

Original Paper

A Study on the English Translation Strategies of Culturally Loaded Terms in Chinese Architectural Aesthetics

Anni Zhong

School of Foreign Languages, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, Guangxi 541006, China

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Abstract

With the deepening of global cultural exchanges, the international dissemination of Chinese architectural culture has become increasingly important. The English translation of culturally loaded terms in Chinese architectural aesthetics, as the key carrier of this culture, faces challenges such as semantic loss, cultural misreading, and aesthetic dilution. This study, grounded in the theoretical framework of cultural translation, systematically sorts and analyzes the culturally loaded terms in Chinese architectural aesthetics. Through a combination of case analysis and comparative research, it explores the applicability and effects of different translation strategies (such as transliteration, literal translation, liberal translation, annotation, and transliteration + literal translation) for different types of terms. The research finds that the choice of translation strategy should follow the principles of "culture as the foundation, communication as the purpose, and audience as the guide," forming a dynamic and multi-level strategy system. For core philosophical and aesthetic concepts (e.g. Qiyun, Yijing), a strategy combining transliteration and annotation is recommended to preserve cultural identity; for technical and morphological terms with corresponding objects (e.g., Dougong, Sunmao), literal translation or transliteration + literal translation can be used to ensure accuracy; for terms describing styles and sensations (e.g., Feidong, Chenwen), liberal translation is more conducive to conveying aesthetic feelings. This study aims to provide theoretical reference and practical guidance for the translation of Chinese architectural texts, cross-cultural communication of architecture, and the compilation of relevant dictionaries, thereby promoting the global understanding and recognition of the profoundness of Chinese architectural culture.

Keywords

Chinese Architectural Aesthetics, Culturally Loaded Terms, English Translation Strategies, Cultural Translation, Cross-cultural Communication

1. Introduction

As one of the three major architectural systems in the world, Chinese architecture is not only a crystallization of technology and art but also a materialized embodiment of Chinese philosophical thoughts, ethical concepts, and aesthetic tastes (Wang, 2022). Against the national strategic backdrop of "cultural confidence" and "the global dissemination of Chinese culture," the international communication of Chinese architectural culture bears profound contemporary significance. However, such in-depth dissemination largely depends on accurate and vivid translation. Chinese architectural aesthetics encompasses a wealth of unique culturally loaded terms, which "carry the distinctive cultural connotations of the Chinese nation and are difficult to find completely equivalent expressions in English" (Liao, 2010, p. 45), such as "Qiyun" [rhythmic vitality], "Yijing" [artistic conception], "Feiyan" [overhanging eave], "Dougong" [bracket set], and "Sunmao" [mortise-and-tenon joint]. These terms serve not only as professional expressions describing architectural entities and technologies but also as core concepts conveying aesthetic ideas and philosophical thoughts.

At present, the English translation of these culturally loaded terms is plagued by several prevalent issues: inconsistent renditions, loss of cultural connotations, and even distortion of cultural imagery resulting from mistranslation (Li & Wang, 2021). For example, "Ting" [pavilion] was once literally translated as "pavilion"; however, the philosophical connotations of the Chinese "Ting"—such as its sense of ethereality and harmony with nature—cannot be fully captured by the Western "pavilion", a structure defined primarily by functional purposes. This translational dilemma has severely impeded the effective dissemination and in-depth understanding of Chinese architectural aesthetic ideas worldwide.

Based on this, this study proposes the following core research questions: 1. What are the main categories of culturally loaded terms in Chinese architectural aesthetics, and what are the characteristics of their cultural connotations and linguistic features? 2. For different categories of culturally loaded terms, what are the main strategies adopted in existing English translation practices, and what are their respective effects and limitations? 3. How can a systematic and effective translation strategy system be constructed to better convey the unique cultural connotations and aesthetic values of Chinese architectural aesthetics? By systematically organizing and analyzing relevant data, this study seeks to address the above questions and contribute to academic endeavors focused on the accurate global dissemination of Chinese architectural culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Research on the Translation Theory of Culturally Loaded Terms*

The translation of culturally loaded terms has long been a key challenge and focal point in the field of translation studies. Early scholars such as Eugene Nida proposed the "functional equivalence" theory, which emphasizes reader response and advocates for cultural adjustments when literal correspondence is unattainable (Nida, 1964). However, this domestication-oriented strategy risks diluting the source

culture when applied to terms with strong cultural identity markers. In response, Lawrence Venuti put forward the "foreignization" translation strategy, which aims to counteract ethnocentrism in the target language culture and preserve the heterogeneity of foreign cultures (Venuti, 1995/2008). This offers valuable insights for advancing the global dissemination of Chinese architectural culture.

In recent years, domestic scholars have conducted in-depth research integrating China's contextual realities. Liu Miqing's (2019) "cultural translation perspective" emphasizes that translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but also an act of cultural interpretation and communication, requiring translators to possess cross-cultural competence. This perspective provides a solid theoretical foundation for the present study. Specifically, numerous scholars have categorized and analyzed the translation of Chinese culturally loaded terms. For example, Zhang Zheng (2020) classifies culturally loaded terms into five categories—ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic—and discusses corresponding translation approaches. Li Ming (2018) focuses on philosophical terms and advocates adopting the "transliteration + interpretation" method to preserve the integrity of their ideological connotations. These studies provide important reference points for the systematic classification of culturally loaded terms in architectural aesthetics within this study.

2.2 Current Status of Research on the English Translation of Chinese Architectural Terms

Existing research on the English translation of Chinese architectural terms primarily focuses on the following aspects:

First, collative work from the perspective of architectural history and theory. For example, Lin He (2021) conducted practical discussions on the translation of terms such as "Jiejing" [borrowed scenery] and "Yijing" [restraining scenery] when introducing Chinese gardens to Western audiences. While such studies offer valuable insights, they are mostly scattered across descriptions of specific architectural works and lack systematic theoretical refinement of translation strategies.

Second, specialized research from the perspective of translation studies. In recent years, the number of relevant studies has grown steadily. Chen (2022) analyzed the translation strategies of technical terms in ancient Chinese architecture by taking the English translation of *Yingzao Fashi* (Treatise on Architectural Methods) as a case study, and emphasized the significance of textual research and contextual analysis. Zhao & Smith (2023) employed corpus-based methods to investigate the usage frequency and evolutionary trends of English translations for architectural typology terms (e.g., "Ting" [pavilion], "Tai" [platform], "Lou" [storeyed building], and "Ge" [pavilion-like building]) in English-language publications. They found that the usage rate of transliteration (e.g., Ting, Tai) has risen significantly over the past two decades, reflecting a boost in cultural confidence and the growing adoption of the foreignization strategy. Liu (2024) explored how multimedia annotations can be used to support the translation of architectural aesthetic concepts in the digital age.

However, most existing research centers on technical terms or specific architectural components, and there remains a dearth of systematic research on translation strategies for core concepts that encapsulate the essence of Chinese aesthetics—such as "Yijing" [artistic conception], "Qiyun" [rhythmic vitality],

and "Xushi" [void-solid]. These concepts are highly abstract, carry heavy cultural connotations, pose significant translation challenges, and are also pivotal to determining the depth of cross-cultural dissemination. Therefore, this study will focus on the entire discourse system of Chinese architectural aesthetics and develop a comprehensive classification and translation strategy framework for culturally loaded terms, spanning from specific technical terminology to abstract aesthetic concepts.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a mixed research method dominated by qualitative research and supplemented by quantitative analysis, specifically including:

- 1) **Text Analysis Method:** This study constructed a small-scale thematic corpus. Core textual sources include authoritative works such as Liang Sicheng's *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture* (English edition) and Li Yunhe's *Hua Xia Yi Jiang* (*The Art of Chinese Architecture*, English translation); academic papers—primarily core journal articles on the English translation of Chinese architecture published in the past five years, retrieved from databases including CNKI and SCOPUS; and official and professional materials, such as application documents for China's world cultural heritage listings, English-language introductions on official websites (e.g., the Palace Museum), and English abstracts of prominent architectural journals. Through close reading of these texts, the culturally loaded terms in Chinese architectural aesthetics and their corresponding English translations were systematically extracted.
- 2) **Classification and Comparative Research Method:** Building on the text analysis, this study categorized the collected culturally loaded terms by drawing on the classification frameworks proposed by Zhang Zheng (2020) and Li Ming (2018), and integrating the distinctive characteristics of architectural aesthetics. The terms were initially divided into three categories: Category A: Philosophical and aesthetic concept terms (e.g., Yijing [artistic conception], Qiyun [rhythmic vitality], Xushi [void-solid], Tianren Heyi [harmony between man and nature]); Category B: Technical and morphological terms (e.g., Dougong [bracket set], Sunmao [mortise-and-tenon joint], Taiiangshi [beam-lifting structure], Feiyan [overhanging eave]); Category C: Style and sensory description terms (e.g., Chenwen [dignified and solid], Feidong [soaring and dynamic], Linglong [exquisite and delicate], Dianya [elegant and refined]). Subsequent cross-comparisons were conducted on different English renditions of the same term to evaluate their respective strengths and limitations.
- 3) **Case Analysis Method:** Two to three highly representative core terms were selected from each category for in-depth case analysis. By examining the cultural connotations, contextual usage, and communicative effects of different translations of these terms, this study verified and deepened the understanding of the effectiveness of different translation strategies.

4. Research Results and Discussion

Based on the above research methods, this study systematically collates the culturally loaded terms in Chinese architectural aesthetics and develops a targeted translation strategy system for different types of terms.

4.1 Classification and Characteristics of Culturally Loaded Terms in Chinese Architectural Aesthetics

4.1.1 Category A: Philosophical and Aesthetic Concept Terms

These terms constitute the core of Chinese architectural aesthetics and are rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy and literary theory. They are highly abstract, rich in connotations, and multi-layered in meaning.

"Yijing" [artistic conception]: Refers to the artistic realm formed by the integration and interpenetration of subjective emotions and objective images, representing one of the ultimate pursuits in the creation of architectural space. It is not merely a visual scene but also a psychological space that evokes boundless imagination in the viewer.

"Qiyun" [rhythmic vitality]: Derived from Chinese painting theory, it denotes the vitality, rhythm, and spiritual essence of a work. In architecture, it is manifested in the rhythmic quality of building complex layouts, the vitality of individual buildings, and the harmonious rhythm of their interaction with the surrounding environment.

"Xushi" [void-solid]: An embodiment of Taoist philosophical thought. "Xu" [void] refers to spatial, empty, and transparent elements; "Shi" [solid] refers to substantial, walled, and enclosed elements. Through the ingenious integration of void and solid (e.g., latticed windows in gardens and corridors in buildings), Chinese architecture creates rich spatial layers and achieves the aesthetic effect of "treating negative space with the same intentionality as positive space."

4.1.2 Category B: Technical and Morphological Terms

These terms refer to specific architectural components, structures, or techniques and embody unique architectural wisdom. They have clear referents but often lack completely equivalent counterparts in the Western architectural system.

"Dougong" [bracket set]: A unique cantilever component in Chinese wood-frame architecture, combining both structural and decorative functions.

"Sunmao" [mortise-and-tenon joint]: A connection method in wood structures where two components are joined by concave and convex parts, without the need for a single nail or rivet, embodying the philosophical thought of "overcoming rigidity with flexibility."

"Feiyan" [overhanging eave]: The corner of the roof tilts upward like a flying bird spreading its wings, which is not only beneficial for drainage and lighting but also endows the building with a sense of lightness and agility.

4.1.3 Category C: Style and Sensation Description Terms

These terms are used to describe the overall style of a building or the subjective aesthetic feeling it brings to people, and they have strong subjectivity and ambiguity.

"Chenwen" [dignified and solid]: Describes the visual feeling of a building being solemn, stable, and not frivolous.

"Feidong" [soaring and dynamic]: Describes the sense of flow and upward momentum exhibited by the outline of a building, especially the overhanging eaves.

"Linglong" [exquisite and delicate]: Describes the characteristics of a building being exquisite, transparent, and meticulous.

4.2 Applicability Analysis and System Construction of Translation Strategies

In light of the distinct characteristics of the three categories of terms outlined above, their translation strategies should be tailored to different priorities, forming a dynamic system oriented toward the effectiveness of cultural communication.

4.2.1 Category A Terms: Foreignization as the Dominant Approach, with Transliteration + Annotation as the Core Strategy

For Category A terms, their core value resides in their unique cultural identity and philosophical depth. Simplistic free translation often results in a significant attenuation or even distortion of their connotations. Therefore, a foreignization-dominant strategy should be adopted, with "transliteration + annotation" as the primary approach.

Case Analysis: Translation of "Yijing" [artistic conception] Common translations: artistic conception, idealized landscape, poetic imagery Problem Analysis: These renditions only capture a single dimension of "Yijing" (the artistic, landscape, or poetic aspect) and fail to convey its complete philosophical essence: "the integration of emotion and scene, and the harmony between intent and realm." Recommended Strategy: Transliterate as "Yijing" with supplementary annotation. Application Example: Yijing (an artistic concept in which subjective emotions and objective scenes blend seamlessly, evoking a realm of boundless imagination beyond physical form). This translation first establishes "Yijing" as a China-specific cultural concept through transliteration, avoiding simplistic equivalence with any existing Western concepts. The subsequent annotation clarifies its core connotation and guides target-language readers to understand and embrace this unique concept. As the use of this term grows in international academic circles, "Yijing" is expected to be fully assimilated into the English lexicon, much like "Yin Yang" and "Feng Shui."

"Qiyun" [rhythmic vitality] is recommended to be translated as: Qiyun (lit. 'spirit resonance' or 'rhythmic vitality'; the lifelike rhythm and spiritual ambiance inherent in a work of art or architecture).

"Xushi" [void-solid] is recommended to be translated as: Xushi (the interplay and complementary relationship between void/empty/open spaces and solid/filled/enclosed elements, a foundational aesthetic principle in Chinese art and architecture).

4.2.2 Category B Terms

Combination of Foreignization and Domestication, with Literal Translation/Transliteration + Literal Translation as the Preferred Strategy.

Category B terms refer to tangible entities, and the primary objective of translation is to accurately

convey their physical form and structural functions. Strategically, a balance can be struck between foreignization and domestication.

Case Analysis 1: Translation of "Dougong" [bracket set] Common translations: bracket set (the most widely used), dougong (transliteration, increasingly prevalent) Problem Analysis: "Bracket set" is a domestication-based translation rooted in functional equivalence; while it enables Western readers to quickly grasp that it refers to a "combination of brackets," it completely omits morphological information about the two components ("Dou" [bucket] and "Gong" [arm]) and their cultural denominations. Pure transliteration of "dougong" provides no contextual information for first-time readers. Recommended Strategy: Transliteration + literal translation/functional explanation (i.e., Dougong [bracket set]). This format should be used at the first occurrence of the term; in subsequent text, either "dougong" or "bracket set" may be used interchangeably as appropriate. Argumentation: The "Dougong [bracket set]" approach represents a pragmatic and effective compromise. It preserves cultural identity through transliteration while ensuring immediate information transmission via the literal translation/functional explanation in parentheses. Liang Sicheng employed this method extensively in his works—for instance, translating "Fang" [tie beam] as "Fang (tie-beam)"—and its effectiveness has been validated in practice (Liang, 1984).

Case Analysis 2: Translation of "Sunmao" [mortise-and-tenon joint]. Common translation: mortise-and-tenon joint. Problem Analysis: This constitutes a highly successful literal translation, as a comparable structure exists in Western woodworking, with the terms "mortise" (the concave component) and "tenon" (the convex component) aligning perfectly. This domestication approach achieves precise transmission of both function and form. Recommended Strategy: Directly adopt the "mortise-and-tenon joint." Annotations may be added to emphasize its central position in Chinese architecture and the philosophical principle of "no nails or rivets required." Argumentation: When fully or highly equivalent terms exist in the target language, domestication through literal translation represents the most efficient and accurate choice. This demonstrates that translation strategy selection should not be rigid but rather contingent on the "degree of cultural correspondence" of specific terms.

4.2.3 Category C Terms

Domestication as the Core, with Creative Free Translation to Evoke Aesthetic Resonance.

Category C terms describe subjective aesthetic experiences, and the goal of translation is to evoke analogous feelings in the target language. Due to cultural divergences, complete semantic correspondence is rare; thus, translators must exercise their subjectivity and employ creative free translation.

Case Analysis: Translation of "Feidong" [soaring and dynamic] Common translations: soaring, dynamic, flying Problem Analysis: These terms partially convey a "sense of movement" but vary in emphasis: "soaring" stresses upward ascent, "dynamic" denotes a general state of motion, and "flying" is overly literal. Recommended Strategy: Select the most appropriate adjectival phrase based on the specific context: use "soaring and graceful" to describe the overall outline, and "sweeping and dynamic" to

characterize linear qualities. Argumentation: For sensory terms, there is no singular "correct" translation. The key lies in the translator's precise grasp of the original text's stylistic nuances and ability to evoke analogous aesthetic responses in the target language. This requires translators to be not only linguistic experts but also connoisseurs of architectural aesthetics.

"Chenwen" [dignified and solid] may be translated as "dignified and solid" or "solemn and grounded," depending on the context.

"Linglong" [exquisite and delicate] may be translated as "exquisite and delicate" or "elegantly refined," depending on the context.

4.3 Dynamic Strategy System and Translator's Subjectivity

To sum up, the translation strategies for culturally loaded terms in Chinese architectural aesthetics form a continuous spectrum of dynamic choices rather than fixed options of "either/or." The selection is mainly based on three variables:

Cultural Uniqueness: The degree of correspondence of the term in the target culture.

Level of Abstraction: The range from specific objects to abstract concepts.

Communication Purpose: Whether the target audience is professional scholars or the general public.

In this system, the translator plays a key role as a "cultural interpreter" and "aesthetic re-creator." He/she needs to deeply understand the cultural connotations of the source language, accurately judge the cognitive context and acceptance ability of target-language readers, and thus find the most appropriate "position" for each culturally loaded term on the spectrum of "foreignization" and "domestication."

5. Research Conclusions

Through the systematic classification of culturally loaded terms in Chinese architectural aesthetics and the analysis of translation strategies, this study draws the following key conclusions:

First, culturally loaded terms in Chinese architectural aesthetics form a system with rich connotations and distinct hierarchical characteristics, which can be broadly categorized into three types: philosophical and aesthetic concept terms, technical and morphological terms, and style and sensory description terms. These term categories exhibit significant differences in cultural uniqueness, level of abstraction, and functional attributes, which serve as the fundamental basis for formulating differentiated translation strategies.

Second, there is no universal "one-size-fits-all" translation strategy. An effective translation strategy system must be dynamic and multi-tiered. For core philosophical and aesthetic concepts (Category A), the "transliteration + annotation" strategy—oriented toward foreignization—should be adopted to safeguard cultural identity; for specific technical and morphological terms (Category B), strategies that combine foreignization and domestication (e.g., "transliteration + literal translation/functional explanation" or direct use of equivalent target-language terms) can be employed to balance cultural identity and information transmission; for style and sensory description terms (Category C), the

strengths of domestication should be leveraged, and creative free translation implemented to evoke readers' aesthetic resonance.

Third, translators' cross-cultural literacy and subjective decision-making are critical. Successful translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but also an in-depth cultural interpretation and cross-cultural aesthetic communication. Based on fully comprehending the source text, translators must comprehensively consider communication objectives, audience backgrounds, and text types, and flexibly apply diverse translation strategies.

The findings of this study provide direct reference value for the English translation of Chinese architectural culture, the translation of academic works, the composition of museum commentaries, the translation of cultural heritage application documents, and the compilation of relevant professional dictionaries. Future research could further expand the corpus scale, utilize corpus tools to conduct more precise quantitative analyses, or carry out empirical research on the reception effects among target-language readers. Such efforts would continuously optimize translation strategies and promote the more effective and far-reaching global dissemination of Chinese architectural aesthetics.

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