On the Translation Strategies of Characters’ Nicknames—Taking *The Iconography of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio* as an Example*

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Up to now, *The Iconography of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio* (shortened as *Iconography*) is the first large-scale book to systematically study and interpret the notes and pictures of *The Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio* (shortened as *Ten Bamboo*). The *Iconography* explains the sources and interpretations of 123 paintings in 15 groups. The content covers the celebrities and historical allusions of Tessa in the past dynasties, in which there are many nicknames that are full of Chinese characteristics. This paper takes the English translation of characters’ nicknames in *Iconography* as the research object. Through the research, it is found that the translation of these characters’ nicknames mainly adopts the methods of transliteration, explanation, literal translation with annotations and free translation. Through the analysis of specific cases, this paper tries to make the translation meet the reading expectation of the target readers to the maximum extent, and provide reference for the English translation of related classical works.

*Keywords: The Iconography of the Decorated Writing-Paper of the Ten Bamboo Studio, translation method, nickname*

**Introduction**

Chinese classics are the very important carriers of Chinese traditional culture. The study of the translation of Chinese classics is a good way to provide western readers access to understand and enjoy Chinese literary works, cultural customs, philosophical ideologies and so on, so as to promote cross-cultural communication.

Although the English translation of Chinese classics has become one of the focuses of translation studies, there are rare studies on the translation of the character nicknames which are rich in cultural connotation. In fact, during the course of translating Chinese classics into English, character nicknames are undoubtedly one of

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the most important difficulties that needed to be professionally handled. Although there were some related studies, the range that the studies have covered is still quite limited.

During the process of the translation of Iconography, the author of this paper began to realize the importance of the translation of Chinese nicknames. The Iconography is the outcome of the reproduction project of the Ten Bamboo, which was organized by the Painting Academy of the Ten Bamboo Studio, a studio in Nanjing that deals with auction of painting and calligraphy, aiming at spreading the culture of the writing-papers of the Ten Bamboo Studio. In the Iconography, there are altogether 130 or so writing-papers and each writing-paper has an introduction that describes the story behind, which was translated to English. In the stories, there are 31 nicknames. Therefore, the translation strategies of these nicknames are the focus of this paper.

Translation Strategies for the Iconography

There are 31 character nicknames that appeared in the Iconography. In this paper. According to different translation strategies employed in the translation process, the author classifies them into four categories: literal translation plus annotation, liberal translation, explanation, and transliteration. The proportion of every translation strategy is presented in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. The Proportion of different translation strategies.](image)

Transliteration

Transliteration refers to the translation process or result of using one literary symbol (such as Latin alphabet) to express the character symbol (such as Chinese character) of another character system. When there is a great difference between the source language and the target language and there is a semantic gap, it is impossible to translate from the form or semantics directly. At this time, transliteration is the main means of translation. Transliteration is mainly used for the translation of names of people, places and newly produced terms. (Fang, 2011, p. 105)
In *Iconography*, there are some nicknames that are unique in Chinese classics. It is nearly impossible to find some equivalents in English, therefore, the translation method of transliteration will be a good choice. Transliterated words are concise, crisp and catchy, some may accurately reflect the cultural characteristics of the target language. With the function of bringing exciting exoticism, arousing the curiosity of readers of the target language, and aiding in the facilitation of cultural exchanges, transliterated words fill the language gap between Chinese and English which are very different and sometimes can enrich the vocabulary of the target language.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character nicknames</th>
<th>Translations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>桑苎翁</td>
<td>Sang Zhu Weng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>五柳先生</td>
<td>Sir Wuliu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>青莲居士</td>
<td>Ch’ing-lien Chu-Shih</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>陶朱公</td>
<td>Tao Zhu Gong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 1, for example, “桑苎翁” was translated into “Sang Zhu Weng”. However, “翁” refers to an old man in ancient Chinese, the word “Weng” fails to reflect its original meaning. Taking “陶朱公” (Tao Zhu Gong) for another example, “公” represents a kind of honorific title for the old in this context. It is also hard to find an equivalent word for “Gong” in English. According to the context, the method of transliteration is used here. However, these translated words are extremely faithful to the original text and successfully preserve the music aesthetics of the ancient nicknames. This kind of translation method pays more attention to the accuracy of language expression, follows the culture of the source language, and does not change the concepts full of national culture in the original text, and strives to preserve the linguistic characteristics and unique expression of the original language. So if transliteration is used properly, we can improve the translatability of the source text, as well as the readers’ acceptance. At the same time, we can use explanation to help the target readers to understand such translation better.

Explanational Translation

Explanational translation was first proposed by Duan Liancheng in 1990. Explanational translation is to integrate the content to be explained into the translated text, so that the translated text can be completed in one go and the meaning and style of the original text can be skillfully conveyed. “Explanational translation is not only suitable for external publicity translation, but also generally used in situations where bilingual cultures or languages are very different and the target language is difficult to express directly” (Fang, 2011, p. 108).

In *Iconography*, there are some nicknames that need to be explained according to the real context, so the target readers can understand the meanings easily, which is quite helpful for cultural communication.

We take “五柳先生” in Table 1 for example. In *Iconography*, there is a photo depicting Tao Qian, the famous poet in the East Jin Dynasty, who can be seen in Figure 2.
ON THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF CHARACTERS’ NICKNAMES

Figure 2. Tao Qian.

ST: 在田居生活中，陶渊明安贫乐道，自称“五柳先生”，一面读书为文，一面躬耕陇亩，从飞鸟、白云、稼禾中体会着生命的真谛。

TT: Though the condition in village was not good, Tao still enjoyed his life a lot and called himself “Sir Wuliu”, for there were five willows near his home. Usually he read books, did some farming and thought about the meaning of life from the birds, clouds as well as seedlings of cereal crops.

In the translation, the added the words “for there are five willows near his home” explained why Tao Qian is called “Sir Wuliu”. In fact, Tao Qian called himself “Wuliu” just for the five willows near his home. Therefore, with this explanation, the meaning is much clearer for foreign readers.

Literal Translation Plus Annotation

Literal translation plus annotation is often used in the translation of unique cultural words. Literal translation is used to reproduce the national characteristics of the culture-specific items of the source language, and annotation is used to eliminate the gap in cultural understanding. (Fang, 2011, p. 104).

We can take the translation about Lin Bu (who is shown in Figure 3) as an example.

Figure 3. Lin Bu.
ON THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF CHARACTERS’ NICKNAMES

ST: 林逋终生不仕不娶, 也无子，唯独喜爱植梅养鹤，自谓“以梅为妻，以鹤为子”，人称“梅妻鹤子”。(隐逸9，林逋)

TT: Lin never worked as a government official and he had neither wife nor son, but he described himself as “regarding plum trees as his wife and cranes as his sons” for he planted hundreds of plum trees and raised many cranes and they were his favorites. Moreover, he pursued spiritual achievements and high-standard of morality. In the translation, the translator explained the meaning of “梅妻鹤子” clearly for Lin Bu, so the readers can understand its deep cultural connotation. Otherwise, it is a real puzzle for foreign reader.

Generally speaking, the nicknames are firstly translated by means of transliteration, which better preserves the original rhythm and style of the source language. Then the added annotation can accurately reflect the cultural meaning conveyed by the nicknames in depth. Taking “李邺侯 Li Ye Hou (the Lord of Ye county)” for another example: “侯” refers to a kind of ancient official title, the translation “Hou” definitely fails to reflect this connotation. The added paraphrase “the Lord” effectively settles the doubts for the foreign readers.

Liberal Translation

Liberal translation refers to the translation method that conveys meaning without being subjected to the restriction of the form of the source language. Feng Qinghua once said that “The so-called free translation is a translation method that only preserves the original content but does not preserve the original form” (Feng, 1997, p. 40). In a word, “to convey meaning” is the first task and fundamental purpose of free translation.

For example, in Iconography, there is a story about “南州高士”, translated as “Nanzhou Celebrity”, which is a culture-specific item with strong characteristics of ancient Chinese culture and has no equivalent expression in English. In the context, “南州” refers to a place, “高士” is the condensed expression of the character’s personality, that is, “恭俭礼让, 是一个很有德行的人”. Therefore, the word “celebrity” not only demonstrates the character’s high ethical standards but also indirectly reflects his lofty position in history. Another case in point, “谪仙人” is translated into “the Banished Transcendent”. In this nickname, “仙人” represents Li Bai’s eminence in literary history rather than a supernatural being. In Chinese, the word “仙人” (immortal) not only subtly expresses his high position but also enriches his legendary experience.

Conclusion

The Iconography is very important for the spread of Chinese culture. However, at present, there are still few researches on it, especially on the translation of the stories in the book, as well as the research on the translation of character nicknames. The four translation strategies discussed in this paper, which are transliteration, literal translation, literal translation plus annotation and liberal translation, can’t be separated completely. They are obviously correlated sometimes. In addition, there are still some other methods for the translation of Iconography, which are not mentioned in this paper.

Chinese classics are the historical crystallization of Chinese civilization. These classics not only have social and historical significance but also have a significance of cultural construction. Chinese culture, with thousands of years of history, not only belongs to China, but also to the whole world. It is our social responsibility and historical mission to spread Chinese culture and let the world genuinely understand China so as to enhance the cultural exchange between different countries.
ON THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF CHARACTERS’ NICKNAMES

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