

Domestication and Foreignization for the English Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine Terminology

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ABSTRACT

As China's global influence continues to grow, traditional Chinese culture is increasingly recognized and appreciated by the Western world. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), a cornerstone of Chinese cultural heritage, has witnessed its significance, now making its way into many countries and regions worldwide. Translation, acting as a vital bridge for cultural exchange between the East and the West, plays a pivotal role in facilitating culture spread. To effectively communicate the knowledge of TCM, it is essential to address the cultural differences between TCM and Western medicine with appropriate application of translation strategies. This not only enhances the clarity and relevance of TCM terminology, but also enriches the content of cross-cultural medical research. Within cross-cultural circumstances, the translation strategy of domestication and foreignization has emerged as a key approach for the translation of TCM terminology to support the global spread of TCM knowledge.

Keywords: English translation of TCM terminology, Domestication and foreignization, Cross-cultural communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is an integral part of culture, and its role as a cultural carrier determines that translation is tied with "culture spread". Translation is not only a conversion of language, but also a communicative activity to spread culture values. Against the backdrop of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) "going global", the international spread for the TCM terminology has increasingly become a hot topic in cross-cultural exchanges. In this context, analyzing the similarities and differences between TCM and Western medicine from a cross-cultural perspective with appropriate translation strategies is an essential step for effectively communicating TCM knowledge to the world.

Broadly speaking, TCM and Western medicine share at least three common principles: the close relationship between humans and environment; the interconnection of organs and tissues; the regulation of homeostasis[1]. However, the development of TCM and Western medicine has been influenced by different cultures and

environmental factors, thus leading to distinct theoretical frameworks and practical approaches. For instance, TCM is rooted in ancient Chinese philosophical concepts, absorbing the essence of various schools of thought and emphasizing the relationship between humans and nature. This foundation has given rise to profound philosophical ideas such as Yin-Yang and the Five Elements. In contrast, Western medicine focuses on the study of etiology and pathogenesis, and emphasizes the application of modern scientific knowledge such as pathology and molecular biology. To effectively spread TCM culture and reduce barriers in cultural exchange, this paper analyses the cultural differences between TCM and Western medicine. Meanwhile, guided by the translation strategy of domestication and foreignization, the paper explores specific translation methods and skills of TCM terminology to balance the interplay of language, translation and culture.

2. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE AND WESTERN MEDICINE

2.1 Linguistic Differences

The linguistic formation of TCM terminology is linked with Chinese philosophy, culture and views of nature, reflecting the collective understanding of life, health, and disease of ancient Chinese people. TCM terminology is not merely a linguistic symbol but an important carrier of TCM knowledge and cultural heritage. The cultural and historical symbol of TCM terminology is conveyed through Chinese characters, which are closely related to pictograms, associative compounds, and pictophonetic characters. Based on Chinese character morphemes, TCM terminology includes simple word structures like 阴(Yin), 阳(Yang), 心(Heart), 脾(Spleen), co-compound words like 脏腑(Zang-Fu rgans), 五行(Five Elements), 表里(Exterior-Interior), formal-oriented compound words like 表证(Exterior Syndrome), 里证(Interior Syndrome), and phrase structures like 土生金(Earth generates Metal), 金生水(Metal generates Water). In contrast, most Western medical terminology originates from Greek, Latin, and Latinized Ancient Greek, with the character type being alphabetic. The basic structure of English medical vocabulary can be divided into four components: word roots, suffixes, prefixes, and combining vowels[2]. Derivation is a primary method for creating medical terms, and most terms are formed by freely combining Greek and Latin roots with other morphemes. For example, "dystrophy" is derived from the Latin prefix "dys-" and the Greek root "trophy".

2.2 Thinking Differences

TCM is based on the ancient Chinese philosophy of "Correlativity Thinking", which is also known as "Interconnected Thinking"[3]. This refers to the idea that all things in the universe are universally connected, are mutually opposing yet complementary, and mutual transformation. Chinese philosophical thought views the world as a unified whole and applies the perspective to explain various phenomena in nature. In contrast, Western philosophy advocates a dichotomy between material and spirit, emphasizing abstract logical thinking. It approaches problems by breaking them down into two opposite parts. Influenced by this "binary independence" mindset, Western thought tends to view subject and object as opposition and

incommensurability. Although Chinese dialectics contains the concept of "bipolarity", such as the Yin-Yang bipolarity in the *Book of Changes (I Ching)*, the bipolarity is interdependence rather than opposition[4]. Furthermore, Western medicine, shaped by Western philosophical thought and supported by the natural sciences, emphasizes logical reasoning and analytical proof. Its understanding of human physiological functions and pathological states is based on the morphology and structure of organs, tissues, and cells[5]. Take the "heart" as example. TCM views that the "heart" is ascribed to the Fire element in the Five Elements, which governs blood and mental activities. In contrast, Western medicine defines function of the "heart" as the continuous contraction of its four chambers to pump fresh blood throughout the body, thereby maintaining blood circulation. This demonstrates how different philosophic patterns determine different perspectives on the same issue.

2.3 Terminology Differences

From the perspective of terminology structure, Chinese and English are influenced by different languages and cultural backgrounds, thus resulting in distinct features in the term of terminology. The English translation of basic TCM terminology is closely tied with the unique features of TCM language, which often embodies philosophical reasoning, literary metaphor, high-level abstraction and polysemy[6]. For example, in terms of literary metaphor, TCM terminology emphasizes imagery and figurative expression, preferring to use concrete words to convey abstract concepts. Terms such as "不更衣", "月水不通", "不得前后" are typical examples of metaphorical euphemisms. The use of such euphemisms not only reflects the cultural characteristics and philosophical ideas of TCM, but also avoids awkwardness in communication to some extent.

Additionally, TCM terminologies embody polysemy, where a single word can have multiple meanings according to the context. For example, these words like "伤", "虚" and "毒" carry different meanings in different terminological contexts. Taking "伤" as an example, TCM terms cover "伤湿", "怒伤肝" and "伤气". Although these terms all include the character "伤", their meaning varies across the three expressions. In contrast, Western medical terminology is characterized by its labeling function, emphasizing practicality and effectiveness. Meanwhile, it strives for semantic transparency. Besides, the Western medical terminology follows

specific naming principles, they are highly scientific, logical and monosemic[7].

3. DOMESTICATION AND FOREIGNIZATION FROM A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Translation, as an activity of linguistic and cultural spread, aims to facilitate the exchange of ideas, broaden perspectives, and ultimately promote societal development. Without the medium role of translation, the spread of cultural exchange would be impossible. Cross-cultural communication refers to the process of interaction, exchange, and understanding between different languages and cultures. It emphasizes mutual influence, comparison, and adaptation within diverse cultural contexts. Translation involves in language concept, as well as a form of cross-cultural communication. In the process of cultural translation, domestication and foreignization are two primary translation strategies.

3.1 Domestication

The concept of "domestication" was first introduced by Eugene Nida within the framework of dynamic equivalence theory. Nida argued that "the relationship between the target text and foreign readers should be substantially the same as that between the source text and native readers[8]". Domestication, rooted in an understanding of the interaction between language and culture, emphasizes that translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but also a transmission and adaptation of culture. In other way, prioritizing the target readers' perspective and sensibilities, the domestication strategy advocates for transforming cultural characteristics and expressions of the source language into other forms that foreign readers can accept.

TCM terminology often embodies rich elements of traditional Chinese culture and philosophical thought. For instance, terms such as "髓海", "血之余", and "女子胞" are deeply rooted in Chinese culture, but they lack direct equivalents in Western culture. In reality, these terms have alternative names in English, and they are "brain", "hair", and "womb" respectively. When translating TCM terminology into a target language, literal translation or transliteration alone often fails to convey the deeper cultural meanings of TCM to the target audiences. This requires translators fully consider the cultural

differences between the source and target languages during the translation process, thereby fostering mutual understanding and respect across cultures. Specifically, it is necessary for the translator to use translation methods like literal translation and borrowing western medical terminology, so as to fill the gap of culture difference and meet cognitive perspective of target readers.

3.1.1 Free Translation

Li Zhaoguo pointed out that free translation involves conveying core meaning of the text rather than translating text by word-for-word[9]. TCM terminologies are linked with traditional Chinese culture, and many of them originate from ancient medical classics with profound languages and cultural connotations. During translation, we can translate the basic meaning of the terms through researching and identifying intended meaning of TCM. For example, if "白虎历节" is literally translated as "white tiger joint running", it would not only mislead readers, but also lose the true essence of the TCM term. Instead, if it is translated as "acute arthritis", it conveys the intended meaning of "acute joint inflammation". There are numerous examples of such the term. For instance, the term like "数脉", "牛皮癣", and "风水" respectively refers to "a pulse that beats rapidly", "a chronic itchy skin condition where the skin becomes thick and tough like cowhide" and "a condition of localized edema triggered by external wind pathogens". If translated literally as "counting pulse", "oxhide lichen" and "wind water", the translation would not only fail to convey their intended meanings, but also cause confusion and ambiguity for readers. Therefore, translating them as "rapid pulse", "psoriasis" and "wind edema" can achieve equivalence in comprehension between source and target readers, thus facilitating communication between Chinese and English languages and cultures.

3.1.2 Borrowing Western Medical Terminology

Although Chinese and Western civilizations embody different cultures, they have common thinking and cognition across nations and ethnicities. Li Zhaoguo proposes the concept of "linguistic ethnology", which posits that a majority of words among language systems can match with corresponding words within the languages of other nations and ethnicities[10]. These shared words are called as the "common core vocabulary" of human language. Furthermore, according to the theory, the

mutual borrowing of terms among language systems not only enhances communication effectively but also promotes the development and enrichment of languages. When translating TCM concepts related to modern medicine, it is necessary to adopt corresponding Western medical terms to make the translation more scientific and natural. Namely, these TCM terms have corresponding language expressions in Western medical terminology. For example, TCM terms "纳呆", "黄疸", "中风" and "白喉" is synonymous with the Western medical terms "indigestion," "jaundice", "apoplexy" and "diphtheria," respectively, although they have different names. Therefore, for TCM terms that equals Western medical diseases or symptoms, translators can borrow Western medical terminology to achieve accurate and natural translations.

3.2 Foreignization

In the 1990s, Lawrence Venuti made significant contributions to the strategy of domestication and foreignization. He criticized that the translation practices in the English-speaking world tend to use domestication, thereby neglecting the uniqueness and cultural differences of the source language[11]. Venuti advocated for the use of foreignization strategies to preserve and respect the cultural differences of the source text. In other words, foreignization involves maintaining the cultural characteristics and expressions of the source language in the translation, allowing target readers to experience the distinctiveness and cultural charm of the source language.

TCM contains many culture-loaded terms, such as "气" (Qi), "阴阳" (Yin-Yang), and "五行" (Five Elements). If these terms are translated by domestication strategies, these terms may lose their specific connotations in terms of culture and theory. In the process of culture output, preserving the unique characteristics of TCM culture enables people from all of countries and regions to understand the history and philosophical foundations of China, as well as cultural value of TCM, thereby fostering greater understanding and respect for traditional Chinese culture. By appropriately applying foreignization in the process of TCM translation, one can respect and reproduce the source culture, while maintaining the profound depth and richness of TCM culture. In the translation process, literal translation and transliteration are common methods for foreignization.

3.2.1 Literal Translation

In the translation of TCM terminology, literal translation is a common method. It involves translating TCM terms into the target language via literal meaning to preserve the stylistic features of the source language. This approach helps readers to understand the meaning of TCM terms better, especially for the terms that are widely used and spread. For example, TCM terms such as "心火", "肾水" and "血虚" can be translated literally as "heart fire", "kidney water", and "blood deficiency" respectively, which maintain the unique characteristics of TCM language.

3.2.2 Transliteration

TCM is an ancient discipline that encompasses many concepts and terms that are deeply rooted in Chinese culture and language, some of which are even obscure. Additionally, some terms have no direct equivalents in English, which poses a challenge for TCM translation. To address this matter, we can moderately adopt the method of transliteration via Chinese pinyin, thereby enriching and expanding the connotation of TCM terms. For instance, since ancient times, the Chinese have revered the "龙" (dragon) as a totem. In Chinese mythology, the dragon is a mystical creature that is capable of transformation, bringing rain and clouds, benefiting all things, and symbolizing auspiciousness and blessings. This cultural belief has led the Chinese people to proudly name themselves as "descendants of the dragon". However, in Western biblical stories, the dragon is associated with Satan and is seen as a symbol of evil and ferocity. In the translation of TCM terminology, if the term "青龙白虎汤" is literally translated as "Blue Dragon and White Tiger Decoction", foreign readers might find it confusing, as they could mistakenly assume the decoction is made from a blue dragon and a white tiger. Such a translation not only fails to convey the cultural essence of TCM for target readers, but also leads to misunderstandings and ambiguity of culture. Therefore, using transliteration to translate the formula as "Qinglong Baihu Decoction" preserves the term's re-translatability, while avoiding cultural shock in cross-cultural communication.

3.3 The Balance Between Domestication and Foreignization

Domestication and foreignization are a whole strategy, and they are closely interconnection.

Using domestication strategies can enhance effective communication in cross-cultural contexts, but it, to some extent, may lead to the loss of traditional culture elements that are embedded in the text. On the other hand, foreignization strategies preserves the cultural essence of the source language, but it may lead to comprehension difficulties for target readers. Excessive use of either domestication or foreignization may pose a negative impact on cultural exchange.

As a type of scientific and technical text, TCM translation spans three fields: medicine, culture, and technology. This requires translators to possess a profound cross-culture consciousness. They must not only be proficient in both the source and target languages but also have a deep knowledge of TCM culture and foreign culture. Balancing the relationship among language, translation, and culture is essential for achieving effective and sensitive translations. Annotation is one of the useful translation method to balance domestication and foreignization.

When translating TCM terms with special meanings or cultural connotations, the annotation method can be used to help readers understand the unique content of the source text better. This approach reveals the hidden cultural elements in TCM terminology, while reducing reading barriers for the audience. For example, in translating the term "失笑散", many scholars have translated it as "Powder for Lost Smiles" or "Shixiao Powder". However, the "失笑散" is a formula that promotes blood circulation, resolves stasis, disperses nodules, and relieves pain. In fact, above translation fails to adequately convey its cultural and functional significance. By using transliteration with annotation, it can be translated as Shixiao Powder (Powder for Dissipating Blood Stasis), and the cultural essence of the term is revealed while avoiding ambiguity for readers. This method overcomes cross-cultural communication barriers and allows readers to appreciate the cultural depth that is embedded in the term "失笑散". Similarly, when translating other formula terms, translators can apply annotation based on specific contexts. For instance, "白虎汤" can be translated as Baihu Decoction (Decoction for Removing Pathogenic Heat), which preserves the original name and clarifies its function of clearing heat and detoxifying. "三子养亲汤" can be translated as Sanzi Yangqin Tang (Three-Seed Decoction for Relieving Distention and Promoting Digestion), which highlights its properties of regulating the spleen and stomach, aiding digestion, resolving stagnation.

This combined approach of transliteration and annotation ensures that the cultural and functional aspects of TCM terms are accurately conveyed, achieving the purpose of bridging the gap between source and target cultures.

4. CONCLUSION

The culture of TCM is profound and extensive, serving as an indispensable part of China's outstanding culture. Against the backdrop of globalization, promoting the spread of TCM culture not only enhances the global understanding and recognition of traditional Chinese culture, but also contributes Chinese wisdom and solutions to the development of global medical and health cause. However, in order to spread TCM culture more widely, translators must act as cultural ambassadors, clarifying the similarities and differences between TCM and Western medicine. At the same time, during the translation process, it is essential to objectively analyse the linguistic and cultural relationships between the source and target languages. From a cross-cultural perspective, it is important for translators to select appropriate translation strategies as translation guidance and to analyse the selection reason of translation strategy. In this way can characteristics of TCM terms be remained and target readers accept. Ultimately, this approach facilitates the international exchange and dissemination of TCM culture.

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