

Original Paper

English Translation of Culture-loaded Terms in TCM from the Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory—A Case Study on *Treatise on Cold Damage Diseases (Shang Han Lun)*

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Abstract

Since the native medical science originating in local China, TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) has been the prominent representative of Chinese civilization. Under the guidance of culture “going global” strategy, it is a critical project to take our fine culture of TCM to the global stage. TCM classics always contain lots of culture-loaded words whose literal counterparts cannot be found in English, leading to great difficulties in translation. Therefore, Luo Xiwen’s Target Text of Treatise on Cold Damage Disease (Shang Han Lun), one of the four TCM classics, is selected for its high recognition to analyzes its culture-loaded words. In addition, the paper studies the translation strategies of culture-loaded words in TCM from the perspective of cultural translation theories and find that translators can opt foreignization or domestication according to different situations, or even can combine them to produce a better translation text, hoping to offer some reference for TCM translation.

Keywords

TCM, culture-loaded words, Cultural Translation Theory, translation strategies

1. Introduction

TCM is the invaluable creation by Chinese nation, to which CPC (Communist Party of China) and the government have been attaching great importance. Since the 18th National Congress of the party, President Xi has delivered several keynote addresses about TCM, which pointed out that TCM should be scrutinized in the context of our profound history and be deployed in the context of Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation and the construction of a global community of health for all. With the further dissemination of TCM, to well present its stories, to promote its culture and to disseminate its wisdom have become a crucial theme nowadays (Li Haoran, 2024). Cultural Translation Theory regards translation as an activity of cross-cultural communication rather than the pure transforming of lingual codes. Thereby, translators should pay attention to the cultural connotation underlying the original language, which appears even more prominent when rendering culture-loaded terms. Culture-loaded

words and expressions are loaded with specific national cultural information and indicate profound culture (Lin Yuewu & Yang Qin, 2015). And TCM, as our own national medical treasure that contains loads of culture-loaded terms represents the spiritual core of TCM. Therefore, to study the strategy about how to translate culture-loaded terms is important. As one of the four great classics of TCM, *Treatise on Cold Damage Disease (Shang Han Lun)* epitomizes the medical thoughts prior to Han Dynasty. It summarizes predecessors' medical achievements and practical experience, and it also elaborates syndrome differentiation and treatment of many exogenous diseases and miscellaneous diseases by combining its own clinical experience. It is the epochal medical classic, serving as a connecting role in the history of TCM. The paper studies the translation of *Treatise on Cold Damage Disease* (Luo Xiwen version) from the perspective of Cultural Translation Theory to analyze the strategy of translating culture-loaded terms.

2. Cultural Translation Theory and Culture-loaded Terms

2.1 Culture-loaded Terms

Language reflects the unique cultural characteristics of a nation in its inheritance and evolution. Words or expressions are the fundamental materials to establish the language, through which the underlying culture is perceived. Culture-loaded terms refer to words, phrases and idioms that are specific to the certain culture, which can reflect the certain activity pattern of a nation that is formed and accumulated in the long historical course, distinguishing it from others. When people with different cultural backgrounds communicate with each other, cultural differences will cause cognitive gaps, vocabulary gaps, different expressions of idioms and cultural attributes so that the counterparts of culture-loaded terms cannot be found in target language. Translators thus need to apply appropriate translation strategies to bridge such gaps and differences. According to Newmark, culture-loaded words can be classified into the following categories generally: material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, ecological culture-loaded words and language culture-loaded words (Wang Rongpei, 2002).

Culture-loaded terms in Chinese are the concentrated expression of Chinese traditional culture and the external manifestation of its most core part. They bear much peculiar cultural information. Therefore, it is important to be scrupulous to address them for translators to accurately present the essence of traditional Chinese culture to the world and take it to the global stage.

2.2 Cultural Translation Theory

In order to better study the translation of culture-loaded terms, the paper adopts Cultural Translation Theory. Language and culture are mutually dependent. Language is the carrier of culture, which serves as a tool to preserve and transmit culture. On the other side, culture influences the formation of language. Different cultures always nurture different languages that own distinguished features just as Chinese and English. Hence it is important to appropriately cope with such differences. In the 1990s, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere came up with "cultural turn" in *Translation, History and Culture—A Sourcebook*. It referred to the shift of the translation unit from language itself to culture, which held that translators

should pay more attention to culture when translating. Besides, Bassnett argued that translation was more than linguistic decoding and reorganization, instead, it was about communication and exchange (Buden B, Nowotny S, Simon S, et al, 2009). Moreover, to translate didn't simply mean transforming the original text into the target language, but obtaining the equivalence in terms of culture. Furthermore, the standards and criteria of translation are different in different periods and for different people to satisfy different demands.

Cultural Translation Theory attaches much importance to culture-exchange, which overshadows information-informing (Peng Xiaobo, 2011). It attempts to introduce different cultures through translation and whereby promotes the cultural exchange. Differences and similarities between languages will be made clearly under Cultural Translation Theory. In that case, native culture will be introduced to other countries while exotic cultures will be open to native readers. As for different purposes of cultural exchange, translators can apply different translation strategies. For example, when faced with scientific texts that aim to give information to readers, translators can domesticate the original language to avoid cultural shock and drive the information home. And when confronted with literary works, translators have more flexible solutions. When encountering exotic elements, translators can opt to foreignize the source text to retain the exotic atmosphere by literal translation. If readers' acceptability is taken into account, translators can adopt footnoting to explain the cultural differences. In that case, readers will acquire both a better understanding of the text and further learning of foreign cultures.

Due to the rapid development of the Internet and the quick progressing of globalization, cultural exchange becomes easier and more frequent, which has broken down the barrier of space and time. For example, by searching on the Internet, people can acquire information from all over the world. They can watch foreign videos, listen foreign music and read foreign books just at home or anywhere they like. Everything seems so good. However, abundance always leads to the consequence that the bad and the good are intermingled. Some fake information will seize the chance to lurk among them. For example, some western countries are "recidivist" to distort facts when reporting about China. They attempt to shape China as poor, underdeveloped and aggressive. To change such phenomena, Chinese translators should build a positive image through translation. By applying Cultural Translation Theory, translators present cultural products that demonstrates Chinese charming culture and set up a positive image to the world.

3.The Overview of TCM and Related Translation Studies

3.1 Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has contributed to health care for thousands of years in Chinese history. It is a vital and holistic system of health and healing and has played a critical role in the fight against COVID-19. TCM is based on the notion of harmony and balance, which employs the ideas of moderation and prevention (Ni Xianghui, 2006). It is a complete system of health care with its own unique theories of anatomy, health, and treatment. Diet and prevention are attached great importance to

in TCM. Acupuncture, herbal medicine, massage, as well as exercise are used. It concentrates on stimulating the body's natural curative powers. Although TCM has undergone the history of several thousand years, it does not decline and fall at all. It has been used to treat more than a quarter of the world's population. The earliest doctors in China were also philosophers and TCM was thus inspired by the role that human and the world played. TCM advocates moderation, which means that human beings and nature should live in harmony, keeping internal and external balance. Once the balance is broken, illness will invade people's body.

3.2 TCM Translation Study

There are many scholars studying on TCM translation from various perspectives. In terms of the study of TCM terminology, Li Zhaoguo has contributed a lot and published recognized papers in core journals. In 1996, he discussed the translation principles of TCM terms: naturality, brief, nationality, back translation and standardization (Li Zhaoguo, 1996). In 2008, he classified basic medical terms and analyzed their similarities and differences. Besides, he proposed the concept, principle, method of standardizing TCM terminology (Li Zhaoguo, 2008). In 2012, Li conducted comparative studies on WHO Western Pacific Region and World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies international standard terminologies on traditional medicine: Diseases in Internal Medicine. Regarding the classics, most scholars studied the translation of *Huang Di Nei Jing (The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic)*, *Shang Han Lun (Treatise on Cold Damage Diseases)*, *Jin Kui Yao Lue (Synopsis of the Golden Chamber)* and so on, among which *Huang Di Nei Jing (the Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic)* was focused on the most, about which there are 476 papers in CNKI. With respect to the theory, beside such common theories as Skopos Theory, Functional Equivalence Theory, Translation Aesthetics Theory, Cultural Translation Theory and Polysystem Theory, more and more scholars have broadened their viewpoints and studied TCM from other theories such as Eco-translatology, Translation Geography, Cognitive Translatology and Imagologie to study the translation process, translation principles and methods of TCM. Wang Chang and Yang Yuchen (2018) conducted research on the translation of public signs in TCM hospitals from the perspective of Eco-translatology, analyzing it from the aspects of language, culture and communication to conclude the translation principles. Li Pan (2023) discussed how translators tell traditional Chinese medicine stories well from the perspective of cognitive translatology, pointing out that translators should obey the basic TCM translation principles, take a neutral stance, keep their own subjectivity and comprehend the connotation and denotation of TCM culture (Li Pan, 2023).

4. English Translation of TCM Culture-loaded Terms from the Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory

In texts of TCM, there are many culture-loaded terms that have no counterparts in the target language. Furthermore, such terms are always of rich cultural connotation. Therefore, the paper attempts to figure out the strategies to translate such words from the perspective of Cultural Translation Theory that considers translation as a cultural activity aiming to realize the ultimate goal of cultural communication

by means of translation. *Treatise on Cold Damage Diseases (Luo Xiwen version)* (2007) is selected as the sample to conduct case study. After analyzing, the paper finds that strategies of foreignization, domestication and foreignization combined with domestication can translate culture-loaded terms well and promote cultural exchanges.

4.1 Foreignization

According to Venuti, foreignization is “an ethnodeviant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad.” (Venuti, Lawrence. 1995.) In other words, by applying foreignization, translators tend to retain the exotic elements in the original text and usually deviate the linguistic norm of the target language in translation. Transliteration is often used in this case.

Example 1:

Source Text: 脉微而恶寒者，此阴阻俱虚，不可更发汗、更下、更吐也；(P 13)

Target Text: If there is a feeble pulse and chill, it is the symptom of Deficiency both in Yin and Yang. For such a case, neither diaphoretic, purgative nor emetic is to be adopted. (P 13)

Analysis: This sentence means the symptoms of feeble pulse and chill indicate the deficiency in Yin and Yang. Under such a circumstance, the treatment of diaphoretic, purgative or emetic will cause an aggravation of the health condition. “阴阳” here is a technical term in TCM, which bears profound historic basis and intricate implications. Generally, it is believed that Yang refers to anything vigorous, outward, rising, warm and bright while Yin refers to anything relatively static, inward, descending, cold and gloom. In English, there is no single term that is capable of covering such complicated meanings. By virtue of transliteration, the target language introduces new words(expression), Yin and Yang, which can completely realize the equivalence and bridge the gap caused by cultural and historic differences.

Example 2

Source Text: 问曰：病有霍乱者何？答曰：呕吐而利，此名霍乱。(P 226)

Target Text: A syndrome with symptoms and signs of nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea is called Huoluan. (P 226)

Analysis: The sentence defines Huoluan by its symptoms. In fact, there is a corresponding term of Huoluan in English—it is “cholera”. However, Luo Xiwen doesn’t use this word, instead, the translator applies transliteration to translate the notion of the disease. In fact, though “cholera” in western medicine and “Huoluan” in TCM share many similarities, they are not totally identical. There are records about Huoluan in ancient TCM classics and can be traced back to as early as *Huang Di Nei Jin (The Yellow Emperor’s Internal Classic)* in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States Period. “Huoluan” is a term integrating “Huo” with “Luan”. “Huo” implies “squander” and “Luan” implies “disorder”. “Huoluan” in TCM covers a relatively more general denotation than “cholera” in western medicine that is caused by vibrio cholera. It refers to diseases with symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea. Therefore, “Huoluan” is more accurate to convey the originate meaning than “cholera”. More importantly, to adopt translation strategy of foreignization is able to lead foreign readers to know about the culture and medical

history underlying the term “Huoluan”.

Example 3

Source Text: 炙甘草汤方: 甘草四两, 炙 生姜三两, 切 人参二两 生地黄一斤 桂枝三两, 去皮 阿胶二两 麦冬门半升 麻仁半升 大枣三十枚, 擘 (P 127)

Target Text:

Decoction of Radix Glycyrrhizae Praeparata

(Zhi Cancao Tang):

Radix Glycyrrhizae Praeparata	<u>4 liang</u>
Rhizoma Zingiberis Recens	<u>3 liang</u>
Radix Ginseng	<u>2 liang</u>
Radix Rehmanniae	<u>1 jin</u>
Ramulus Cinnamomi	<u>3 liang</u>
Colla Corii Asini	<u>2 liang</u>
Radix Ophiopogonis	<u>0.5 sheng</u>
Fructus Cannabis	<u>0.5 sheng</u>
Fructus Ziziphi Jujubae	<u>30 pcs.</u>

(P 127)

Analysis: The excerpt above is the prescription for the treatment of the febrile disease caused by Cold, which notes the dosage of each medicinal material. One significant difference between English and Chinese is that measure words abound in Chinese, but English tends to use articles (a/an, the) to mark the number of objects. Therefore, measure words in English are much less than in Chinese. In addition, the different history and culture lead to different units of measurement between English countries and China. Based on the reasons above, it is bound to cause non-equivalence between English and Chinese in terms of measure words. “Liang(两)”, “jin(斤)” and “sheng(升)” are the culture-loaded terms that have no counterparts in English, so the translator applies transliteration to bridge the gap. Though they can be transformed into English measure words like kilograms or grams by conversion. Nevertheless, in this way, the translation will lose the native flavor of TCM. Worse still, foreign readers thus will not deepen their knowledge about the unit of measurement in TCM and reduce the possibility of promoting Chinese culture to the world.

4.2 Domestication

Domestication is the translation strategy localizing the original language text and making the translated text more readable, so as to better convey the original information and cultural connotation. Domestication takes cultural differences and target readers’ reading habits into account and clear reading obstacles for them. In that case, the translation is relatively more acceptable and closer to target readers’ thinking mode. Readers thus are capable of clearly obtaining the original author's writing intention, so as to avoid misreading and misunderstanding caused by different cultural backgrounds (Yang Jiahao & Xiong Xin, 2021). For some target readers, it is hard for them to understand some culture-loaded terms,

so the translator can apply domestication to convey cultural notions familiar to the target readers, helping them better comprehend the proper meaning of TCM. And it is more noticeable when dealing with the translation of “qi(气)” in *Shang Han Lun*.

Example 4

Source Text: 血弱气尽，腠理开，邪气因入，与正气相搏，结于胁下。(P 65)

Target Text: When the Blood is deficient and the Vital Resistance weak, the Couli opens, so the pathogenic factor intrudes into the Interior and struggles against the Body Resistance at the costal region. (P 65)

Example 5

Source Text: 若少气者，梔子甘草豉汤主之；若呕者，梔子生姜豉汤主之。(P 52)

Target Text: In case there is shortness of breath, Decoction of Fructus Gardeniae, Radix Glycyrrhizae and Sement Sojae Praeparatum will be the curative.

Or if there is vomiting, Decoction of Fructus Gardeniae, Rhizoma Zingiberis Recens and Semen Sojae Praeparatum fit the case. (P 53)

Example 6

Source Text: 以荣气不足，血少故也。(P 37)

Target Text: That is because a slow pulse signifies an insufficiency of Nutrient Essence, a lack of Blood. (P 37)

Analysis: “Qi” is an importance notion in TCM, which covers rich implications. TCM studies the concept, generation, distribution and function of “qi” in the human body as well as the relationship among “qi” and viscera, essence, blood and body fluid. “Qi” is a very fine substance with strong vitality and continuous operation, and it is one of the basic substances that constitute the human body and sustain life. “Qi” works continuously, promoting and regulating the metabolism in the human body. Once it ceases moving, the life will get an end.

Due to the rich implications of “qi”, there may be different references in different situations. Example 4, 5 and 6 involve many terms of “qi”, but all of their translations are different. Luo uses neither literal translation nor transliteration to transform them into English. Instead, the translator domesticates them, translating them into different expressions in different discourses specifically.

In example 4, the sentence means that the weakening body resistance causes bad health conditions. In example 4, the first “气(qi)” and the last “气(qi)” can both refer to body resistance. Nonetheless, the former one is more general. It refers to something that sustains the human body. Except meaning “absolutely necessary”, “vital” also means “performing an essential function in the living body”. Therefore, the translator translates “气” in “气尽” as “Vital Resistance”, which not only conveys the original information accurately but also distinguishes it from “气” in “正气” as well. “邪气” in this sentence refers to those factors causing diseases, which makes people afflicted with illnesses. “Pathogenic” means “being able to cause disease”. Accordingly, the translator renders it as “pathogenic factor”, helping foreign readers better understand the text.

Example 5 is the treatment for enteric fever, noting different prescriptions according to different symptoms. When confronted with patients of the symptom of “少气”, TCM practitioners can prescribe Decoction of Fructus Gardeniae, Radix Glycyrrhizae and Sement Sojae Praeparatum. Here, “少气” refers to the symptom of “short of breath” caused by inflammation, which glycyrrhiza can relieve. Luo localizes the term “少气” for the target readers. He throws light on what it refers to in English, thus English readers can comprehend it without confusion.

Example 6 explains the reason why perspiration is prevented when the ring finger is slow attributes to the lack of “Nutrient Essence” and blood. Here, “荣气” is a culture-loaded term in TCM referring to nutrients inside blood, opposite to “卫气(defensive energy)” that refers to “气(qi)” running on the surface of body. “荣气” provides nutriment for human body. In this sentence, the translator renders “荣气” as “Nutrient Essence”, transforming it into the language that is familiar with target readers. Through this way, the translation conveys the original information accurately and English readers can better understand the denotation of “荣气”.

4.3 Foreignization Combined with Domestication

Whether foreignization or domestication possesses their own advantages and disadvantages, of course. As two translation strategies, they are both the unity of opposites and complement each other. Neither absolute foreignization nor absolute domestication exists in one excellent work. Instead, it is necessary to combine the two strategies sometimes to produce better translation and promote cultural exchanges. Supplementing and transliteration are usually used together under the circumstance.

Example 7

Source Text: 病有发热恶寒者，发于阳也，无热恶寒者，发于阴也。发于阳七日愈，发于阴六日愈，以阳数七，阴数六故也。(P 3)

Target Text: The syndrome with fever and chill comes from Yang and takes seven days to heal; that with chill but no fever comes from Yin and takes six days to heal. Seven is Yang(odd) number and six is a Yin(even) number. (P 3)

Analysis: The excerpt explains the different manifestations caused by different disease origins: Yin and Yang. Besides, it points out that fever from Yang takes seven days to heal for it's a Yang(odd) number while fever from Yin number takes six days to heal for it is a Yin(even) number. In this sentence, Luo combines the foreignization with domestication. The translator uses transliteration to render “阴” and “阳” and literal translation to render “阴数” and “阳数” as “Yin number” and “Yang number” respectively. In this way, Chinese cultural implications are reserved. On the other hand, to avoid confusion and help English readers know more knowledge about Chinese culture, the translator applies the translation strategy of supplementing to interpret “Yin number” and “Yang number”. In Chinese ancient times, odd numbers are believed to be Yang numbers while even numbers are Yin numbers. Therefore, the translator supplements “odd” and “even” after “Yang” and “Yin” to help target readers to get the full understanding of what they refer to, hence realizing both cultural exchanges and the fluency of the translation text.

Example 8

Source Text: 少阴病，欲解时，从子至寅上。

Target Text: The lesser Yin syndrome is likely to heal approximately between eleven o'clock in the evening and five o'clock in the morning (from zi to yin).

Analysis: The sentence involves culture-loaded terms: “子” and “寅”. They belong to the marks of twelve Earthly Branches, which can be used to signify time in China. “子” refers to the time between 23 o'clock and 1 o'clock and “寅” refers to the time between 3 o'clock and 5 o'clock, so the time from “子” to “寅” is between eleven o'clock in the evening and five o'clock in the morning. On the one hand, the translator domesticates the source language, making the translation text easier to be understood by target readers. On the other hand, the translator also reserves the cultural elements in the source language, employing transliteration to supplement the time notations that are specific to Chinese. In this way, both the accurate information is conveyed and cultural communication is promoted.

5. Summary

This paper studies culture-loaded terms in TCM from the perspective of Culture Translation Theory and selects *Shang Han Lun* as the study sample. It is found that culture-loaded terms abound in TCM such as “阴阳”, “气”, “阴数”, “阳数”, etc. Such terms are specific to Chinese culture. Therefore, they are void of counterparts in English, causing difficulties in translation. Therefore, translators should deliberate about them and choose appropriate translation strategies. Cultural Translation Theory attaches much importance to cultural communication, which can be realized by applying foreignization, in which transliteration is a frequently-used means. However, excessive uses of foreignization may lead to incoherence and confusion. Therefore, translators should flexibly adopt foreignization and domestication according to different circumstances. By virtue of domestication, the accurate denotations of culture-loaded terms are demonstrated. In this situation, literal translation is usually used to paraphrase culture-loaded terms, making them understood. In addition, translators can also combine both of them to render the source text, which can both convey the accurate meaning of the source text and promote cultural communication. Under this circumstance, supplementing is an effective method.

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