

English Translation of Chinese Traditional Cultural Vocabulary Under the Context of Cultural Dissemination

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The influence of Chinese culture in English-speaking countries is still not as significant as that of Japan and other East Asian countries. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the English translation of vocabulary with Chinese elements. Based on the main purpose of cultural dissemination, this article briefly classifies vocabulary with Chinese elements, explores translation strategies for Chinese traditional cultural vocabulary, and summarizes the actual cultural propaganda effects. The article also provides insights and suggestions for subsequent strategy applications.

Keywords: cultural dissemination, traditional cultural vocabulary, translation strategies

Research Background

A search for keywords “文化传播”, “传统文化词汇”, and “英译” in the CNKI database yielded only six articles, including three journal articles, two master’s theses, and one doctoral dissertation. The main research perspectives include cultural translation, communication studies, sociology, multidimensional perspectives, and Chinese traditional cultural transmission. However, there is only one article from the perspective of Chinese traditional cultural transmission, which focuses on the differences between eastern and western cultures. Therefore, this article aims to explore the characteristics and strategies of English translation of Chinese traditional cultural vocabulary based on cultural dissemination theory, hoping to contribute to the promotion of national culture through translation.

Theoretical Basis

People are the sum of communication relationships. The subject-object theoretical model is not applicable to cultural dissemination because cultural exchange does not involve a single subject or communication centered on oneself. The process of cultural dissemination is not a one-way radiation and diffusion from the producing subject to the receiving object, but rather a process of mutual understanding, exchange, and absorption formed by multiple subjects. Culture is equal, diverse, and free in its interactions. Therefore, if cultural dissemination only focuses on self-expression and the unilateral conquest of other cultures, it will sever the relationship between science and human existence. Culture interacts and creates a way of interaction in a certain way (Shan, 2011). Only through “mutual understanding” can cross-cultural communication relations be constructed.

Strategy Analysis

Transliteration is one of the key strategies for translating Chinese traditional elements into English, but it is also a challenge for translation strategies. The spelling and pronunciation of Chinese pinyin and English words

are vastly different, and their homogeneity is extremely low. Therefore, this strategy cannot create opportunities for “mutual communication” between cultures. However, over time, many transliterated Chinese words have been retained and widely accepted by English speakers. For example, “气” is translated as “qi”, “功夫” is translated as “kongfu”, and “炒面” is translated as “chow mein”.

Combining transliteration with other translation methods is a more effective way of promoting traditional Chinese culture. This translation method is common in many tourist attractions, traditional Chinese architecture, personal names, and place names. For instance, Emperor Taizong of Tang is a translation for 唐太宗, while the common translations for 秦始皇 include “First Emperor of Qin” and “Qin Shi Huang”. One is a semi-transliteration, and the other is a full English translation. When faced with “Qin Shi Huang”, western readers are confused about how to pronounce these three strange words and cannot understand the meaning behind the object and title, rendering the translation useless for cultural exchange, but more like the result of a one-sided cultural conquest that only values self-expression. Looking back at the first translation, “First Emperor of Qin”, it provides an explanation of Qin Shi Huang’s identity and status, and although it does lose the sound and beauty of the Chinese language when compared to the original text, it clearly achieves equal and free communication between cultural subjects.

Traditional Chinese architecture often includes specialized vocabulary, and the translation of these terms can often affect the accuracy and cultural load of the translated text. For example, “牡丹亭” is translated as “Peony Pavilion” and “琉璃亭” is translated as “Liuli Pavilion”. “亭” refers to a circular open-sided building used for resting, sheltering from rain and sun, and beautifying landscapes. The explanation in the “Shuowen Jiezi” is “where people can settle down. The pavilion has a tower, which looks down from a high place, and has a sound”. In English, the corresponding term is “gazebo”, which is defined by *Webster’s Dictionary* as “a freestanding roofed structure usually open on the sides”. Western countries also have their own “亭” style buildings, which originated in the 18th century and are different from traditional Chinese “亭”. However, if it is directly transliterated as “ting” or “T”, it will obviously cause a significant cultural disconnect. So, why translate it as “Pavilion”? If you search for “Pavilion” and “Gazebo” on Google, the search results for “Pavilion” are more than 10 times that of Gazebo, indicating that “Pavilion” is a more common and frequently used term. Gazebo is gradually being used to refer to different types of buildings, such as pavilions and terraces, which are different from traditional Chinese pavilions. Translating it as “Gazebo” would only cause confusion for English speakers. Another word that refers to pavilions and towers is “Kiosk”, which can be used to refer to small open-sided buildings that provide services such as newspapers or film development. Therefore, different functions and understandings require different vocabulary choices in the translation. *The Analects* is not only a classic of Confucianism, but also a symbol of traditional Chinese culture. Since the 17th century, there have been more than 30 translations of *The Analects*, and the core concept of “仁” (ren) as the central idea of Confucianism and *The Analects* has been translated into 11 different English terms, which fully shows the various understandings of Confucianism by Chinese and western translators (B. Y. Liu, Hu, & X. Q. Liu, 2011).

“Liuli” is often used as the translation of “琉璃”, which is one of the five famous Chinese ceramics. The production of colored glaze can be traced back to the Warring States period, and it has been widely used in ancient and modern Chinese architecture as a decorative material. Therefore, colored glaze gradually became a representative of traditional Chinese culture and was endowed with a strong mythological color. While “Liuli” is a foreign word, it has become an important part of Chinese culture. Although “colored glaze” is also a possible translation, it does not carry the same cultural connotations as “Liuli”. Non-Chinese readers may not immediately

recognize that “colored glaze” refers to “琉璃”, as the former term only refers to colored glaze on the surface. Therefore, the translation “Liuli” is more appropriate in the context of cross-cultural communication.

So, how should transliteration be used and how can we avoid its abuse? The main reason why translators still hesitate to use transliteration is that they lack a standard for its use. Culture is an interactive existence, and when we label culture with a certain preconceived essence, we not only fall into a one-sided understanding but also adopt a non-cultural attitude and approach, which ultimately leads to a failure to understand culture (Shan, 2011). If transliteration is overused, the translation will be difficult to understand, and many foreign readers will be left staring at a bunch of pinyin, and cultural exchange and dissemination will not be achieved. Terms such as “Qi”, “Yin”, and “Yang” in traditional Chinese medicine clearly stem from the differences between Chinese and English cultures. If these words were translated as “Air”, “Negative”, and “Positive”, they would not fully cover the original Chinese connotations and even contain numerous loopholes. Similarly, terms such as “medicinal cuisine”, “five elements”, “opera”, and “musical instruments”, which are absent in western culture, are the best applications for transliteration. The erhu is known as the “Erhu”, the pipa is the “Pipa” or “Chinese Pipa”, and the five notes in Chinese music are called “Gong”, “Shang”, “Jue”, “Zhi”, and “Yu”. However, words such as “道”, which already have an agreed-upon translation as “Tao”, should be preserved and not arbitrarily translated. For example, the 12 zodiac animals in Chinese culture are rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. The dragon, which symbolizes the identity of the Chinese people and represents auspiciousness, progress, and the continuation of life, is associated with evil omens and bad luck in the west. Therefore, if it is directly translated as “dragon”, it will convey a wrong understanding of Chinese culture, and westerners may even think that Chinese people call themselves the descendants of dragons in order to dominate the world. Therefore, in my personal opinion, an appropriate translation would be “Chinese Dragon”, which not only preserves the image of the dragon in English but also adds a new meaning to the concept of the dragon for westerners by indicating that the Chinese dragon is a unique symbol of Chinese culture. This serves the purpose of filling the gap in cultural expressions and enhances cultural exchange and understanding. Similarly, the roles in Chinese opera, such as Sheng (the chief male), Dan (the female), Jing (the painted face), Mo (the supporting role), and Chou (the clown), can also be translated in this way. The ancient art of burning paper and medicinal pills by Taoist priests, known as the “黄白之术”, can be translated as “the art of the ‘yellow and white’” or “the transmutation of baser metals into gold and silver”. “Yellow and white” preserves the imagery of the original term and, in combination with free translation, serves the purpose of cultural exchange (Sheng, 1998). Other examples:

麒麟, Kirin, a mythical hooved chimerical creature known in Chinese culture.

貔貅, Pixiu, a Chinese mythical hybrid creature considered to be a very powerful protector to practitioners of Feng Shui.

华表, Huabiao, a type of ceremonial columns used in traditional Chinese architecture.

武术, Wushu, a martial art.

太极, Tai chi, an internal Chinese martial art practiced for both its defense training and its health benefits.

Of course, there are also many cases where the use of translated words, rather than transliterated ones, is preferred, even though the function of cultural exchange has been reduced. However, the purpose of cultural transmission can still be achieved through such translation. For example, “谋事在人, 成事在天” (“Man proposes, God disposes”), where “God” refers to the god of fate, can be translated as “God” in English. “月老” (“the Old

Man of the Moon”) can be translated as “the God of Marriage”, and “太岁” (“the God of the Year”) can be translated as “the God of the Year”. The titles “传” and “记” in “鸳鸯传” (“A Dream of Red Mansions”) and “枕中记” (“The Pillow Book”) can be translated as “story”.

Conclusion

Currently, the situation of transliteration in Chinese culture is quite messy. However, compared to that, Japanese culture has been able to directly turn the common pronunciation of Katakana into English official dictionary searchable words, such as Sakura (cherry blossom) and Manga (comic). Therefore, the translation of traditional Chinese cultural elements in cultural dissemination becomes increasingly important. The profoundness and inheritance of traditional Chinese culture determine that there will inevitably be obstacles to overcome in the dissemination process. However, I believe that if we still look down on the translation of traditional Chinese elements from the perspective of “mutual understanding” in cultural dissemination theory, the current translation standards are gradually improving, and the use of strategies is becoming more flexible and diverse with the effectiveness of talent training and the continuous emergence of research results. Western culture and Chinese culture are constantly gaining a deeper mutual understanding and integration, and it is believed that a more diverse and rich cultural communication and exchange will be developed in the future.

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