

A Study on the English Translation of Zang-Fu Organs in Traditional Chinese Medicine from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theoretical foundations and practical approaches to translating TCM Zang-fu terminology into English through the lens of Eco-Translatology. Using the framework of “three-dimensional transformation”—linguistic, cultural, and communicative—Eco-Translatology examines how translators make adaptive choices within the translation ecosystem, balancing terminological accuracy, cultural connotations, and communicative effectiveness. The study suggests that Eco-Translatology offers systematic theoretical support for the English translation of TCM terminology, encouraging translators to preserve the cultural essence of TCM while fostering an effective academic and communicative environment in cross-cultural dissemination.

Keywords: *Eco-Translatology, English translation of Zang-fu organs, International dissemination of TCM.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The culture of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is deeply rooted in the unique soil of traditional Chinese culture. The translation of TCM terminology, which plays a crucial role in the international dissemination of TCM, faces challenges such as lack of standardization and diverse translation approaches. Translators must navigate a delicate balance between transliteration that preserves cultural specificity and free translation that enhances comprehension, while also reconciling conflicts among linguistic accuracy, cultural connotation transmission, and target-reader acceptability. At its core, this process involves constructing a dynamic expression for TCM within the Western medicine-dominated cognitive ecosystem—one that retains its authenticity while integrating into the target context. This reflects the fundamental contradiction that the “adaptation and selection” theory of Eco-Translatology seeks to address. Taking the English translation of TCM Zang-fu organ-related terminology as an example, this paper, based on an understanding of the connotations of Zang-fu theory in TCM, examines translation strategies and methods from the

linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions of Eco-Translatology, aiming to facilitate the global dissemination of TCM culture.

2. ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

Research in Eco-Translatology serves both as a “metaphorical reference” and a “substantive reference.” The so-called “metaphorical reference” refers to a holistic study that analogizes the translation ecosystem to the natural ecosystem through metaphor. The so-called “substantive reference” pertains to the study of the relationship between the translator and the translation ecological environment, particularly focusing on the survival and development of the translator’s competence within the translation ecosystem. From the perspective of Eco-Translatology, it offers new descriptions and interpretations of the nature, process, criteria, principles, and methods of translation, as well as translation phenomena, through its own narrative framework.

Eco-Translatology provides essential theoretical support and practical guidance for the translation of TCM terminology. It guides translators in making adaptive choices within the translation ecosystem

through the “three-dimensional transformation” (linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions): ensuring the accurate transmission of the unique word formation and conceptual logic of TCM terminology linguistically, interpreting the underlying philosophical ideas culturally, and balancing medical accuracy with target-reader acceptability communicatively. In doing so, it preserves the cultural essence of TCM while building bridges for cross-cultural understanding, thereby promoting the effective dissemination and integration of TCM knowledge within the global translation ecosystem.

3. OVERVIEW OF ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF ZANG-FU ORGANS IN TCM

3.1 The Cultural and Philosophical Core of the Zang-Fu Concept

The concept of Zang-fu organs in Traditional Chinese Medicine is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy and agrarian culture. Its essence lies not in anatomical entities but in functional systems represented by the theory of “zangxiang (visceral manifestation).” Zang-fu organs are closely linked to Yin-Yang and the Five Phases, forming an organic whole characterized by mutual generation and restraint—emphasizing functional relationships rather than morphological structures. This holistic and function-oriented perspective fundamentally distinguishes it from the anatomical and physiological concept of “organs” in Western medicine. Therefore, using purely anatomical terms in translation can lead to significant misunderstandings. Current approaches often employ transliterations such as “Zang-fu organs” to preserve cultural identity, or adopt interpretive translations like “functional systems” to convey their philosophical connotations, reflecting their nature as classificatory and relational models of life activities.

3.2 Major Historical and Current Strategies in Translating Zang-Fu Terminology

The English translation of Zang-fu terminology has evolved from an early stage characterized by the direct borrowing of Western anatomical terms, which often resulted in severe conceptual confusion. Subsequently, scholars have engaged in diverse explorations to distinguish these concepts. German

scholar Manfred Porkert was a pioneering figure in this effort as early as the 1960s–1970s, dedicating himself to establishing an independent terminology system for TCM. Meanwhile, sinologist Paul U. Unschuld adopted a thick translation strategy of “literal translation supplemented by extensive footnotes” when translating *Huangdi Neijing*, striving to trace the metaphorical roots of terms and avoid Western medical vocabulary to highlight the distinctiveness of TCM concepts. His rendering of “脏腑” as “depots and palaces” exemplifies a metaphorical approach. During the same period, domestic scholars such as Xie Zhufan contributed to terminology collation and standardization through works like the *Classified Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine*.

Translation practice gradually moved toward systematization and standardization. In his 2000 doctoral dissertation, *Translation of Medical Terms: A Source-Oriented Approach*, Nigel Wiseman analyzed the translation of Latin medical terms into English and Western medical terms into Chinese, summarizing four methods: using everyday equivalents, borrowing, calque, and neologism, thereby establishing conceptual separation between TCM and Western medicine at the terminological level. This approach directly contributed to the current mainstream model of “literal/transliteration + qualifying explanation.” Ultimately, Chinese scholars represented by Professor Li Zhaoguo, in their work on translating national standards, explicitly rendered “五脏六腑” as “five Zang-organs and six Fu-organs” and successfully submitted this Chinese proposal to the World Health Organization (WHO), aiming for its adoption as an international standard.

Current standardized schemes promoted by institutions such as the WHO and the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies, as well as widely accepted translations like “Zang-fu organs” and “Zang-organ” in academia, reflect this trend. The objective is first to establish the conceptual independence of TCM terminology, then clarify specific functions through context or annotations.

3.3 Challenges in Current Translation Practices

The current dilemmas in translating Zang-fu terminology can be summarized as the superficial “standardization predicament” and the deeper “philosophical-cultural divide.” The standardization predicament refers to conflicts between translation

systems adopted by different bodies, such as the WHO and the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies. This is not merely an issue of terminological inconsistency but stems fundamentally from differing understandings of the nature of TCM. This foundational divergence, in turn, arises from an incommensurable cognitive gap between the philosophical thinking of TCM—centered on analogical thinking based on imagery and functional systems—and the scientific language of the West, which is grounded in anatomical entities and logical precision. TCM extensively employs “analogical reasoning based on imagery (取象比类)” drawn from natural and social phenomena. As Professor Fang Tingyu has pointed out, rendering “秋刑” literally as “autumn punishment” or simplifying “心之合脉也” fails to convey the systematic TCM concepts of “the purging qi characteristic of autumn” or the connection between internal organs and external body surfaces. Similarly, translating “命门” as “gate of life” largely loses its connotation as the root of the primordial driving force of life. Consequently, any attempt at terminological unification that bypasses these deep cultural and philosophical underpinnings and remains solely at the technical level is unlikely to succeed. This leaves translation trapped in a dilemma: simplification leads to loss of essence, while preserving authenticity often results in incomprehensibility.

4. ANALYSIS OF ZANG-FU TRANSLATION EXAMPLES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

4.1 *Adaptive Selection in the Linguistic Dimension*

4.1.1 *Formal Transformation at the Terminological Level*

The core task at the terminological level is to select the most appropriate English form for unique TCM concepts. Taking the translation of the distinctive concept “五脏六腑” as an example, scholars have adopted different strategies. When promoting standardization, Professor Li Zhaoguo advocated that “unique concepts are best rendered through transliteration,” translating “五脏六腑” as “five zang-organs and six fu-organs.” This approach aims first to establish the terminological independence of the concept, clearly reflecting his eco-translatological emphasis on preserving the

cultural subjectivity of TCM as a core ecological priority. The “ecology” he prioritizes adapting to and serving is the long-term, sustainable global ecology of TCM as an independent discipline. By sacrificing short-term “comprehensibility” in the target context, he chooses a path that first establishes an independent identity and then gradually explains its connotations. This trade-off ensures that the cultural essence of TCM is not diluted or assimilated in translation, with the fundamental goal of securing the power of definition and interpretation in cross-cultural communication.

4.1.2 *Integration and Restructuring at the Syntactic Level*

The core task at the terminological level aims to deconstruct the paratactic structure of Chinese and reorganize sentences according to English syntactic logic, thereby accurately conveying the dynamic relationships and functions among the zang-fu organs. Achieving this primarily involves three key strategies.

The first is “subject specification and predicate precision”. This entails establishing an explicit subject for English sentences where Chinese may imply or generalize the subject, and pairing it with a transitive verb that precisely conveys the TCM function. Taking Professor Nigel Wiseman’s translation as an example, “肝主疏泄” is not simply rendered as “Liver controls dispersion,” but is reconstructed as “The liver governs coursing and discharge.” Here, the choice of “governs” over “controls” better conveys a sense of dominance and systematicity, accurately aligning with the ecological niche of the “liver” as a functional agent.

The second is “explicitation of logical relations and reconstruction through prepositional structures”. In Chinese, relationships among Zang-fu organs are often implied through juxtaposition, whereas English requires making these relationships explicit through prepositions, conjunctions, or non-finite structures. For instance, “肾主纳气” can be translated as “The kidney is responsible for receiving/grasping qi,” where the structure “be responsible for” grammaticalizes the duty-bearing relationship of “主”. Similarly, when describing organ-attribute associations, “精藏于肾” must be transformed into a “subject + passive voice + prepositional phrase” structure such as “The essence is stored in the kidney.”

Therefore, the ultimate goal of syntactic restructuring is to enable TCM Zang-fu terminology—once its conceptual independence is established at the terminological level—to “come alive” within a syntactically compliant English framework. This allows the complex functional relationships among the organs, such as mutual generation and restriction, dominance and governance, to be accurately and dynamically represented. In this way, genuine “transplantation of meaning” and “conceptual survival” are achieved within the cultural and academic ecosystem of the target language.

4.2 Adaptive Selection in the Cultural Dimension

4.2.1 Strategies for Transplanting Culture-Loaded Concepts

From the perspective of eco-translatology, the core of “adaptive selection in the cultural dimension” lies in how translators handle the unique cultural information embedded in TCM zang-fu concepts—information rooted in Chinese philosophy, history, and lifestyle, with no direct equivalents in English-speaking cultures. Currently, three main strategies are employed in translation.

The first is “retentive transplantation”, or the foreignization strategy. Taking “五脏六腑” as an example, Professor Paul U. Unschuld, adhering to thick translation and cultural preservation, renders it as “five depots and six palaces.” Similarly, Professor Nigel Wiseman translates “藏府” as “treasures and houses,” meaning “treasure repositories and storehouses.” Both approaches reflect their emphasis on cultural fidelity as an ecological priority, though at the cost of increasing the cognitive load on readers, who must actively adapt to these unfamiliar terms.

The second is “domesticating transplantation”. The primary goal of this strategy is to prioritize the cognitive habits and acceptability of target-language readers, replacing unfamiliar cultural elements with familiar concepts. Using “五脏六腑” again as an example, some scholars translate it as “viscera.” While this does not align with the original meaning of “藏府” in *Suwen*, it lowers the barrier to understanding during dissemination and enhances communicative fluency. However, this approach risks cultural loss and may lead to conceptual confusion.

The third is “explanatory transplantation”, which involves creatively integrating annotations to reduce reading barriers while minimizing cultural distortion. This strategy seeks a creative balance between preserving the cultural core and ensuring comprehensibility. Currently, explanatory transplantation—represented by transliteration with annotations or literal translation with annotations—has become the mainstream approach in academic translation.

4.2.2 Transmission and Transformation of Metaphorical Imagery

From the perspective of eco-translatology, the transmission and transformation of metaphorical imagery constitutes a key challenge in cultural-dimension adaptation. The translator’s strategy fundamentally involves making adaptive choices between “foreignization” and “domestication” in order to handle the “analogical reasoning based on imagery” characteristic of TCM. Currently, for core philosophical metaphors in TCM Zang-fu theory, “literal translation + systematic annotation” has become the academic standard—as exemplified by translating “上火” as “excessive internal heat.” This reflects the core principle of eco-translatology: utilizing annotations as a form of compensation in the linguistic dimension to achieve transplantation in the cultural dimension. The ultimate goal is not merely to translate words, but to reconstruct an intelligible cognitive framework within the target culture, enabling TCM’s distinctive metaphorical system to survive and grow within a new academic ecosystem.

4.3 Adaptive Selection in the Communicative Dimension

4.3.1 Target-Reader-Oriented Translation Variants

In eco-translatology, the primary principle of the communicative dimension is that translators must produce different translation variants for the same TCM concept based on the knowledge background and receptive capacity of the target readers, in order to achieve optimal communicative effectiveness. When addressing Western medical professionals or researchers, translations tend to borrow or analogize Western medical terminology—for example, simplifying “脏腑” to “viscera” or rendering “中风” as “stroke”—sacrificing some cultural specificity in exchange for precise

technical communication, thereby quickly establishing a channel for professional dialogue. On the other hand, when targeting TCM students or practitioners, translations must strictly maintain conceptual systematicity and independence to serve specialized learning. This involves consistently using standardized terms such as “Zang-fu organs” and “qi,” while emphasizing their distinction from Western medical concepts, so as to construct an authentic TCM knowledge system.

4.3.2 *The Decisive Influence of Translation Purpose on Strategy*

The fundamental purpose of translation acts as a “guiding principle” that determines all specific strategies in the linguistic and cultural dimensions from the top down. If the purpose is academic research and classical exegesis, the strategy will lean strongly toward “foreignization”, employing literal translation with annotations to pursue faithful transplantation of the full cultural context. If the purpose is clinical standardization and international harmonization of terminology, the strategy will focus on “systematization”, adopting fixed structures such as “pinyin + categorical word” to prioritize clarity, consistency, and cross-referencing of terms. If the purpose is cultural popularization and public dissemination, the strategy will shift toward “creative domestication”, using vivid analogies and simplified explanations to convey the core ideas. Therefore, the translation purpose constitutes the ultimate “ecological environment” of the translation act, and all adaptive choices made by the translator serve this highest goal.

5. CONCLUSION

The English translation of TCM zang-fu terminology is a complex endeavor involving multi-layered transformation across linguistic, cultural, and philosophical dimensions. Eco-translatology, with its “three-dimensional transformation” framework, provides translators with a theoretical basis for making adaptive choices within the dynamic translation ecosystem. Through analysis, this paper demonstrates that:

- At the “linguistic dimension”, the use of transliteration and syntactic restructuring helps establish the independence and systematicity of TCM concepts within the English academic ecology.
- At the “cultural dimension”, addressing TCM’s analogical reasoning based on imagery requires balancing the

preservation of cultural essence with comprehensibility through strategies such as foreignizing literal translation, in-depth annotation, or creative domestication.

- At the “communicative dimension”, translation strategies are ultimately shaped by the target audience and communication purpose, with clinical, academic, and popularization contexts necessitating different variants to ensure the effective survival and growth of terminology in the target ecology.

Current translation of Zang-fu terms still faces challenges such as standardization discrepancies and deep-seated philosophical divides. Any effort toward terminological unification must be grounded in an understanding of the cultural essence of TCM. Eco-translatology reminds us that translating TCM is not merely a matter of code-switching, but a dynamic process of adaptation, selection, and survival within a cross-cultural ecosystem. Future research and practice should continue to be guided by a holistic ecological perspective, promoting the construction of a sound ecological framework for TCM terminology — one that maintains its ontological integrity while enhancing its communicative power in a globalized context.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funding Project: Hubei Provincial Department of Education Philosophy and Social Sciences Research Project “A Study on Translator Behavior in the English Translation and Dissemination of TCM Classics” (22Q093).

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