

Original Paper

Exploring English Translation of Chinese Dish Names from a Cross-Cultural Communication Perspective

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Abstract

As Chinese food culture gains popularity, the English translation of its dishes has garnered increasing interest. The menu not only highlights the cuisine but also reflects Chinese aesthetics and culture. This paper analyzes dish name translations, highlighting the major issues in current translations, such as machine translation, grammatical errors, and improper wording. It then refines these translations and identifies three key principles for dish name translation: semantic proximity, cultural communication and aesthetics. Studying dish name translations enhances Chinese food culture, fosters Sino-Western exchanges, and propagates Chinese cuisine globally.

Keywords

Translation, Dish names, Cross-cultural Communication

1. Introduction

Currently, the translation of dish names is gaining increasing attention. Its purpose is to convey the spiritual essence of Chinese culture as diners enjoy their meals, enhance global understanding of China, and thereby promote economic and cultural exchanges between China and other countries. For overseas expansion, addressing menu translation issues is crucial. A standardized translation of dish names facilitates comprehension for all. Just as a unified script fosters cultural inheritance, standardized dish names broaden the influence of Chinese cuisine, thus enhancing the international popularity of Chinese catering businesses. We must excel in the transformation of language and culture, articulate Chinese stories effectively, establish a positive Chinese image, and promote the widespread dissemination of Chinese culture globally. Translators must have a thorough understanding of the disparities between the source and target languages. Following a profound grasp of the distinctive food cultures between China and the West, they must accurately translate not just the dish name's literal information but also the cultural nuances embedded within, thereby effectively achieving the goal of cross-cultural

communication. However, in the process of external dissemination of Chinese cuisine, there exists a dearth of systematic research and discussion on translation standards conducted by unified industry, cultural departments, or research institutions. This often leads to translation issues arising during cross-cultural communication regarding Chinese cuisine, primarily due to the absence of a standardized reference blueprint for translating each dish name. In this regard, studying the dish name translation is imperative.

Over the past few years, numerous researchers have delved into the English rendition of dish names. Caiqiao Huo (2020) points out the challenges posed by the translation of metaphorical dish names and subsequently proposes a series of translation strategies to address these difficulties. Chen Tingting (2022) comments on the current translation of Chinese dish names and puts forward his own opinions. Guimei Zhang (2024), from the perspective of frame semantics, a thorough analysis was conducted on the English renditions of Shandong cuisine names, examining the intricate frame relationship between the original Chinese nomenclature and their English counterparts. And she put forward several standardized English translation strategies for Shandong cuisine names. A thorough review of the extant academic works reveals a paucity of studies. Given this gap, this paper endeavors to dissect the prevalent challenges encountered in the translation of dish names and formulate pertinent translation principles in order to gain a deeper understanding of the rich connotations embedded in these names.

2. Problems in the Translation of Dish Names

Translators have overlooked a crucial methodology in translating Chinese menus: a unified and standardized theoretical framework. Consequently, there are significant variations in the translation of dishes across different Chinese restaurants, resulting in considerable confusion in the English versions of Chinese menus. Below are some prevalent issues encountered in translating dish names.

2.1 Machine Translation

Example 1:

SL: 鲜炒小蘑菇

TL1: Freshly fried mushroom

TL2: Fried Fresh Small Mushroom

When translating “小蘑菇” to English, indeed, it is often rendered as “mushroom” with the addition of the determiner “small” to convey the accurate meaning. Specifically, for “鲜炒小蘑菇”, which refers to small mushrooms that are freshly fried, a more precise translation would be “Fried Fresh Small Mushroom”. This rendition captures the freshness and size of the mushrooms more clearly.

Example 2:

SL: 素菜炒饭

TL1: Vegetable Fried Rice

TL2: Fried Rice with Vegetables

When referring to “素菜” in this dish, it indeed means “vegetables” in general, without specifying the

specific type. Therefore, a more fitting translation would be “Fried Rice with Vegetables”, which accurately conveys the meaning while omitting the unnecessary detail of specifying the kind of vegetables.

Example 3:

SL: 外婆炒香肠

TL1: Grandma Fried Sausage

TL2: Waipo Cai—Fried sausage with salted potherbs

The “Waipo” in the name of the dish does not refer to a blood relative, namely “grandma”, but rather designates a highly popular home-style dish from Xiangxi, Hunan Province. This dish utilizes a variety of uniquely pickled wild vegetables, renowned for their appetizing and other beneficial effects. The allusion stems from a five-flavored farewell dish traditionally prepared by a mother for her daughter on the eve of her wedding, symbolizing the mother’s profound love. Consequently, “Waipo” in this context solely denotes the dish's name, “Waipo Cai”, which also encapsulates the cultural significance of marriage among the ethnic minorities in Xiangxi. Hence, a suitable translation for “Waipo Cai” would be “Waipo Cai—Fried sausage with salted potherbs”.

Example 4:

SL: 玉米炒青豆

TL1: Corn-fried green beans

TL2: Fried Green Beans with Corn Kernels

The phrasing “corn” fry “green beans” doesn't quite conform to standard English usage. Also, as mentioned, “玉米” in this context refers to “corn kernels” rather than the entire corn plant. Therefore, a more apt translation would be: “Fried Green Beans with Corn Kernels”. This version captures the intended meaning and culinary context more accurately.

Example 5:

SL: 夫妻肺片

TL1: Husband and Wife’s Lung Slice

TL2: Sliced Beef and Tripe in Chili Sauce

This first translation is indeed too literal and could lead to confusion. Instead, it’s more appropriate to translate the ingredients. “Fuqi Feipian” is a controversial Sichuan dish, with its name stemming from a story of a couple in Sichuan who created it from leftover beef, beef offal, and other ingredients. Some scholars have suggested that the character “肺” in this dish’s name is a colloquial reference to “persimmons” (柿), and “柿片” means “thin slices”. Therefore, there is no actual “beef lung” in “Fuqi Feipian”, which sometimes leads to misinterpretation among Chinese diners. A more suitable translation could be “Sliced Beef and Tripe in Chili Sauce”.

2.2 Grammatical Errors

Example 6:

SL: 麻婆豆腐

TL1: Ma Po Tofu—Bean Curd with Minced Pork in Hot Sauce

TL2: Mapo Tofu—Bean curd with minced pork in hot-spicy sauce

“Mapo” is a Chinese term, thus its pinyin should be spelled as a whole word with the initial letter capitalized. Secondly, when annotating foreign dish names, the first letter of the first word is capitalized, while the rest remain lowercase. Additionally, the cooking method is “stewing”, hence the preposition “in” is appropriate. Furthermore, given the dish’s flavor characteristics, it falls under the “spicy” category of Sichuan cuisine, making “hot-spicy” sauce a more fitting description rather than just “hot”. Therefore, the correct translation of “麻婆豆腐” would be: “Mapo Tofu—Bean curd with minced pork in hot-spicy sauce”.

Example 7:

SL: 佛跳墙

TL1: Fotiaoqiāng: A Delicacy Embodying the Essence of Steamed Abalone

TL2: Fotiaoqiāng—Stewed shark fins with assorted seafood

The ingredients of “Fotiaoqiāng” primarily comprise shark fin, sea cucumber, dried scallops, fish lips, clams, and various other seafood. According to research, the cooking method for this dish is primarily “stewing”, rather than “steaming”. Therefore, the translation should adhere to the guideline of not capitalizing the initial letter of the dish's name, resulting in: “Fotiaoqiāng—Stewed shark fins with assorted seafood”.

Example 8:

SL: 油条

TL1: You Tiao (deep-fried twisted dough stick)

TL2: Youtiao (deep-fried twisted dough sticks)

“Youtiao” is the appropriate transliteration for the term “油条” in English. When it appears as a proper noun, the initial letter “Y” should be capitalized, making it “Youtiao”. Given the actual production style of “Youtiao”, the word “stick” should be in its plural form, “sticks”. When translating the name, it’s crucial to concisely convey the basic information of the dish without causing ambiguity. Adhering to the principle of brevity, a suitable translation would be: “Youtiao (deep-fried twisted dough sticks)”.

Example 9:

SL: 避风塘手撕鸡

TL1: Typhoon shelter shredded chicken

TL2: Bifengtang Shredded Chicken

The translation “Typhoon shelter” for “避风塘” in the dish name is overly literal and does not accurately reflect the culinary context or aesthetics of the dish, potentially causing confusion for readers. Instead, “避风塘” here refers to the presentation of the dish and is also a company name. For professional culinary terms, it is generally advisable to adopt transliteration to avoid ambiguity, so “Bifengtang” is a more appropriate translation. Furthermore, the translation of “手撕” as “hand-shred” is not ideal, as “shred” already incorporates the meaning of “tearing into strips” according to the

Cambridge International English Dictionary. Therefore, a more concise and accurate translation would be “Bifengtang Shredded Chicken”.

Example 10:

SL: 宋嫂鱼羹

TL1: Braised Fish Soup

TL2: Songsao Fish Soup

By omitting “Songsao” from the translation, the translator fails to grasp the essence of the dish’s methodology, ingredient composition, and the origin of its name. As a renowned Jiangnan dish belonging to the Zhejiang cuisine, it is a soup prepared by steaming sea bass and adding ingredients to remove the bones. Its name stems from a woman named “Song Wusao” from the Southern Song Dynasty, renowned for her exquisite fish soup that drew many to taste. When Emperor Gaozong of Song visited the West Lake, he sampled her fish soup and praised it highly. Since then, it has been handed down as a favored dish among gourmands, and its legacy continues to this day. Therefore, in the translation process, the personal name “Songsao” in the original dish name is not just a mere addition; it encapsulates the essence of Chinese traditional culture and must be retained. It can be translated directly as “Songsao Fish Soup”.

2.3 Improper Wording

Example 11:

SL: 干煸四季豆

TL1: Pan Stir String Beans

TL2: Stir-fried Spring Beans

When “pan” is used as a verb, it typically refers to cooking food in a pan. However, for this particular dish, the translation does not necessitate mentioning the cooking utensil. “Pan stir” does not accurately capture the essence of “stir-fried” cooking, nor does it constitute a complete phrase. Therefore, a more fitting translation for “干煸四季豆” would be: “Stir-fried Spring Beans”.

Example 12:

SL: 虎皮青椒

TL1: Pan Seared Hot Green Pepper

TL2: Stir-fried Green Peppers

The translation “hot green” may cause confusion as “green pepper” is already self-explanatory. Thus, “hot” should be omitted since the primary ingredient, “green pepper”, typically refers to a thicker, non-spicy variety. The term “seared” is inappropriate for “虎皮青椒” as the dish involves stir-frying green peppers in a hot wok until they develop white and black spots, followed by even stir-frying with oil, salt, soy sauce, and chicken essence. Here, the cooking utensil “pan” does not require translation. Therefore, “虎皮” is best rendered as “resembling the pattern of a tiger's fur”, which, though not typically translated, can be briefly explained verbally by service staff. Consequently, “虎皮青椒” should be translated as “Stir-fried Green Peppers”.

Example 13:

SL: 红烧豆腐

TL1: Braised Bean Curd with Brown Sauce

TL2: Braised Tofu in Brown Sauce

“With” often denotes the accompaniment of materials, whereas “in” typically indicates that the main ingredient is immersed in an auxiliary material or soup. The dish “红烧豆腐” involves boiling a stock, adding tofu slices, simmering for 2 minutes, and then cooking with seasonings. Clearly, the tofu is immersed in the broth. Therefore, the English translation of “红烧豆腐” in this context should be revised to: “Braised Tofu in Brown Sauce”.

Example 14:

SL: 活力苹果汁

TL1: Activity of apple juice

TL2: Power Apple Juice

The term “activity” typically refers to “the state of being active”, while “power” is defined as “the ability to do something or act in a particular way, including physical, intellectual, or motor capabilities”. The phrase “能量” encompasses not just physical strength but also intellectual and kinetic power. Given this, in the English translation of “活力苹果汁”, the word “活力” should be rendered as “power” rather than “activity”. Therefore, the dish name “活力苹果汁” is best translated as “Power Apple Juice” to capture the vitality intended.

Example 15:

SL: 白胡椒牛仔骨

TL1: White pepper cowboy bone

TL2: Roasted Calf Ribs with White Peppers

The term “牛仔骨” in Chinese cuisine actually refers to “calf ribs”, not “cowboy's bone”. The word “cowboy” typically refers to those who herded cattle on American ranches in the past, not to the actual animals or their parts. To avoid any confusion, using “calf” is more accurate. Therefore, a suitable translation for “牛仔骨” would be “calf ribs”. Given this, the dish “牛仔骨” with white peppers would best be translated as: “Roasted Calf Ribs with White Peppers”.

3. Principles of Dish Names Translation

In 2012, the Beijing Municipal Government introduced a menu translation guideline titled *Food Translation Garden: English Translation of Chinese Menus*. This guidebook offers English translations for over 3,000 dishes, including more than 2,000 traditional Chinese cuisines. The Chinese dishes are categorized into eight major cuisines, encompassing Sichuan, Fujian, and other regional specialties. The majority of dish names in the book are transliterated, and the translation methods can be broadly divided into three groups: traditional foods with distinct Chinese characteristics, such as “包子” (Baozi) and “馒头” (Mantou); dishes whose translated names have been widely adopted in major English

dictionaries, like “宫保鸡丁” (Kung Pao Chicken) and “馄饨” (Wonton); and dishes whose Chinese names do not directly reflect their preparation methods or ingredients, in which case they are transliterated with explanatory notes in English, for instance, “锅贴” (Guotie, Pan-Fried Dumplings) and “粽子” (Zongzi, Glutinous Rice Wrapped in Bamboo Leaves).

3.1 Principles of Semantic Proximity

The initial task is to eliminate barriers, thus ensuring that the semantic meaning of the dish name is precisely communicated. The principle of semantic proximity dictates that the English translation of the dish name should convey a similar or identical semantic connotation as the original text, enabling target menu readers to gain as much information as possible, just as source language readers do when reading the original. This principle serves as the fundamental requirement for menu translation, necessitating that the translator carefully considers and adheres to the linguistic rules of the target language in terms of grammar and word choice.

For instance, “Yu Xiang Rou Si” translates to “Shredded Pork in Garlic Sauce”. This translation style is prevalent on menus in overseas Chinese restaurants. Overseas Chinese restaurants typically render “Yu Xiang” as “in garlic sauce”, while some domestic restaurants opt for “fish-flavored”. Given the semantic differences between these two translations, which method is more reasonable and accurate? To assess the quality of these translations, we must first consider whether “Yu Xiang Rou Si” contains fish. Those familiar with Sichuan cuisine know that it does not. However, opinions vary on the origin of “Yu Xiang”. Some suggest that the “Yu Xiang” in “Yu Xiang Rou Si” comprises pickled chili, salt, soy sauce, sugar, minced ginger, minced garlic, and green onion. This seasoning is unrelated to fish and named “Yu Xiang” because the dish imitates the cooking method and ingredient profile of fish, embodying the flavors of saltiness, sweetness, sourness, spiciness, freshness, and fragrance. Legend has it that these ingredients were originally leftover seasonings from grilled fish. The chef happened to use them for stir-frying, and the dish turned out delicious, thus earning the name “Yu Xiang”. Regardless of the origin, it’s evident that “Yu Xiang” has no connection to “fish”. Therefore, translating “Yu Xiang” as “fish-flavored” does not align with the original meaning. When translating “Yu Xiang Rou Si”, rendering “Yu Xiang” as “in garlic sauce” better captures the semantic connotation of the original, adhering to the principle of semantic proximity.

3.2 Principles of Cultural Communication

The principle of cultural communication encompasses two key aspects. Firstly, menu translation should accurately and profoundly convey the essence of Chinese culture to achieve the objective of cultural dissemination. Secondly, it must cater to the target audience. In the process of menu translation, there are two methods to preserve cultural uniqueness: the first is transliteration or literal translation with annotations, and the second is to provide annotations that complement the information not captured through transliteration, thereby assisting readers in understanding the cultural traits and imagery embedded in the dish name. Given the distinctive phonological features of dish names, transliteration is an effective means to preserve cultural characteristics.

For instance, “担担面” translates as “Dan Dan Noodles, noodles with minced pork”. The moniker “Dan Dan” originates from the traditional selling method of this noodle dish. Vendors would carry a pole with pots of noodles on one end and utensils and seasonings on the other, walking the streets and shouting “担担面” to attract customers. This is how the name “Dan Dan Noodles” came to be. Similarly, “棒棒鸡丝” translates to “Bang Bang Chicken, shredded chicken in sesame”. The “Bang Bang” refers to its unique cooking technique, where the cooked chicken is pounded with a wooden stick to make it easier to flavor and more convenient for diners to enjoy. This translation not only captures the essence of Chinese food culture, allowing diners to appreciate the charm of Chinese cuisine through the menu, but also employs an appealing treatment of overlapping sounds, making it easier for target readers to remember and disseminate, thereby enhancing the establishment of the catering brand. Among various translation methods, transliteration preserves the phonetic beauty of the original Chinese cuisine names in its entirety.

3.3 Principles of Aesthetics

The aesthetic principle stipulates that menu translation should prioritize the target audience’s perspective, ensuring that the phonology, structural form, and imagery of the translated name align with aesthetic standards. The beauty of phonology and structure is fundamental in literary translation, while the beauty of imagery holds significant value in foreign cultural dissemination. Additionally, menu translations should be concise and clear, avoiding lengthy phrases and complex academic terminology. Both literal and paraphrased translations should prioritize brevity and clarity, steering clear of verbose expressions. One common practice in translating Chinese restaurant menus is omitting cooking methods, a testament to the principle of brevity.

For instance, “红烧” is often translated as “red braise”, which fails to capture the imagery’s beauty. In Chinese cuisine, “红烧” refers to frying the main ingredients, followed by the addition of soy sauce, sugar, and other spices to enrich the color and flavor, ultimately stewing the dish. However, in Western culture, the word “red” is often associated with negative connotations like “cruelty” and “blood”, which creates a disconnect with the target audience’s aesthetic psychology and cultural background. This translation may lead the audience to misunderstand the dish’s specific characteristics, conjuring images of “blood” and “cruelty”, thus violating aesthetic principles.

4. Conclusion

This paper summarizes common issues and translation principles in menu translation, highlighting better translation strategies to enhance reader acceptability. The primary translation challenges are machine translation, grammatical errors, and improper wording. The translation principles encompass semantic proximity, cultural communication, and aesthetics. Research indicates that translating dish names necessitates adhering closely to the original text’s semantics, ensuring grammatical and lexical accuracy. Secondly, capturing the cultural essence of the dish name is crucial, which can be achieved through transliteration, literal translation, or annotations to preserve the dish’s unique characteristics.

Lastly, concise translations that consider the phonological and structural beauty of the dish name are imperative. From a cross-cultural communication perspective, translating dish names is not just a communication activity; it's a behavioral exchange. The fundamental objective of this research is to investigate how to minimize cultural barriers and conflicts between people of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in China and the West through the bridging role of "translation", thereby ensuring smooth cultural exchanges in Chinese and Western cuisine. To comprehensively understand the translation of dish names, the research scope will be broadened in future studies.

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