

Original Paper

A Study on the English Translation of Museum Cultural Relics from the Perspective of Skopos Theory: A Case Study of Hubei Provincial Museum

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of globalization and the “going global” of Chinese culture, the English translation of museum cultural relics acts as an important carrier for the cross-cultural communication of regional culture. As a core platform for the display of Chu culture, the quality of English translations of cultural relics in Hubei Provincial Museum directly influences the international communication effect of the distinctive culture in the Yangtze River Basin. Supported by Skopos theory of the German functionalist translation approach, this paper conducts a case analysis of the English translations of typical cultural relics such as bronzes, ceramics and lacquered wooden artifacts in the museum, centering on the three principles of the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule. This paper shows that the museum’s translations generally achieve a balance between information transmission and linguistic standardization, but there are still problems such as the lack of key information, mistranslation of culture-loaded words and inconsistent translation of craft terms. Looking at both positive and negative translation examples, this paper puts forward an optimization strategy that’s guided by communication goals, balances cultural authenticity and natural English phrasing. It can give practical pointers for standardizing the English translation of Hubei Provincial Museum’s cultural relics, plus provide solid empirical support for the translation of promotional materials about unique cultural content from local museums.

Keywords

Hubei Provincial Museum, Skopos Theory, English Translation of Cultural Relics

1. Introduction

Museums showcase the long-standing history and unique spiritual essence of the Chinese nation. They undertake vital cultural missions to disseminate traditional Chinese culture and facilitate cross-cultural dialogue (Zhou, 2022). The English translation of museum cultural relics will directly affect the actual effect of cultural communication, and also shape the overall impression of international tourists on Chinese culture. The on-site inscriptions and explanatory notes attached to the cultural relics on display, on the one hand, have practical value, on the other hand, also bear a variety of functions. These translation contents will convey basic factual information, interpret the implied cultural connotation, and popularize professional cultural knowledge; standard translation practice will give priority to the absolute accuracy of the original information, and will also strive to reproduce the deep cultural meaning embedded in the cultural relics. Local museums in China have a relatively distinct regional cultural attribute, which also constitutes their own characteristics. The existing English translation still exposes many obvious defects in the museum cultural relics. Translators often have deviations in interpretation when dealing with words loaded with cultural meanings. There is also a lack of a unified translation standard for local craft terms, and many translation contents fail to match the cognitive habits and reading preferences of the target language recipients. These problems are particularly prominent in the English translation of typical artifacts of Jingchu culture, such as bronzes, lacquer wood and ceramics.

As a national-level museum that gives a full picture of Jingchu culture, the Hubei Provincial Museum ranks among the largest museums in central China and holds one of the region's richest collections (Chen & Chen, 2022). Among its collections, there are bronze wares, Chu-style lacquer and wood wares, as well as ceramics and other artifacts. These artifacts have strong regional technological characteristics and also contain profound cultural significance. The English commentary text on the side of the museum constitutes an important carrier for the international dissemination of the culture of the Yangtze River Basin. However, some of the existing English translations of cultural relics in museums still expose problems such as lack of cultural information, mistranslation and semantic redundancy (Chen & Chen, 2022), which will weaken the role of museums in promoting Jingchu culture on a global scale and limit the actual effect of cross-cultural communication. Although Skopos theory has been introduced into the study of museum translation, there are still not many empirical studies on Hubei Provincial Museum. The existing achievements are either scattered case studies, which fail to fully highlight the regional characteristics of Chu cultural relics, or fail to make a systematic diagnostic analysis based on the three principles of Skopos theory, so it is difficult to provide a more specific improvement direction for the translation practice of museums.

In order to fill the above research gaps, this paper takes Skopos theory as the analytical basis and selects the representative English translations of artifacts in Hubei Provincial Museum as the research object. Under this theoretical framework, the current translation practice of museums is systematically investigated through case analysis and comparative study. Based on this analysis, we can find out the specific problems in the translation and put forward corresponding improvement strategies.

2. An Overview of Skopos Theory

Skopos theory is a core achievement of German functionalist translation theory in the 1970 s. It was proposed by Hans Vermeer and later perfected and systematized by scholars such as Katrina Rice and Christiane Nord. This theory breaks the traditional translation method which is centered on the original text and one-sided pursuit of formal equivalence. Instead, it defines translation as a purpose-centered and audience-oriented cross-cultural communication behavior. According to Vermeer, translation activities always have a clear purpose orientation, and translation strategies also need to be flexibly adjusted according to the actual context (Vermeer, 2009). To this end, Vermeer put forward the three principles of Skopos theory. These are the skopos rule, the coherence rule, and the fidelity rule. The skopos rule plays a dominant role in the whole translation activity. It requires the translator to make strategic choices according to the communicative purpose that the translation wants to achieve, so as to ensure effective communication in the cultural context of the target language. The coherence rule is also called intratextual coherence. This rule asks that a translation be coherent and acceptable within the culture of the target language. Ordinary readers in the target language should be able to understand the translation content without any trouble. The fidelity rule is also called intertextual coherence. This rule says that the target text should pass on the content and style of the source text. It should do this as faithfully as it can. That is, as long as the communicative purpose is met. The core features of Skopos theory, one is function-oriented and the other is audience-centered, which are indeed in line with the practical needs of museum cultural relics translation. The translation of cultural relics is not a simple conversion of language symbols, but a cross-cultural communication behavior for overseas audiences. Therefore, it is necessary to find a balance between the accuracy of information, the fluency of expression and the spread of culture. Because of this compatibility, the Skopos theory can provide a scientific theoretical framework for the choice of strategies for the English translation of cultural relics in Hubei Provincial Museum, and thus can also serve as an important theoretical framework for the analysis of the English translation of Jingchu culture-related culture-loaded texts.

3. A Skopos-Based Analysis of the English Translation at Hubei Provincial Museum

The Hubei Provincial Museum has a considerable number of collections. These collections focus on the Jingchu culture, especially the bronze and lacquer wood, which has attracted the attention of the international academic community. The English translation of these cultural relics by museums plays an important role in cross-cultural communication and is also a major way to introduce Chinese history to foreign tourists (Zhu & Yang, 2017). The empirical materials used in this study are mainly from the cultural relics commentary and descriptive texts collected by the author on the museum site in January 2026. In addition, the English content of the official website of the museum as of March 2026 is supplemented. This part of the data can provide some additional comparative materials. This paper uses Skopos theory as a theoretical framework and evaluates the current translation practice according to the three principles of the theory.

3.1 The Skopos Rule

In functionalist Skopos theory, the skopos rule occupies the central position, holding that any translational action is directed by the communicative end it is meant to serve. For the translator, this means that the expected function of the translation in the target language environment should be used as the main guide for the whole translation process. The core purpose of this work is to accurately convey the key information of the artifacts to overseas audiences, which can enhance their awareness and understanding of Chinese cultural relics, and ultimately achieve effective cross-cultural communication. In order to achieve this goal, the translator has to convert the content with proprietary information in the source language culture according to the cultural background and cognitive habits of the target language audience, and then optimize the expression form on the basis of ensuring the integrity of the information. In this way, the two communicative goals of accurate transmission of cultural relics information and effective dissemination of culture can be achieved at the same time.

Example 1:

ST: 粉彩荷花吸杯

TT: Famille Rose Lotus-shaped Sipping Cup

The value of this rendering lies in the way each part of the Chinese name is given a distinct function. “Famille Rose”, an established term in Western writing on Chinese ceramics, identifies “粉彩” without replacing it with a loose description of color. “Lotus-shaped” tells readers what the vessel looks like, whereas “Sipping Cup” indicates how it was used: liquid could be drawn through the cup in much the same way as through a straw. A visitor without specialist knowledge can therefore recover the technique, form, and function from one label. From the perspective of the skopos rule, the translation selects the information needed for identification and presents it in terms accessible to its intended readers. Retaining “Famille Rose” also places the object within the established vocabulary of Chinese ceramic techniques and gives overseas audiences a point of entry into the ceramic crafts of the late Jingchu period.

Example 2:

ST: 青花缠枝莲纹梅瓶

TT: Blue-and-white Prunus Vase with Interlocking Lotus Pattern

Because “梅瓶” is a specific Chinese vessel type, the literal label “Plum Vase” may lead Western visitors to mistake “plum” for a description of the vessel’s function rather than part of its conventional name. On the other hand, the translator adopts the commonly used translation name “Prunus Vase” in the international museum community, in which the part of “Prunus” refers to the Prunus plant. This treatment can not only retain the cultural image of “梅”, but also make the audience realize that it is a flower vessel through the expression of “vase”, thus realizing the balance between cultural image and audience cognition. In addition, the two words “blue and white” and “lotus pattern” are standard terms for describing glaze color and decorative patterns, which are also in line with the cognitive habits of the target language audience in ceramic naming. The interlocking lotus pattern belongs to a classic decorative pattern in Jingchu ceramics. this translation not only conveys information about the ornamentation but also allows

overseas audiences to perceive the aesthetic characteristics of Jingchu ceramic designs; it can be said that this translation case is a relatively successful translation practice under the guidance of the skopos rule.

Example 3:

ST: 嵌红铜几何纹龙形足铜敦

TT: Bronze *dui*-container with dragon-shaped feet and copper inlay

The original translation of this exhibit violates the skopos rule from the perspective of Skopos theory. Specifically, although the two words “dragon-shaped feet” and “copper inlay” are accurately translated, the key decorative detail “geometric pattern” is completely omitted. Geometric patterns are a major clue for figuring out the time period and style of bronze vessels. As a result, this omission means that the full information and cultural meaning of the original text cannot be passed on. According to Skopos theory, the main aim of translating museum relics is “to pass on information clearly and help people from different cultures understand it”. But here, because some key details are left out, this aim is not met. That clearly goes against the Skopos theory.

It is worth noting that after comparing the original translation with the English official website of Hubei Provincial Museum, it is found that the museum made a comprehensive revision of the above translation in March 2026; the updated translation version on the official website: “Bronze Dui (wine vessel) inlaid with geometric dragon pattern in red copper” (Hubei Provincial Museum, 2026). A comparison between the two clearly shows that the original translation violated the skopos rule under Skopos theory. This authoritative translation adds the core information of “geometric patterns”. On the one hand, it enables overseas audiences to fully recognize the decorative features of objects, and on the other hand, it enables them to perceive the distinctive features of Jingchu bronze crafts with the help of geometric patterns. In this way, it really returns to the dual core purpose of the English translation of museum cultural relics, that is, “information transmission and cultural communication”.

3.2 The Coherence Rule

The coherence rule requires that the translation should be readable and acceptable in the cultural context of the target language, that is, the translation should conform to the language habits and logical structure of the target language, so that the audience can understand the meaning smoothly. Specific to the museum translation practice, the English translation should follow a more authentic way of expression and avoid rigidly applying Chinese syntactic structure or stacking modifiers in an unnatural way. Through the careful arrangement of sentence patterns and the orderly processing of the information presented, it can ensure that the audience can naturally grasp the characteristics of cultural relics and cultural connotations when reading, and then achieve the goal of intratextual coherence.

Example 4:

ST: 彩绘漆木蟠虺纹扁壶

TT: Painted lacquer flat flask with coiled serpents

The translation adopts the classic English structure of head noun post-modification. The expression “Painted lacquer” identifies the distinctive material and craftsmanship of Chu-style lacquerware, and

“flat flask” defines the vessel form. Together they constitute the stable core of the noun phrase, followed by “with coiled serpents” to indicate the decorative motif. The whole presentation follows the progressive logic of material–vessel form–decorative pattern, which is highly compatible with the way overseas audiences perceive information about cultural relics. The treatment of “蟠虺纹” deserves particular attention. This regional motif occurs on both Chu-style lacquerware and bronze wares, and its design is formed by small serpents twisting around one another. The phrase “coiled serpents” records this compact, intertwined form rather than reducing the motif to a general animal image. At the same time, the wording can be understood by visitors who have no prior knowledge of the Chinese term. It thus contributes to intratextual coherence without erasing the regional character of the ornament: the English is direct, while the decorative identity of the relic remains visible.

Example 5:

ST: 窑变釉贯耳扁方瓶

TT: Fambe-glazed Flat Square Vase with Pierced Handles

The source name follows a compact naming pattern commonly used in Chinese descriptions of antiquities. It adopts a compact structure, which integrates the production process, glaze color type, vessel shape and accessories details. The parts are connected by implicit logical relations. If the Chinese name is literally translated word by word, it is easy to cause confusion in the English word order, making the whole expression more chaotic.

In the TT, “vase” functions as the head noun. “Fambe-glazed” is placed before it to identify the glazing technique, while “with pierced handles” follows the noun to describe the pierced ears. This arrangement separates the main categories of information instead of forcing the source-language modifier chain into English. A visitor can identify the object as a vase first and then add the details concerning its glaze, shape, and handles. The specialized vocabulary for the technique and vessel form is nevertheless retained. The label is therefore readable for a general audience without losing the professional detail expected in a museum context.

Example 6:

ST: 粉彩仕女婴戏图转颈瓶

TT: Famille Rose Vase with Rotatable Neck and Pattern of Lady and Playing Children

The translation pays close attention to how target readers normally make sense of things. It also considers the usual rules for writing about cultural objects. The term “Famille Rose” is used to stand for “粉彩”. Because this term is established in Western ceramic studies, it gives specialist readers an immediately recognizable equivalent. The rest of the label is organized around the head noun “vase”: the preposition “with” introduces both “Rotatable Neck” and “Pattern of Lady and Playing Children”. This structure separates the vessel’s construction from its ornament instead of piling several modifiers before the noun. A museum visitor can identify the object first and then read its distinctive details. Since the lady-and-children motif is characteristic of Jingchu ceramics, preserving it in the label is important. The TT remains intelligible in English while still directing attention to the artifact’s regional aesthetic features.

3.3 The Fidelity Rule

Within Skopos theory, the fidelity rule concerns the relationship between the source and target texts, or intertextual coherence. It does not demand formal equivalence at every point. Rather, once the purpose of the translation has been defined, the TT should preserve the source information needed to fulfil that purpose. For a museum label, the essential details usually include the relic's name, material, form, decoration, and function. Some simplification may be necessary for visitors, but it should neither alter these details nor flatten the cultural meanings attached to them.

Example 7:

ST: 斗彩鸳鸯卧莲碗

TT: Doucai Bowl with Mandarin Ducks Resting on Lotus

The translation restores the original information. The strongest feature of this rendering is its treatment of the technical term “斗彩”. Unlike “粉彩”, for which “Famille Rose” is established in Western ceramic discourse, Doucai has no exact counterpart in Western ceramics. Therefore, the transliteration of “Doucai” is finally selected. This choice aligns with the fidelity rule of Skopos theory, preserves cultural specificity, and also reflects a moderate foreignization strategy in cross-cultural communication. Second, “鸳鸯卧莲” in the source text has been completely translated. “Mandarin Ducks” accurately translated the name of this bird, while “Resting on Lotus” also expressed the static posture of “卧”. It also uses prepositional phrases to explain the positional relationship between lotus and bird, which is completely corresponding to the description of the original decoration. The vessel shape is clearly shown as “Bowl”. The whole translation is closely related to the content of the original text in terms of wording, meaning and cultural details, and still maintains a good sense of balance between being loyal to the original work and making it easy for the target readers to understand.

Example 8:

ST: 影青缠枝莲高足碗

TT: Shadowy Blue High-footed Bowl with Interlocking Lotus Pattern

This translation completely and accurately conveys the information of the original text, and implements the fidelity rule very well. In this translation, the “影青” is processed into “Shadowy Blue”, which accurately restores the visual characteristics of the glaze color, and presents shadowy blue in a faithful way. This glaze color is a very iconic style of Jingchu ceramics, and also preserves the original technological characteristics of Jingchu porcelain. This unique glaze represents a key characteristic of Jingchu ceramics. It fully retains the craft features of Jingchu ceramic ware.

The term “缠枝莲纹” is translated as “Interlocking Lotus Pattern”, which reflects the basic visual form of this decorative motif. The term “高足碗” corresponds to the translation of “High-footed Bowl”, which can accurately correspond to the specific shape of such objects. In this translation, the glaze color, decoration and overall shape of the cultural relics are preserved. At the same time, it accurately conveys the professional definition and cultural characteristics presented in the original text, which is also in line with the requirements of the fidelity rule.

Example 9:

ST: 粉地粉彩宝相花双喜碗

TT: Pink Bowl with Famille Rose Rosette Pattern and Double-happiness Character

This translation has noticeable flaws and runs counter to the requirements of the fidelity rule. Although it accurately translates expressions such as “pink ground”, “famille rose” and “double happiness”, it wrongly renders “宝相花”—a traditional decorative pattern embedded with Chinese Buddhist cultural connotations—as “Rosette Pattern”. The Baoxiang flower is a classic auspicious pattern developed by extracting stylistic elements from lotus, peony, chrysanthemum and other flowers and reprocessing them through artistic imagination (Dong, 2025). Nevertheless, “rosette pattern” only refers to a common rose ornament, which does not match the cultural denotation of the original text. Since the translation fails to faithfully pass on the cultural implications and decorative features of the cultural relic, it produces conceptual deviation and information distortion, and clearly violates the fidelity rule.

As stated in the paper Exploring the application of Baoxiang flower patterns in modern ceramic design, the authoritative and standardized translation of “宝相花” in ceramic research is “Baoxiang Flower Pattern” (Fan, 2025). Accordingly, the revised translation for this artifact is suggested as: “Pink-ground Famille Rose Bowl with Baoxiang Flower Pattern and Double-happiness Characters”. This revised version accurately conveys core information covering the artifact’s material, craftsmanship and decorative motifs, fully retains the cultural connotations and artistic traits of the Baoxiang flower, and complies with the fidelity rule as well as the requirements for cross-cultural communication.

4. Conclusion

This paper adopts functionalist Skopos theory as its major research framework. It analyzes English translation cases of cultural relics collected from Hubei Provincial Museum. The research results confirm that the three principles of Skopos theory can indeed play a practical guiding role in the translation of cultural relics with cultural connotations; the English translation of cultural relics is not only a simple process of language symbol conversion, but also a cross-cultural communication behavior with overseas audiences as the core and serving the external explanation of Chinese excellent traditional culture. The analysis shows that, overall, the museum’s relic translations strike a balance between accurate information and readable text. Some problems still exist. These include missing key information and wrong translations of culture-loaded words. Such problems hurt how well the translation communicates. This also shows that translating cultural relics needs a flexible balance.

In the future, Hubei Provincial Museum can establish an exclusive terminology database of ceramic ornamentation and bronze ware type to further enhance the professionalism and audience acceptance of the translation. This paper can not only provide an operational path for the accurate translation of Jingchu regional cultural relics, but also provide reference for the translation of characteristic culture of similar local museums in China, and help regional culture integrate into the international communication system more efficiently.

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