

# A Study on German Translation Strategies for Chinese Culture-Specific Items

ZHANG Haoyang

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

This paper focuses on the translation of Chinese cultural-specific items (CSIs) into German, and analyses the selection and practice of translation strategies. Through analysing a large number of concrete cases, five main translation methods are summarized: phonetic translation, free translation, cultural substitution, annotation and mixed strategy, and the application of each strategy and its advantages and disadvantages are discussed in detail with examples. The study shows that the translation of cultural-specific items needs to seek a balance between cultural transmission and reader acceptance, and flexibly apply the principles of domestication and foreignization. At the same time, this paper takes the German translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, classical Chinese literature, and modern Chinese cultural vocabularies as the objects of study, analyses the practical application effect of translation strategies, and then puts forward the establishment of dynamic cultural terminology database, the flexible application of mixed strategies, and other practical suggestions, hoping to provide theoretical support and practical reference for the relevant translation work.

*Keywords:* culture-specific items, German-Chinese translation, translation strategies, cultural transmission

## Introduction

### Research Background

In recent years, exchanges between China and Germany in cultural, economic, and educational fields have become increasingly close. Chinese culture-specific items (CSIs), such as “节气” (solar terms), “红包” (red envelope), and “阴阳” (yin and yang), are crucial carriers of Chinese culture. The quality of their translation directly impacts German-speaking readers’ understanding of Chinese culture. However, due to significant historical and cultural differences between China and Germany, many Chinese CSIs lack direct equivalents in German, posing considerable challenges for translation.

### Research Significance

This paper aims to systematically organize German translation strategies for Chinese CSIs. Through theoretical analysis and case studies, it seeks to provide references for translation practice. Furthermore, it proposes several specific practical suggestions to offer new perspectives and actionable guidance for translating Chinese CSIs into German, thereby promoting the effective dissemination of Chinese culture in the German-speaking world.

## Research Methodology

This paper employs a combined method of literature analysis and case studies. Utilizing Peter Newmark's theories of Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation, it conducts a systematic analysis of German translation strategies for Chinese CSIs. The selected cases are primarily drawn from the German translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, German translations of classical Chinese literary works, and modern German translations of Chinese cultural vocabulary.

## Theoretical Basis

### Definition and Classification of CSIs

In international translation studies, the Spanish translation scholar Xavi Franco Aixelá first explicitly defined the concept of CSIs in 1996. Aixelá, from the perspective of cultural translation, defined CSIs as concepts that exist in the source culture but are absent in the target culture (Feng, 2016). These concepts typically include the following categories:

- (a) Material culture: e.g., “旗袍” (qipao), “饺子” (jiaozi/dumplings).
- (b) Institutional culture: e.g., “科举” (imperial examination system), “衙门” (yamen).
- (c) Spiritual culture: e.g., “道” (Dao), “阴阳” (yin and yang).
- (d) Social customs: e.g., “红包” (red envelope), “拜年” (New Year greetings).

### Theoretical Framework for Translation Strategies

Peter Newmark's theories of Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation provide essential guidance for translating CSIs. Building on this foundation, this paper will primarily explore the following five translation strategies for CSIs:

- (a) Transliteration: Directly borrowing the source language pronunciation.
- (b) Paraphrase: Conveying the cultural connotations of the source CSI through explanatory language.
- (c) Cultural substitution: Replacing the source CSI with a similar concept from the target culture.
- (d) Annotation: Providing relevant cultural background through footnotes, bracketed supplements, etc.
- (e) Hybrid strategy: Combining multiple translation methods to achieve optimal translation effectiveness.

## Analysis of German Translation Strategies for Chinese CSIs

### Transliteration

Applicable scenario: Unique concepts with no corresponding German vocabulary, where the cultural specificity of the source language needs to be preserved.

Case analysis: “太极” (Taiji) → Taiji (direct transliteration): In the German translation of the *Daodejing*, translator Richard Wilhelm (1911) used transliteration to preserve the uniqueness of the philosophical concept “Taiji” (Yin, 2024).

“气功” (Qigong) → Qigong (transliteration + classifier): In German translations of modern medical literature, it is often supplemented with “chinesische Heilgymnastik” (Chinese healing gymnastics) as an explanation (Wu, 2011).

“麻将” (Majiang) → Mahjong: Borrowing the Chinese pronunciation directly has become a common German word (Deutsche Vereinigung für Chinastudien e. V., 2020).

“豆腐” (Doufu) → Tofu: Translated via transliteration, it is now an everyday German word (Deutsche Vereinigung für Chinastudien e. V., 2020).

Advantages: Preserve the cultural specificity of the source language and avoids loss of meaning.

Limitations: Require supplementary explanatory notes; otherwise, it may cause comprehension difficulties for target-language readers.

### Paraphrase

Applicable scenario: The cultural connotations of the source item can be conveyed through existing German vocabulary.

Case analysis: “红包” (Hongbao) → Geldgeschenk in rotem Umschlag (Literal explanation): Commonly used in German reports related to the Spring Festival (Deutsche Vereinigung für Chinastudien e. V., 2020).

“衙门” (Yamen) → Behörde der Kaiserzeit (supplementing historical context): In Franz Kuhn’s German translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1932), adding historical background information helped readers understand this ancient Chinese institution (Wang, 2016).

“春运” (Chunyun) → Reiseverkehr während des chinesischen Neujahrsfestes (functional explanation): Commonly used in German news to describe the transportation peak during the Chinese New Year period (Zou, 2015).

“拜年” (Bainian) → Neujahrsgrüße überbringen (literal explanation): Commonly used in German cultural reports (Zou, 2015).

Advantages: Improve readability and facilitates acceptance by target-language readers.

Risk: Partial loss of cultural imagery from the source language, potentially leading to an oversimplification of cultural connotations.

### Cultural Substitution

Applicable scenario: Conversion to a functionally equivalent cultural symbol.

Case analysis: “牛郎织女” (Cowherd and Weaver Girl) → Romeo und Julia der chinesischen Mythologie (literally: “Romeo and Juliet of Chinese mythology”) (borrowing western classic analogy): Commonly used in German children’s literature to enhance reader resonance (He, 2020).

“孔子” (Kongzi) → Konfuzius (Latinized transliteration): Borrowing the Latin form makes it easier for German readers to accept (Deutsche Vereinigung für Chinastudien e. V., 2020).

“孙悟空” (Sun Wukong) → Der Affenkönig (“The Monkey King”) (literal explanation + cultural analogy): Often borrows the “monkey” image from western mythology for analogy in German literature (Li & Fu, 2018).

Advantage: Enhance resonance with target-language readers and shortens the cultural distance.

Note: Avoid misinterpretation of cultural connotations; ensure functional equivalence.

### Annotation

Applicable scenario: Situations requiring in-depth cultural explanation.

Case analysis: “二十四节气” (24 Solar Terms) → 24 Sonnenkalenderperioden (traditionelle chinesische Zeitrechnung nach dem Lauf der Sonne—traditional Chinese calendar based on the sun’s movement): In academic literature, detailed explanations are often provided via footnotes or brackets (Quan, 2023).

“科举” (Imperial Examination) → Kaiserliche Beamtenprüfung (historisches chinesisches Prüfungssystem zur Auswahl von Beamten—historical Chinese examination system for selecting officials): Commonly used in historical documents with detailed annotations (Wang & Teng, 2014).

“中秋节” (Mid-Autumn Festival) → Mondfest (traditionelles chinesisches Fest zur Feier des Vollmonds im Herbst—traditional Chinese festival celebrating the full moon in autumn): Commonly used in cultural introductory texts with supplementary background information (Wang & Teng, 2014).

“清明节” (Qingming Festival) → Qingming-Fest (chinesischer Gedenktag für die Ahnen, an dem Gräber gepflegt werden—Chinese memorial day for ancestors involving tomb sweeping): Commonly used in tourism promotional materials with brief explanations (Di, 2023).

Form: Supplemented through footnotes, brackets, appendices, etc.

### Hybrid Strategy

Applicable scenario: Comprehensive handling of complex cultural concepts.

Case analysis: “功夫” (Kung Fu) → Kung Fu (chinesische Kampfkunst—Chinese martial art): Often uses the hybrid strategy of transliteration + classifier in films, TV, and mass media (Wang & Teng, 2014).

“双十一” (Double Eleven) → Singles’ Day (chinesischer Shopping-Feiertag—Chinese shopping holiday): Commonly used in business reports, combining transliteration and functional explanation (Wang, 2014).

“直播带货” (Live-Streaming Sales) → Live-Streaming-Einkauf (Einkauf während eines Live-Streams—Shopping during a live stream): Commonly used in technology and business texts, combining paraphrase and functional explanation.

“网红” (Internet Celebrity) → Internetberühmtheit (Person mit großer Online-Fangemeinde—Person with a large online fan base): Commonly used in social media-related reports, combining paraphrase and supplementary explanation.

Advantage: Balance cultural specificity with reader acceptability.

## Strategic Choices in Dynamic Equilibrium: Navigating Constraints in CSI Translation

The translation of Chinese CSIs into German is not a mechanical application of isolated strategies. Instead, it demands a sophisticated, context-driven approach where the translator must navigate a dynamic interplay of influential factors to achieve an optimal balance between fidelity to the source culture and intelligibility for the target audience. This section elaborates on the key contextual variables shaping this crucial decision-making process.

### The Pivotal Role of Text Type and Function

The *Skopos* (purpose) and functional nature of the target text exert primary influence on strategy selection. Different text types prioritize distinct communicative goals, demanding tailored translation approaches:

#### Literary texts (e.g., *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and classical poetry).

Priority: Preserving cultural authenticity, aesthetic value, and the unique flavour of the source text. Foreignization is often favoured to transport the reader into the source cultural context.

Strategies: Dominated by transliteration (often with initial capitalization) and annotation. Hybrid strategies (e.g., transliteration + brief gloss) are common. Paraphrase or substitution is used sparingly to avoid excessive cultural dilution.

For example: Translating “黛玉” as “Daiyu” (transliteration preserving the poetic sound) rather than “Trauriger Jadel” (literal paraphrase “Sad Jade”) maintains the character’s original identity and cultural resonance. Contextual understanding is built through character introductions or narrative integration.

Rationale: Literature serves as a cultural artifact; flattening its unique cultural markers diminishes its artistic and historical value. The reader expects and is prepared for cultural encounter.

**Practical/informative texts (e.g., news reports, tourism brochures, and business documents).**

Priority: Clarity, conciseness, and immediate comprehension. Functionality and efficient communication override strict cultural fidelity. Domestication often enhances accessibility.

Strategies: Paraphrase and cultural substitution are prevalent. Established loanwords (e.g., Tofu, Mahjong) are used freely. Transliteration is minimal and usually reserved for well-known concepts or requires immediate, integrated explanation. Annotation is rare or very brief.

For example: Translating “长城” as “Chinesische Mauer” (“Chinese Wall”, leveraging the familiar concept of the Berlin Wall) ensures instant recognition and spatial understanding for a tourist, whereas Changcheng would require explanation and delay comprehension. “红包” becomes “roter Geldumschlag” (red money envelope) or even “traditionelles Neujahrs Geschenk” (traditional New Year’s gift) in a news report focusing on the custom rather than the physical object.

Rationale: The primary goal is swift and unambiguous information transfer. Overloading the reader with unfamiliar transliterations or lengthy notes impedes communication.

**Academic/specialized texts (e.g., historical studies, philosophical works, and medical journals).**

Priority: Precision, terminological consistency, and comprehensive cultural contextualization. A balance between fidelity and explanation is crucial.

Strategies: Transliteration is standard for key terms/concepts. Annotation (footnotes, endnotes, and glossary entries) is essential and often extensive. Hybrid strategies (e.g., transliteration + integrated functional explanation) are common. Precise paraphrase is used where functional equivalence can be rigorously established. Cultural substitution is generally avoided unless explicitly comparing cultural systems.

For example: Translating “道” as “Dao” (transliteration) with a footnote explaining its philosophical breadth in Taoism versus potentially misleading alternatives like Weg (Way/Path). “科举” becomes “Kaiserliche Beamtenprüfung” (Imperial Officials’ Examination) with a detailed endnote describing its historical operation, social impact, and duration.

Rationale: Academic readers require access to the original concept and its full cultural/intellectual context for accurate understanding and analysis. Ambiguity or oversimplification is detrimental.

**Reader Expectation and Cultural Preparedness: Bridging the Knowledge Gap**

The anticipated knowledge base, interests, and reading objectives of the target audience are critical considerations:

**Academic/expert readers.**

Profile: Possess background knowledge or research interest in Chinese culture/history/language. Seek precision and depth.

Strategy implications: Can handle extensive Transliteration and demands comprehensive Annotation. Expects nuanced terminology. Hybrid strategies are well-received. Strategies lean towards Maximal Cultural Fidelity.

For example: Detailed footnotes explaining “阴阳” (Yin Yang) beyond simple duality into its cosmological and medical applications are expected and necessary.

**General interest readers (e.g., cultural enthusiasts and educated laypersons).**

Profile: Curious about Chinese culture but lack specialized knowledge. Seek understanding without excessive academic burden.

Strategy implications: Benefit from hybrid strategies, e.g., Kung Fu (chinesische Kampfkunst). Paraphrase and functional explanations integrated into the main text are preferred. Limited annotation is acceptable. Cultural substitution can be effective for relatable concepts. Initial introductions of transliterated terms with light explanation are useful.

For example: Explaining “节气” (Sonnenkalenderperioden) briefly within the text as “24 periods marking seasonal changes in the traditional Chinese solar calendar” upon first mention, using the transliterated term consistently afterwards.

**Mass audience/readers seeking pure functionality (e.g., tourists and casual news consumers).**

Profile: Primarily interested in practical information or entertainment. Low tolerance for unfamiliar terms or interruptions for explanation.

Strategy implications: Domestication reigns supreme. Paraphrase, functional translation, and cultural substitution are primary. Established loanwords are safe. Transliteration is minimized and only used for universally known concepts (Yin Yang and Feng Shui) without explanation in the text itself. Annotation is extremely rare.

For example: “火锅” becomes “Hot Pot” or “chinesischer Feuertopf” (Chinese fire pot) in a restaurant menu or travel guide snippet. “拜年” is rendered as “Neujahrsgrüße überbringen” (deliver New Year greetings).

**Negotiating Cultural Distance: The Principle of Gradual Introduction**

The perceived gap between Chinese and German cultural contexts necessitates a strategic approach to introducing novel concepts, often employing a “gradient translation” methodology:

**Initial introduction.**

Strategy: Transliteration + integrated explanation/gloss. The foreign term is introduced alongside an immediate, concise explanation within the sentence or phrase.

For example: “The festival involves eating Yuanxiao (sweet glutinous rice balls)” or “They practiced Taiji (a Chinese martial art focusing on balance and flow)”.

Goal: Name the concept authentically while providing essential understanding on first encounter.

**Subsequent occurrences.**

Strategy: Gradual shift towards using the transliterated term alone, relying on the reader’s memory of the initial explanation or contextual understanding built up. If the concept is complex or central, hybrid references (e.g., “the Daoist concept of Wu Wei”) or occasional brief reiteration might be used.

For example: After the initial introduction, subsequent mentions would simply be “Yuanxiao are a traditional treat” or “Taiji promotes relaxation”.

Goal: Build familiarity and fluency with the CSI term within the text, reducing reliance on constant explanation.

**Long-term integration/widely known concepts.**

Strategy: Transliterated term used independently, potentially becoming a fully integrated loanword in German (Tofu, Mahjong, and Feng Shui). Paraphrase might be used only for stylistic variation or if the transliterated term is still very niche.

For example: “They played Mahjong all evening” (no explanation needed for most German readers).

Goal: Recognize the CSI as a permanent, self-explanatory (within context) element of the target language/culture discourse.

### **Achieving the Equilibrium**

The skilled translator acts as a cultural mediator, constantly weighing these factors (text type, reader, and cultural distance) against the specific CSI and its role within the source text. There is rarely a single “correct” strategy, but rather an optimal balance point for each instance. This dynamic equilibrium ensures that the German translation:

- (a) Respect the source: Accurately represent the Chinese cultural concept.
- (b) Serve the text’s purpose: Meet the functional demands of the specific text type (literary, informative, and academic).
- (c) Engage the reader: Provide an appropriate level of challenge and support based on the reader’s profile and preparedness.
- (d) Manage introduction: Gradually bridge the cultural gap without overwhelming or oversimplifying.

This nuanced decision-making process is fundamental to effective and responsible cross-cultural communication through translation.

## **Practical Recommendations**

The German translation of Chinese CSIs is not merely linguistic conversion but a systematic cultural dissemination project. Based on the preceding analysis, this paper proposes the following specific practical recommendations to provide actionable guidance for translation practice.

### **Establish a Dynamic Cultural Terminology Database**

Specific measures:

1. Systematically catalog high-frequency CSIs: Led by government agencies or academic organizations, compile core CSI terminology covering history, folklore, philosophy, etc. For example, “节气” could be uniformly translated as “Sonnenkalenderperioden” with a brief explanation.

2. Annotate multi-dimensional information: Add annotations for each entry in the database, including:

Cultural background: e.g., for “科举”—“Ancient Chinese official selection system (1300-1905)”.

Applicable context: e.g., for “功夫”—prioritize “Kung Fu” in film/TV translation, but supplement with “chinesische Kampfkunst” in academic translation.

3. Regular updates and sharing mechanism: Enable real-time updates via open-source platforms (e.g., GitHub) to incorporate emerging vocabulary. For example, the recent term “直播带货” can be included as “Live-Streaming-Einkauf”.

Case reference: *The Deutsch-Chinesisches Kulturlexikon* (German-Chinese Cultural Lexicon) released by the German Association for Chinese Studies (DVCS) in 2020, containing over 500 standard translations for Chinese CSIs, serves as an important reference tool for translators.

### **Flexible Application of Hybrid Strategies**

Implementation path:

1. Layered translation approach:

Introductory texts (e.g., travel brochures): Use “transliteration + visual aid”. For example, to translate “月

饼” as “Mondkuchen (traditionelles Gebäck zum Mondfest)” and include a picture of mooncakes.

In-depth texts (e.g., academic papers): Use “transliteration + footnote”. For example, to translate “道” as “Dao” and add a footnote explaining its philosophical connotations (Yin, 2024).

#### 2. Cross-media collaboration:

In audiovisual translation: Use transliteration or conventional translation in subtitles, while the voice-over narration supplements with paraphrase and relevant historical/cultural knowledge.

Typical case: Handling of “火锅” (hot pot) in the German version of *A Bite of China*:

Subtitles: Hot Pot (chinesisches Feuertopf-Gericht—Chinese fire pot dish).

Voice-over: Detailed explanation of the history and social function of hot pot.

In museum guides: Use QR codes linked to cultural background videos to avoid text overload from annotations.

### Technology Empowerment and Cultural Compensation

Innovative practices:

#### 1. AI-assisted translation:

Use neural network models (e.g., DeepL) for basic translation, while humans focus on proofreading CSI translations. For example, AI might translate “红包” literally as “roter Umschlag” (red envelope), requiring human intervention to add “symbolisiert Glück und Wohlstand” (symbolizes luck and prosperity).

Develop cultural sensitivity detection tools to automatically identify potentially misleading translations. Example: When “韬光养晦” (hide one’s capabilities and bide one’s time) is translated literally as “Licht verstecken” (hide light), the system prompts the need for political context.

#### 2. Multimedia compensation strategies:

Apply augmented reality (AR): e.g., scanning the translation of “京剧” (Beijing Opera) triggers a 3D display of performance costumes and facial makeup.

Interactive e-books: e.g., clicking on the translation of “茶道” (tea ceremony) jumps to an animated demonstration of the tea-making process.

### Conclusions

Within the academic field of cross-cultural communication, research on the translation of culture-specific items (CSIs) has successfully transcended the boundaries of traditional linguistics, gradually evolving into a micro-experimental platform for civilizational dialogue. This paper has conducted a multi-dimensional analysis of CSI translation strategies, revealing that the cross-linguistic conversion of cultural symbols is essentially a dynamic hermeneutic practice. This practice requires translators to accurately grasp the core connotations of the source culture while fully considering the cultural reception patterns of the target language. For instance, when the philosophical concept of “道” (Dao) spreads in the German-speaking world as “Dao”, and the folk concept of “红包” (red envelope) undergoes cultural transcoding as “roter Glücksumschlag” (red lucky envelope); translation activity ascends to a creative process of mutual cultural learning.

Research data indicate that the subtlety in choosing translation strategies lies in precisely grasping the dialectics of cultural dissemination. Richard Wilhelm’s approach to translating and interpreting the *Daodejing* is highly instructive. He used transliteration to preserve the philosophical purity of “太极” (Taiji), while simultaneously employing the interpretive annotation “ausgleichende Lebenskraft” (balancing life force) to

establish a basic framework for understanding the concept within the German cultural context. This method of seeking balance between “foreignization” and “domestication” resembles the adaptive expression of cultural genes, ensuring the integrity of cultural genetic information while promoting functional evolution between different cultures in the process of cross-cultural communication.

In the digital age, the translation ecosystem is undergoing dual transformations. On the one hand, artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted translation, when processing CSIs like “红包”, often resorts to literal translation, fully exposing the mechanistic nature and limitations of algorithms in cultural decoding. On the other hand, augmented reality (AR) technology offers novel solutions for CSI translation: Scanning the translation triggers a three-dimensional visualization of the term and its cultural context, allowing audiences to perceive and understand the profound connotations embodied in CSIs more intuitively. This reminds us that technological applications should not diminish the translator’s agency but should instead become effective tools aiding cultural interpretation, providing multi-dimensional pathways for perceiving abstract concepts.

Looking ahead to a new phase of Sino-German cultural exchange, the paradigm of translation studies urgently requires innovation and breakthroughs. Future academic research should focus on constructing dynamic and balanced models of cultural dissemination. This will ensure that CSIs, during the cross-linguistic translation process, can steadfastly retain their original characteristics while being appropriately understood and accepted by readers in other countries and regions, truly becoming vibrant carriers in the dialogue between civilizations.

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