

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

Yumeng Liu¹ Linxi Zhang²

^{1,2} Hubei University of Chinese Medicine, Wuhan 430065, China

ABSTRACT

In this paper we investigate the theory and practice on translating TCM Zang-fu terminology into English from a perspective of Eco-Translatology. Based on "three-dimensional transformation" (linguistic, cultural, and communicative), Eco-Translatology investigates how translators adapt their choices under the translation ecosystem by balancing between terminological accuracy, cultural connotations, and communicative effectiveness. It is suggested that Eco-Translatology provides systematic theoretical support for the English translation of TCM terminology; it encourages translators to retain the cultural essence of TCM as well as foster 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

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) culture has been embedded in the unique soil of traditional Chinese culture. Lack of standardization and diverse translation approaches are encountered when translating TCM terminology, which play a crucial role in the international dissemination of TCM. In order to achieve a balance between transliteration with cultural specificity and free translation with enhanced comprehension; reconcile the conflict between linguistic accuracy, cultural connotation transmission, and target reader's acceptability, translators need to construct a dynamic expression of TCM in the Western medicine-dominated cognitive ecosystem—retaining its authenticity but integrating into the target context. It embodies the basic contradiction addressed by "adaptation and selection" theory of Eco-Translatology. With the English translation of TCM Zang-fu organ-related terminology as an example, this paper, based on our understanding of the connotations of Zang-fu theory in TCM, explores translation strategies and methods from the linguistic, cultural and communicative aspects of Eco-Translatology, trying to promote the global dissemination of TCM culture.

2. ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

The research of Eco-Translatology is a "metaphorical reference" and a "substantive reference." The former means a holistic study which uses metaphors to compare the translation ecosystem to the natural ecosystem; the latter concerns studying the relationship between the translator and the translation ecological environment, especially regarding the survival and development of the translator's competence inside the translation ecosystem. Through its own narrative framework, Eco-Translatology provides new descriptions and interpretations about the nature, process, criteria, principles, and methods of translation or translation phenomena.

It gives important theoretical support and practical guidance for translating TCM terminology by guiding translators' adaptive choice within the translation ecosystem via the "three-dimensional transformation" (linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions) – accurately transmitting the unique word formation and conceptual logic of TCM terminology linguistically, interpreting the underlying philosophy ideas culturally, and achieving the balance among medical

accuracy and target-reader acceptability communicatively. Thus preserving the cultural essence of TCM at the same time establishing bridges for cross-cultural understanding, facilitating the effective dissemination and integration of TCM knowledge into the global translation ecosystem. Overview of English Translation of Zang-Fu Organs in TCM

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

The concept of Zang-fu organs in Traditional Chinese Medicine has its roots in ancient Chinese philosophy and agrarian culture; its essence is a set of functional systems embodied in the theory of "zangxiang (visceral manifestation)." The zang-fu organs are closely associated with Yin-Yang and the Five Phases that constitute an organic whole based on mutual generation and restraint—the emphasis being on functional relationship instead of morphological structure. It differs fundamentally from the anatomical and physiological concept of "organs" in Western medicine because of this holistic and function-based approach. Using purely anatomical terms for translation may result in serious misunderstanding. Presently there are many ways including transliteration ("Zang-fu organs") to maintain cultural identity, and interpretation ("functional systems"), which embodies their philosophical connotation and reflects their nature as classificatory and relational model of life activities.

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

From the initial phase where there were serious conceptual confusions due to the direct borrowing of Western anatomical terms, scholars have explored various ways to differentiate them. German scholar Manfred Porkert is one pioneer who dedicated himself to creating his own independent terminology system for TCM since the 1960s–1970s. Sinologist Paul U. Unschuld took a thick translation strategy of "literal translation supplemented by extensive footnotes" while translating Huangdi Neijing, trying to track the metaphors behind the terms without using Western medical vocabulary to emphasize the distinctive features of TCM concepts; he rendered "脏腑" with "depots and palaces", which is a metaphorical approach. At that time, domestic scholars also made contributions to collation and standardization on terminology, e.g., Xie Zhufan's

work: *The Classified Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine*.

The ultimate objective of current TCM translation standardization is to first establish the conceptual independence of its terminology, and then clarify specific physiological functions through contextual usage or annotations. This guiding principle underpins the standardized schemes promoted by international bodies like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies, as well as widely accepted academic translations such as "Zang-fu organs" or "Zang-organ."

The process towards systematization started from Nigel Wiseman's seminal 2000 doctoral dissertation on Translation of Medical Terms: A Source-Oriented Approach; by studying the translation of Latin medical terms into English and Western medical terms into Chinese, he concluded that there were four main approaches – everyday equivalents, borrowing, calque and neologism which created a formal distinction between Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Western medicine at the terminological level. The methodology thus laid down led to what is now the widely adopted practice of "literal/transliteration + qualifying explanation." Concurrently, Chinese scholars, especially Professor Li Zhaoguo pushed forward this approach within national standard translation projects. They made explicit use of rendering "五脏六腑" as "five Zang-organs and six Fu-organs", and their Chinese proposal was successfully submitted to the WHO for it to be adopted as an international standard, which was a major milestone in the global recognition of TCM terminology.

2.3 Challenges in Current Translation Practices

The core of translating Zang-fu terminology involves a double layer of an impasse – at first sight a dispute about standardization protocols but underneath a much more intractable philosophical/cultural chasm. However, what matters most here isn't who has the more authoritative lexicon (WHO vs. World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies), rather their disputes reflect a deeper difference in understanding TCM, and this reflects the fact that there are two radically incommensurable cognitive frameworks involved – one based upon the analogical, imagery-driven logic of traditional Chinese thought versus the anatomical precision and empirical specificity of Western scientific discourse.

What are some specific challenges this presents? For instance, according to Professor Fang Tingyu, if we translate "秋刑" literally as "autumn punishment," then we lose sight of its systemic meaning – the idea of autumn's purging, descending qi mirroring the severity of a judicial officer. If we simplify the translation of "心之合脉也", we miss the intricacies of how internal organs correspond with external surfaces on our bodies—a cornerstone of TCM's holistic view. A word such as "命门"—often translated as "gate of life"—loses the profound connotation of being the very root and driving force of vitality when reduced to a simple spatial metaphor. Such cases demonstrate that TCM terminology functions not as a collection of labels, but rather an interwoven web of analogies taken from nature and society—any extraction from this web will distort/hollow these terms out.

This cultural/epistemic depth makes unification attempts superficially futile. So what is called the standardization predicament—that is simply the inconsistent translations between various transliteration and annotation systems—is only a symptom, not the disease. Since there is a fundamental disagreement about the very nature of TCM as a knowledge system, any technical effort to harmonize terminology while ignoring its philosophical underpinnings will surely end in failure. Thus the translator finds herself perpetually caught in a bind: Simplify too much and the essence evaporates; stay true to the original's complexity and the text becomes all but opaque to the uninitiated. It is not just a language puzzle—it is a clash of two worlds of meaning—and right now, no consensus can bridge them without first acknowledging the gulf that lies underneath.

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

3.1 Adaptive Selection in the Linguistic Dimension

3.1.1 Formal Transformation at the Terminological Level

Translating uniquely TCM-specific concepts involves a crucial decision about how best to serve the long-term interests of the discipline. Take "五脏六腑"—without any equivalent concept in Western languages. Different scholars have offered different

solutions; but Professor Li Zhaoguo, who pushes for standardization, has made a firm stance: he insists that "unique concepts are best rendered through transliteration," resulting in the expression "five zang-organs and six fu-organs."

It is no simple compromise. Through transliteration, Li sacrifices everything towards terminological autonomy—he seeks only to establish an independent conceptual foothold for TCM in the global arena (rather than instant accessibility for the target audience). He calls it "ecology" in his eco-translatological framework—the sustainable, long-term development of TCM as a self-standing knowledge system within the international academic ecosystem. For him, the cost of reduced comprehensibility for non-Chinese readers is a calculated sacrifice—one that buys time for further elaboration and contextual clarity over time. As those transliterations become familiar with use and annotation, we will begin to unravel their rich connotations.

3.1.2 Integration and Restructuring at the Syntactic Level

Ultimately what we want when reworking syntax in translating TCM is not just grammatically correct English sentences; we want our Zang fu terminology (after securing its conceptual independence at the lexical level) to work dynamically inside the target language's syntactic framework. Then will the complex network of mutual generation, restraint, domination, and governance among the organs be accurately and vividly communicated. That would be true "transplantation of meaning" and "conceptual survival" in the culture and academia ecology of English.

To achieve such, we need to identify a basic structural mismatch—that classical Chinese depends largely on parataxis wherein logical relationship and functional role are suggested implicitly via juxtaposition, while English needs explicit syntactic markers. Two complementary strategies have proven especially useful here:

A key maneuver involves giving explicit subjects and choosing appropriate predicates. When Chinese leaves the subject vague/general, English demands a clear agent coupled with a transitive verb capturing exactly the functional role in TCM theory. Consider how Nigel Wiseman deals with "肝主疏泄." Instead of the flat "Liver controls dispersion," he renders it as "The liver governs coursing and discharge." By deliberately using governs instead of controls, there

is a hint of orderly dominance and systematic regulation – far more faithful to the liver's ecological niche as a functional coordinator within the body's internal environment.

Another key strategy concerns making implicit logical relations explicitly through prepositions and structures. Relationships between Zang fu organs or between organs and their attributes in Chinese are often marked simply by word order, but in English, grammaticalized indicators are required. Thus, “肾主纳气” has to become a passive voice, preposition anchored structure: “The essence is stored in the kidney.” These changes not only make the directionality of physiological actions clearer but also avoid misleading readers who interpret the organ as a mere physical container rather than a functional locus.

These strategies go beyond producing readable translations—we rebuild the conceptual architecture of TCM in English terms, thus unfolding the original paratactic web of relations in a syntactically coherent and logically transparent way. We thereby guarantee that the transplanted concepts preserve their theoretical richness and gain new life within the host language's cognitive habitat.

3.2 Adaptive Selection in the Cultural Dimension

3.2.1 Strategies for Transplanting Culture-Loaded Concepts

The cultural aspect of “adaptive selection,” from the perspective of eco-translatology, presents a major dilemma – How do we transplant the unique Chinese philosophical, historical, and lifestyle connotations (which have no ready equivalents) contained within Zang fu terminology into English speaking world without distorting their essence nor alienating the target readership? Translators tend towards three general approaches that occupy varying positions along the continuum between cultural fidelity and communicative accessibility.

One end of the spectrum represents retentive transplantation — a foreignizing method where cultural authenticity takes top priority. Scholars such as Paul U. Unschuld who are dedicated to thick translation translate “五脏六腑” as “five depots and six palaces”, Nigel Wiseman opts for “treasures and houses” for “藏府” to conjure up the idea of treasure repositories and storehouses. Such translations carefully maintain the original cultural imagery as an ecological asset that should never be diluted.

However, such fidelity carries a heavy cost—the reader is left struggling with unfamiliar metaphors carrying the entire cognitive load to adapt to an alien conceptual landscape.

On the other side stands domesticating transplantation, completely reversing priorities. Where the target reader's cognitive habits and ease of comprehension prevail, translators opt to substitute unfamiliar cultural markers with familiar Western equivalents. For example, translating “五脏六腑” simply as “viscera” facilitates immediate understanding and improves communicative fluency, yet it erases the distinct functional systemic meaning of “藏府” as articulated in *Suwen*. The increase in readability is counterbalanced by a substantial loss of cultural specificity, and worse, it may confuse TCM concepts with biomedical ones, breeding confusion instead of clarity.

Between them sits the third way—the middle ground, increasingly becoming the academic consensus. Explanatory transplantation creatively combines annotations/glosses/parenthetical clarifications with transliterations/literal translations, attempting to maintain the cultural core while minimizing reader disorientation. The prevalent model, exemplified by transliteration plus explanatory notes or literal translation with supplementary commentary, has become the mainstream approach in scholarly translation. While it fails to reconcile the inherent tension between authenticity and intelligibility, it finds a pragmatic balance—that the foreign concept retains its identity while providing the reader with a foothold for gradual familiarity.

3.2.2 Transmission and Transformation of Metaphorical Imagery

The underlying premise of eco-translatology argues that the goal of translating TCM Zang fu theory should be not lexical substitution but cognitive transplantation – allowing the target culture to internalize a foreign metaphorical system so that it thrives in a new academic habitat. But what lies ahead? How do we translate the uniquely Chinese mode of “analogical reasoning based on imagery” that pervades each layer of TCM philosophy, without flattening out its richness nor overloading our readers?

Translators face the dilemma of choosing one of two polar approaches (foreignization preserving the original imagery at the expense of accessibility versus domestication prioritizing readability at risk

of losing cultural distinctiveness). However, there has been a growing trend among scholars toward a middle ground strategy: literal translation augmented with systematic annotations. Consider the ubiquitous phrase "上火"; instead of using a free paraphrase, most academic translations use the expression "excessive internal heat", keeping the spatial thermal metaphor but adding explanatory notes that unpack its clinical and philosophical implications.

Such an approach is anything but random — it reflects the fundamental tenet of eco-translatology, namely, that the linguistic dimension serves as a compensatory mechanism for the cultural dimension. Annotations, glosses, and parenthetical clarifications function like scaffolds, helping bridge the gap between an alien image and the target reader's conceptual horizon. Thus, the translator transcends word transfer by creating a coherent cognitive framework—a framework that retains the metaphorical logic of TCM yet gradually makes it familiar to the host academic community.

3.3 Adaptive Selection in the Communicative Dimension

3.3.1 Target-Reader-Oriented Translation Variants

The communicative dimension of eco-translatology rests upon a seemingly straightforward but highly significant principle—that optimal communication requires rendering the same TCM concept with various linguistic options, entirely dependent on who reads what. The translator's main challenge lies precisely in adjusting the translation according to the target audience's level of previous knowledge and cognitive ability—an act of adaptive selectivity which ultimately dictates the success of cross-cultural exchange.

For example, if the target audience are those trained in Western biomedicine, then the translator's first concern should be to create a quick, friction-free path for professional dialogues. Often, borrowing or analogizing familiar Western medical terms comes into play (at the expense of cultural compression). Therefore, we might streamline "脏腑" to "viscera", and render "中风" as just "stroke"—we sacrifice philosophical nuances for accurate technical correspondence, enabling our biomedical professionals to quickly place the concept in their established framework.

On the other hand, if the target audience consists of TCM students or practitioners—who have been immersed in the epistemological foundations of the discipline—the translator has to assume a completely opposite approach. Here, conceptual systematicity and terminological independence come first. We emphasize consistency—we use standard terms like "Zang-fu organs" and "qi" strictly—and maintain their radical departure from Western medical constructs. Our aim here is not to ensure easy comprehension, but gradually build up a coherent and authentic TCM knowledge system resistant to assimilation and preserving its own logic.

3.3.2 The Decisive Influence of Translation Purpose on Strategy

The apex of eco-translatological decision-making resides at the level of translation purpose – a principle that works from the top down, governing all tactics on the linguistic and cultural levels. This purpose is far from an inconsequential detail: it represents the ultimate "ecological niche", where all adaptive decisions take place. What looks like inconsistencies in translation practice turns into strategic coherence upon viewing it under the lens of purpose-driven variation.

Let's consider three different scenarios. When translating for academic research and classical exegesis, the paramount issue is contextual integrity. Strategy then leans heavily towards foreignization, literal renderings backed up by extensive annotations – a conscious trade-off between immediate readability versus the faithful transplantation of the whole cultural and philosophical milieu.

When translating for clinical standardization and international terminological harmonization, priorities pivot drastically. Systematization and cross-referential consistency become key goals, resulting in fixed structural formulae (like "pinyin + categorical qualifier") so that each term has a stable, unambiguous role in a globally interoperable framework.

4. CONCLUSION

Translating the TCM Zang fu terminology into English goes beyond a simple word-for-word task – it's a multi layered intercultural negotiation involving linguistic adaptation, cultural mediation, and philosophical interpretation. Current practices are plagued with persistent problems including inconsistent terminologies according to different

institutional standards, and underlying epistemological conflicts between Eastern analogical thinking and Western biomedical empiricism.

Linguistically, adopting transliteration combined with syntactic restructuring proves instrumental in carving out a distinctive conceptual space for TCM within English academic discourse. Using forms such as "Zang fu", and adapting sentence structure to conform to English grammar norms allows translators to achieve terminological independence and internal coherence, avoiding subsuming TCM concepts under misleading Western analogues;

Culturally, one major challenge involves rendering the imagery driven analogical reasoning pervading throughout TCM philosophy — what is known as "取象比类". Navigating a delicate tradeoff here between cultural authenticity and reader comprehension ranges from highly foreignized literal translations accompanied by dense annotations, to more domestically focused paraphrases sacrificing nuance for clarity. There is no absoluteness here either, but adaptability based on the particular cultural ecology the translation seeks to inhabit;

Communicatively, the critical determinant will be the target audience and the purpose at hand. For clinical standardization, fixed, interoperable terms such as "Zang fu organs" ensures unambiguous cross referencing; for scholarly exegesis, prioritizing textual fidelity and philosophical depth takes precedence over other considerations; for public outreach, vivid simplifications and metaphorical bridges become the tools of choice. A legitimate variant exists in each case, and the skill of the translator is in tuning the version to fit the recipient's cognitive habitat.

In essence, eco translatology serves as a reminder that translating TCM is not a static code-switching activity but a living process of adaptation, selection, and survival where the terminology constantly negotiates its position in a foreign intellectual ecosystem. We hope future research and practice embraces a holistic ecological perspective, working toward a balanced terminology framework that maintains the ontological integrity of TCM whilst improving its communicative efficacy across various global contexts. Only then can we ensure that Zang fu concepts do not merely survive in translation, but thrive, take root in new soil without losing their original vitality.

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