the plan.

The description becomes more specific as it moves inward. The central pillar represents Pa Aileng's staff; a board stands for a cloud; four groups of pillars occupy the corners; and five posts in each group symbolize different divine domains. In translation, the arrangement should be presented before the symbolic lists. Readers then know what the numbers count and where the objects stand. Compressing the description into "twenty gods around an altar" would mistake physical signs for the beings they signify. Here, the explanation is embedded in ordered syntax. A long aside on Chinese cosmology would add little to this passage's own account of a particular structure.

The altar also gathers the book's references to ancestors, nature, and tea. Its cultural meaning emerges through the relation among a summit, objects, and ritual actions, so a translator can spread explanation over consecutive sentences. In this passage, the source's immediate description already supplies much of the context needed for the English reader[2]. A note would be useful if a publication required further documentation of the site's names or historical record.

4.3 Clarifying Relationships across Sites and Communities

The Tea Ancestor Temple and the pagoda in Jingmai Village participate in the same wider landscape yet have different functions. The book says that the temple enshrines "one ancestor and six deities": Pa Aileng and deities associated with tea, water, trees, land, insects, and wild animals. Retaining the compact formula followed by its categories preserves its internal distinction. Recasting the expression as "seven gods" would remove the position of the ancestor. The book further describes the present temple as restored and expanded on an earlier site, completed in 2016, and used as a public space for celebrations and interethnic encounters. This modern public function belongs in its translation context.

At Guangjing Square, the large pagoda is also called Tea Soul Pagoda. Earlier festivals and Tea Ancestor rites occurred beside an old tea soul tree in the forest; as population and visitor numbers grew and forest protection became more salient, the ceremonial venue moved to the pagoda precinct. The square became a major festival space in 2018. A first reference can retain Chahun Guangta with a literal explanation of its name and identify it as a pagoda. Subsequent sentences should explain the movement of ceremonies. Rendering it simply as an ancient shrine would collapse a historically described change into a timeless religious label.

The nearby figure venerated at the pagoda is Zhao Nuola, identified in this passage as Jingmai Mountain's Tea Ancestor; the temple and altar passages center on Pa Aileng in the Blang narrative. A translation must maintain these personal names and their local contexts. UNESCO's general phrase "Tea Ancestor belief" remains appropriate for the cultural landscape as a whole, while the book calls for more precise reference when it narrates a particular place or community. This movement between a broad public term and local names is an important form of selective thickness: a reader receives more detail when the argument of the narrative depends on it.

5. Conclusion

The three strategies work at different textual scales. A category word next to a retained name helps readers identify an unfamiliar object or celebration. The surrounding sentence places a term within harvesting, invocation, or worship. Across paragraphs, an account of movement between the tree, altar, temple, and pagoda preserves the book's changing ritual geography. These scales also set limits

on supplementation: an explanation should answer an identifiable question raised by the source term, and it should be placed where the source provides evidence for the answer.

The UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.) offers a useful English point of contact for the landscape-level concept of Tea Ancestor belief, while the book describes the particular people, sites, and practices through which that belief is expressed. The present case shows how Appiah's principle of contextual explanation can operate within a continuous narrative: local names remain visible, and nearby sentences supply their relationships. The resulting explanations should stay grounded in the source rather than add unverified ethnographic detail.

The study is limited to selected passages from one book and to proposed English choices. It does not survey actual published renderings of Jingmai terminology or test how different readers understand these terms. Further work could compare translations used in books, local signage, and heritage interpretation, and then examine reader responses to different degrees of contextual explanation. Such work would test the present argument's practical effect.

Tea Ancestor culture in Jingmai Shan: Gu Cha Mang Lin is articulated through named trees, places, persons, and ceremonies. Their English translation requires attention to distinctions within the cultural landscape: the Blang and Dai names for a protected tree, the altar's structured symbolism, Pa Aileng's association with temple and festival, and Zhao Nuola's place in the account of the pagoda. Thick translation provides a useful perspective when it guides selective explanation rather than producing an accumulation of notes. Retained names, concise classification, and source-grounded context can help an English reader follow these relationships while preserving the narrative's cultural specificity.

References

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