

# English Retranslations of *The Classic on Tea* From the Perspective of Cultural Awareness\*

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The paper analyzes the English retranslation of *The Classic on Tea* from the perspective of cultural awareness and finds some misinterpretations and omissions of Chinese culture appeared in the translations of foreign scholars. Domestic translators have a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and their retranslations embody the increasing cultural awareness of the source language culture, mainly in seeking conceptual equivalence rather than lexical equivalence, choosing the most suitable translation according to the textual and cultural context, and focusing on cultural facsimile and readers' awareness. This study will help better spread the Chinese tea culture and help Chinese culture go global.

*Keywords:* English retranslation of *The Classic on Tea*, the perspective of cultural awareness, Chinese tea culture

## Introduction

*The Classic on Tea* (Tang Dynasty, Lu Yu) is the most ancient and comprehensive classic on tea in the world, hailed as an encyclopedia of tea. When President Xi Jinping visited the tea plantation in Wuyi Mountain in 2021, an intangible cultural heritage project, he quoted a famous saying, "Tea is a fine tree of the South" and instructed the villagers to promote the tea culture, the tea industry, and tea technology. However, there is few research on retranslations of *The Classic on Tea* from a cultural awareness perspective. This paper will systematically analyze the English retranslations of *The Classic on Tea* and explore the translation strategies adopted by the latest retranslation by Qiu Guixi (2023), hoping to better disseminate Chinese tea culture and its philosophical essence.

## Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness means to coexist peacefully with other cultures and complement their strengths and weaknesses on the basis of recognizing their own culture (Fei, 1997).

In the process of translating Chinese classics into English, translators should uphold the position of cultural self-awareness, and promote the dissemination and acceptance of Chinese culture in the Western world with reasonable translation strategies and evaluation mechanisms. Specifically, cultural awareness in translation

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should include self-awareness of the culture of source language, self-awareness of the culture of the target language, and self-awareness in cross-cultural communication and dissemination (Luo, 2019). Cultural fidelity should be a fundamental principle of translation (Sun, 1999).

### **English Retranslation of *The Classic on Tea* From the Perspective of Cultural Awareness**

Retranslation refers to translate again after an existing translation (Che & Huang, 2024). Even if the existing translations are in good quality, retranslation is necessary because the translator can take advantage of the former translations and add their own new ideas, which will result in a completely definitive version (Lu, 2005).

*The Classic on Tea* was introduced to Britain in the mid-19th century by Samuel Ball, then had numerous translations of different languages in the 20th century. In 1935, William Harris Ukers, the founding editor-in-chief of the *Tea and Coffee Trade*, translated ten chapters of *The Classic on Tea* and wrote in the first volume of *All About Tea*. American scholar F. R. Carpenter's (1974) *The Classic on Tea* was the first complete English translation abroad. In 1982, America's Tea Sage James Norwood Pratt translated several chapters from *The Classic on Tea* and wrote in his book *The Tea Lover's Treasury*. In 1999, James Norwood Pratt further translated more chapters of *The Classic on Tea*. In September 2015, the International Tea House, a non-profit organization completed a full translation of *The Classic on Tea*. For Western translators, the target language is their native tongue, their works are characterized by rich vocabulary, smooth expression that gradually spark the reader's interest in Chinese tea culture. However, in the case of insufficient understanding of Chinese culture, western scholars sometimes misinterpret or misunderstand some aspects of Chinese culture (Jiang, Yang, Zhang, & Feng, 2021), failing to translate the historical and cultural connotations.

Jiang Xin and Jiang Yi (2009) completed the modern Chinese and English translations of *The Classic of Tea*. It is the first complete English translation of *The Classic of Tea* by Chinese translators. Representing *The Classic of Tea* to readers worldwide from the perspective of Chinese can ensure a more precise interpretation of its cultural essence, thereby promoting the broader dissemination and recognition of Chinese civilization's contributions to the world (Wang & Liu, 2018). However, the translators often omitted necessary explanations for essential information that Western readers may find difficult to understand. They also added too much information unrelated to the main theme of the original text, which is of little value to Western readers, causing a burden in comprehension (Jin & Long, 2014). This highlights Chinese translators' strong awareness of the source culture but less awareness of the target language.

Qiu Guixi's English translation of *The Classic on Tea* was published in 2023. Qiu Guixi is from Jiangxi, a region renowned for its tea production, so he has been deeply influenced by the local tea culture. He has a background in literature, extensive business experience, and expertise in translating tea poetry, which gives him a clear understanding of translating *The Classic on Tea* from the perspective of readers. The vernacular text for Qiu Guixi's translation was provided by researcher Shen Dongmei from the Institute of History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The English proofreading was done by Professor Ben Abraham Kahn from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Qiu Guixi's translation was completed through the collaborative efforts of multiple experts with native knowledge of both the source and target languages, as well as a reviewer with native knowledge of the target language. This work was built upon existing translations and demonstrated a higher level of cultural awareness in terms of the source language, target language, and intercultural communication.

From the perspective of cultural awareness, this paper compares the early translations of *The Classic on Tea* (mainly the Carpenter translation and the Jiang Xin and Jiang Yi translation, which will be referred to as the Jiang translation due to the limited number of words) with the latest Qiu Guixi's translation (hereinafter referred to as the Qiu translation).

### Qiu Guixi's Cultural Awareness in the Retranslation of *The Classic on Tea*

#### Seeking Conceptual Equivalence Rather Than Lexical Equivalence

Tea terms refer to the professional terms, with the connotation of tea science under the framework of tea culture (Wang & Cai, 2016). Qiu's translation avoided the mistake of conceptual equivalence, as shown in example 1.

Example 1:

Original text: “华之薄者曰沫，厚者曰饽，细轻者曰花”。

Carpenter: “The thick cream is called bo, and the thin spume of the marrow is called mo. Hua meaning ‘flower’ refers to even finer froth”.

Qiu: “The foam is the ‘infusion bubble’ of the tea infusion, the thin one is called ‘foam’ (沫), the thick one is called ‘froth’ (饽) and the light one is called ‘bubble’ (花)”.

The original description refers to three shapes that appear on the tea surface when pouring tea into a bowl: thin ones are called “沫”, thick ones are called “饽”, and fine, light ones are called “花”. These three are tea terms. In Carpenter's translation, “cream” means the part of milk containing the butterfat, which does not match the concept of a thick foam on the surface of the tea. “spume” refers to the foam of waves, which is inconsistent with the idea of a light, thin foam on the surface of the tea. The translator seems to have chosen appropriate words but actually lacks cultural awareness of the source language, leading to mistranslation. Qiu Guixi, based on his tea-drinking experience, used “foam” to describe the thin one, which is similar to the large and light foam in beer and “froth” to describe the thick one, which is similar to the small and dense foam in coffee. When depicting the surface of the tea forms a “flower” shape, he chose “bubble” from “bubble tea”, which describes the top layer with dense bubbles. It allows readers of the target language to form visual images close to those of the source language based on their own cultural schema, thus faithfully conveying the culture of the source language. Qiu's translation also retains Chinese characters “沫, 饽, 花” to indicate that these are professional concepts in Chinese tea culture.

#### Choosing the Most Suitable Translation According to the Textual and Cultural Context

This translation version takes full account of the text and cultural context when translating words with multiple translations, as shown in example 2.

Example 2:

Original text: “其合以竹节为之”。

Jiang's translation: “A section of bamboo with a knot makes a natural canister to hold the sieved tea”.

Qiu's translation: “The tea box is made of a section of bamboo with a joint”.

Jiang translated “节” as “knot”, which commonly means “a fastening made by tying a piece of string, rope, or something similar”. Additionally, “knot” can also have a derogatory meaning in the context of “lumps and bumps”. “节” refers to the protruding parts where bamboo segments connect. Providing that “tea is most suitable for those who practice frugality and virtue”, Qiu translated it into “joint”. “Joint” specifically refers

to the junctions between plant segments, and its etymology is “join”, which carries a positive connotation of unity and connection.

### Focusing on Cultural Facsimile and From the Perspective of Readers’ Awareness

The translation of cultural-loaded words is an important part of the English translation of *The Classic on Tea*, and affects the foreign communication of tea culture. In the retranslation, Qiu Guixi paid more attention to the translation of cultural-loaded words than the early translation, as shown in example 3.

Example 3:

Original text: “籩，一曰籃，一曰籠，一曰筥，以竹織之，受五升，或一斗、二斗、三斗者”。

Carpenter: “There are several kinds of baskets, there being one called ying and another called lan. There are also the lung and the chu. All of them are made of bamboo, Pickers carry those with a capacity of one to four gallons, or of five, ten, twenty or even thirty pints”.

Jiang: “Ying, also called lan, long or ju, is a basket-like container woven with thin bamboo strips. The capacity of a ying varies from five liters to one, two or three decaliters”.

Qiu: “Ying (籩, bamboo chest), also called lan (籃, basket), or long (籠, trunk), or ju (筥, round bamboo basket), is woven from bamboo with the volume of five sheng (one sheng in Tang Dynasty equals 0.6 liter today), or with the volume of one dou (unit of dry measure for grain, equals 10 liters), or two dou, or three dou”.

There are differences in measurement tools and standards between the East and West. Translators must be acutely aware of these differences. Otherwise, they may resort to literal translation, leading readers to form incorrect perceptions. In the original text, units of measurement in Tang Dynasty are “斗” and “升”. 1 市斗 (dou) = 10 市升 (sheng) = 6 升 (L). compared with modern units, “籩” would be 3 L, 6 L, 12 L, or 18 L. Carpenter’s translation uses “gallon” and “pint”. Gallon is a liquid measure, approximately 4.546 L. One to four gallon is about 4.5 L to 18 L, which differs significantly from the original 3 L. Pint is also a liquid measure, roughly equivalent to 0.568 L. 5 pints is approximately 2.8 L (0.5 shi dou), 10 pints is about 5.7 L (1 shi dou), 20 pints is about 11.4 L (1.9 shi dou), and 30 pints is about 17 L (2.8 shi dou). It over-translated and mistranslated compared to the original “一斗，二斗，三斗”. Jiang translated “升” into “liter”, with five liters equaling 5 L, which does not correspond to 5 市升 (about 3 L). It also translated “斗” to “decaliter” (10 L), with 1 decaliter equaling 1.7 市斗, and 2 decaliters equaling 3.3 市斗, 3 decaliters equaling to 5 市斗. It does not align with the original text’s “一斗，二斗，三斗”. The above two translations fail to adequately consider the historical and cultural connotations of units of measurement. Qiu adopted transliteration combined with interpretation and added a conversion table between Tang Dynasty’s units of measurement and modern international standard units in the appendix. This approach not only preserved cultural facsimile but also provided information to help target language’s readers to understand, demonstrating a cultural awareness of both the source culture and cross-cultural communication.

Example 4:

Original text: “百节不舒”。

Carpenter: “afflicted in the hundred joints”.

Qiu: “joints stiffness”.

Numbers have both literal and figurative functions. In the original text, “hundred” is a commonly used figurative number in classical Chinese, often indicating a large quantity or the severe degree. Qiu’s translation adopted the strategy of free translation, translating it as “joints”. When translating from Chinese to English, one

should determine whether the number in the original text represents a specific quantity or conveys emotions and atmospheres, then choose the appropriate translation strategies.

Example 5:

Original text: “体均五行去百疾”。

Jiang: “Balancing five elements to cure all diseases”.

Carpenter: “Harmonize the five elements in the body and you will banish the hundred illnesses”.

Qiu: “Balancing Five Elements to cure all diseases (Five Elements of metal, wood, water, fire and earth, ancient Chinese thinkers tried to use these five substances to explain the origin of all things in the world. Traditional Chinese medicinal practitioners use the Five Elements to explain the physiological and pathological phenomena. Superstitious people use the principles of the Five Elements producing and overcoming each other to tell the fate of a person)”.

Both the Jiang and Carpenter translated “五行” into “five elements”. Chinese readers understand the basic content and characteristics of the “五行”, but foreign readers may lack corresponding cultural concepts. The Four-element Theory of Universe in Western culture originates from the ancient Greek theory of the four elements of the world, such as water, fire, air, and earth. This differs from the Five Elements and its derived cultural connotations in Chinese culture, such as the Five Elements Destiny. In addition to literal translation, Qiu added interpretations and capitalized the first letter of Five Elements to highlight its status as a specialized term in Chinese culture, helping Western readers in understanding the cultural essence of China.

### Conclusion

*The Classic on Tea*, as an important text on tea and agriculture, will provide intellectual support for the cultivation, processing, and utilization of tea worldwide through its English translation. It will also offer a channel for foreign readers to understand the profound Chinese culture. In the context of Chinese culture going global, the publication of this translation will help spread Chinese tea culture to the world and foster confidence in the tea culture of a great nation.

Qiu’s translation of *The Classic on Tea* demonstrated a stronger cultural awareness. When translating tea terms, he sought conceptual equivalence rather than lexical equivalence. When a word has multiple translation, he chose the most suitable translation according to the textual and cultural context. When translating culturally loaded words, he considered the differences in imagery between Chinese and Western, vividly presenting Chinese cultural characteristics to Western readers. However, this retranslation also needs to be proved. For example, existing translations have all translated the term “茶饼” as “tea cake”, but according to Sogou Encyclopedia, tea cake refers to a snack enjoyed with tea in the West, which does not align with the Chinese concept of “茶饼”. “茶饼” is a type of compressed tea brick. This once again highlights the necessity of retranslation. Translators need to continuously enhance their cultural awareness, being acutely aware of cultural differences when translating from Chinese to English, thus accurately understanding and conveying the essence of Chinese culture.

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