

Original Paper

The Translation of Chinese Food Culture from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

Xiayan Guo¹ & Shi Shi*

¹ Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

* Corresponding author, Shi Shi, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Received: October 7, 2025 Accepted: November 10, 2025 Online Published: November 24, 2025

doi:10.22158/selt.v13n4p122

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v13n4p122>

Abstract

As a core carrier of Chinese civilization, Chinese food culture bears profound historical accumulation and philosophical connotations, and its effective translation is a crucial pathway to advance the international spread of Chinese culture. However, the external translation of food culture currently faces multiple challenges, such as differences in linguistic structures, cultural image default, and cognitive background barriers, which urgently call for systematic theoretical support and practical guidance. This study adopts Eco-translatology proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen as its theoretical framework. By virtue of the core principle of "three-dimensional transformation" of this theory, it explores how translators achieve dynamic adaptation and selective transformation in the source language and target language ecological environments. The research selects Food in Chinese Culture edited by K.C. Chang as the analytical text. Through in-depth analysis of the translation difficulties and handling methods in this text, this study aims to expand the application of Eco-translatology in the specific field of cultural translation, and provide actionable reference pathways for the external translation practices of Chinese food culture, contributing to the more effective global dissemination of Chinese culture.

Keywords

Eco-translatology, Three-dimensional transformation, Food in Chinese Culture, Cultural translation

1. Introduction

Chinese culinary culture has a long history, carrying rich connotations of thousands of years of history, philosophy and social structure. It is not only a material practice to satisfy the appetite, but also a unique form of cultural expression. The translation should take into account both the goal of language conversion and cultural transmission. The Chinese culinary culture contains unique philosophical thoughts and folk customs, such as the concepts of "balance of yin and yang" and "food and medicine are the same source".

This philosophical thought is deeply rooted in the Chinese cultural soil, but it faces many challenges in cross-cultural communication. Due to the significant differences between Chinese and Western culinary cultures, Chinese cuisine is complex and has a wide variety of categories. In translation, there are often phenomena of insufficient corresponding words and strange combinations, which hinder the transmission of cultural connotations.

In this context, ecological translation theory, as a new translation theory, provides a new theoretical perspective to solve the problems of culinary culture translation. Ecological translation theory emphasizes the dynamic balance of language, culture and communication, providing theoretical support for culinary culture translation. This theory was systematically proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen of Tsinghua University. It introduces ecological concepts into translation research, regards translation activities as a dynamic ecosystem, and emphasizes the role of the translator's adaptation and selection. Under this theoretical framework, translation is not only the conversion of language symbols, but also a continuous adaptation and selection process carried out by the translator in the multi-dimensional ecological environment of language, culture and communication. The focus is on the study of the relationship between the translation environment and the translator, as well as the translator's ability to survive and develop in different environments. In translation methods, attention is paid to the adaptive selection and conversion of language, cultural and communicative dimensions. This theory provides a comprehensive and dynamic framework for analyzing the problems in culinary culture translation, helping translators find the best translation strategies in complex cultural and language environments, and thus achieve the effective dissemination of Chinese culinary culture in the target language.

This study aims to apply the ecological translation theory to the specific practice of Chinese culinary culture translation, and take Professor Zhang Guangzhi's representative work "Food in Chinese Culture" as the core analysis text. Zhang Guangzhi's "Food in Chinese Culture" is an important work that deeply explores the close connection between Chinese culinary culture and society, history and culture. It has unique text features. The book covers a large number of professional terms, historical anecdotes, folk knowledge, etc. which constitute a rich but complex translation environment. This study aims to combine the text characteristics of "Food in Chinese Culture", apply the ecological translation theory, deeply analyze the core issues in culinary culture translation, and propose practical translation strategies, thereby promoting the accurate and effective translation of Chinese culinary culture. It helps Chinese culinary culture break through language and cultural barriers, go to the international stage, enhance the international influence of Chinese culture, and promote the exchange and understanding between different cultures.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The research framework of Eco-translatology Studies

2.1.1 Representative Scholars and Theoretical Development

Hu Gengshen, as the founder of ecological translation studies, proposed the "three-dimensional

transformation" theory centered on "language dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension", emphasizing that translators need to adapt to the ecological environment of the source language and target language in the translation process and achieve multi-dimensional balance. His seminal work *Translation as Adaptation and Selection* and his paper *An Interpretation of Eco-Translatology* provide the core theoretical foundation for the field.

Fang Mengzhi further promoted the interdisciplinary development of ecological translation studies, promoted the international dissemination of ecological translation studies, expanded the methodology of ecological translation studies and integrated them across disciplines, such as the combination of translation and cognitive science, cultural studies, emphasizing the interaction between translation activities and social and cultural environments.

In their study *Translation of Chinese Culinary Culture-Loaded Terms from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology: Taking the English Translation of A New Account of the Tales of the World as an Example*, Jiang Xiaoping and Luo Yun analyzed translation strategies for food culture-loaded terms in *A New Account of the Tales of the World* through the lens of "three-dimensional transformation." The research found that the translation achieved a balance between linguistic norms and cultural translatability through lexical selection, syntactic adjustment, and compensation for cultural imagery, offering a practical "three-dimensional integration" approach for translating food culture.

2.1.2 Limitations of Existing Studies and Directions for Improvement

However, most existing research focuses on translation cases from classic literary works (such as "Dream of the Red Chamber") or popular documentary series on mass media (such as "A Bite of China"), while paying insufficient attention to interdisciplinary works with a strong academic weight like "food in Chinese Culture". The research on local characteristic food cultures (such as the Dong ethnic group and Shaanxi snacks) is rather scattered, lacking systematic comparative analysis across regions; and the research mostly concentrates on traditional text translation, with less attention paid to translation strategies for emerging food phenomena. Most studies merely conduct superficial analyses at the linguistic, cultural, and communicative levels, failing to deeply integrate the particularity of food culture. We should strive to establish a local food culture translation system, conduct cross-regional comparative studies, analyze the influence of differences in northern and southern cuisines on translation strategies. We should also study the translation of food culture in short videos, analyze the translation strategies of food-related short videos on platforms like TikTok, and explore the synergy of multimodal translation (such as subtitles, dubbing, and visuals). We should also introduce complex system theory and view the translation ecosystem as a dynamic and open complex system, analyzing the interactive relationships among translators, texts, readers, and social culture.

2.2 Textual Features of K.C. Chang's *Food in Chinese Culture*

In *Food in Chinese Culture*, K.C. Chang uses food as a central pivot, frequently employing specialized terms laden with historical context and cultural connotations, such as cooking vessels, ritual systems and fermentation. These culture-loaded terms represent the first barrier in translation. The text is

characterized by complex sentences that integrate archaeological findings, literary references, and logical inferences. Translating such content requires handling intricate syntactic structures and implicit logical relationships.

The book is organized chronologically, with a clear timeline spanning the "Neolithic Age - Shang and Zhou Dynasties - Han and Tang Dynasties - Song and Yuan Dynasties - Ming and Qing Dynasties." However, each chapter follows a spiral narrative structure that moves from technology (ingredients, cooking methods) → ritual (dietary systems, sacrifices) → culture (philosophy, social impact). Translators must deeply understand this structure and reproduce it in the target text through discursive means; otherwise, the academic logic may be compromised. For instance, in the chapter on the Song Dynasty, the text first introduces innovations in urban cooking techniques, then describes dining ritual scenes in entertainment districts, and finally summarizes the sociocultural transformations behind the popularization of dining. This structure creates a spiral progression from technology to ritual to culture across chapters, requiring semantic construction to clarify the historical context of food culture.

The work is built upon extensive historical allusions and cultural common sense, as the author essentially writes a history of Chinese civilization through the lens of food. Therefore, translators must possess broad vision to grasp this unique narrative structure and maintain it in the translation through textual strategies.

2.3 The Ecological Translation Environment of Chinese Food Culture

The ecological translation environment of Chinese culinary culture constitutes a complex system interwoven by linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Its core components primarily include the dual ecological environments of the source and target languages and their interactive relationship. Specifically, this environment encompasses the following key elements: the historical background, philosophical concepts, and social customs in which the source text is rooted; the cognitive framework, cultural habits, and linguistic expression patterns of the target readers; and the specific context in which the translation act occurs. The dynamic equilibrium of this ecosystem requires translators to achieve a two-way interaction between adaptive selection and selective adaptation during the translation process. From the linguistic dimension, Chinese culinary vocabulary is rich in imagery and poetic expression. Dish names such as "Buddha Jumps Over the Wall", "Lion's Head Meatballs", and "Ants Climbing a Tree" convey cultural connotations through metaphor and allusion. This linguistic characteristic stands in sharp contrast to the accurate, direct, and logical expression style prevalent in Western languages, resulting in a fundamental contradiction in translation. In subsequent chapters, based on Eco-translatology, we will systematically analyze, using specific translation examples, how to perform adaptive transformations of culture-loaded words, phrases, sentence structures, and rhetorical devices. Strategies such as image reconstruction, annotative compensation and contextualized paraphrasing will be discussed to enhance the acceptability of the target text while preserving cultural distinctiveness.

From the cultural dimension, Chinese food culture is deeply rooted in traditional philosophical systems, theories of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and social customs. Western readers, however, often lack the corresponding cognitive framework. This cultural default necessitates necessary cultural compensation

during the translation process. This book will utilize the "cultural dimension transformation" principle of eco-translatology to explain how to bridge cultural cognitive differences through methods like background implantation, analogical conversion, and conceptual correspondence, thereby achieving effective transmission of cultural information.

From the communicative dimension, translating dietary texts requires simultaneously fulfilling multiple communicative purposes: accurately conveying practical information like ingredients and techniques, explaining the underlying cultural connotations, and accommodating the requirements of different text types. Therefore, within this complex ecosystem, the translator must assume the role of an adaptive selector, seeking a dynamic balance among the three dimensions of linguistic form, cultural connotation, and communicative effect.

3. Difficulties in Translating Chinese Food Culture: An Empirical Analysis Based on Food in Chinese Culture

Data Source: 100 core terms and 30 cultural allusions from Food in Chinese Culture were selected. By comparing existing translations (e.g Wang Chong's version) and public-domain translation cases, the types and frequencies of translation errors were statistically analyzed.

3.1 Difficulty 1: Untranslatability of Cultural Imagery

Chinese dietary concepts are deeply rooted in traditional philosophy, such as the core ideas of yin-yang and the five elements, for which there are significant gaps in English equivalents. These terms carry philosophical connotations beyond mere linguistic symbols, they are composite concepts integrating sensory experience, practical wisdom, and cultural cognition, lacking direct counterparts in English.

(1) “火候” far exceeds “cooking time” or “heat.” It encompasses time, heat intensity, the chef's experience, and intuition, representing an almost Taoist level of artistry. Simply translating it as “heat control” strips away its cultural essence. Wang Chong's version renders it as “heat control,” conveying only the superficial meaning of temperature management and losing its dynamic nature. To address this, transliteration should be adopted to preserve the cultural core: translating “火候” as “huohou (the dynamic control of heat intensity and cooking time in Chinese cuisine, a skill relying on the cook's experience).” This strategy retains cultural uniqueness through transliteration while explaining its core meaning, avoiding both over-domestication and literal translation pitfalls.

(2) “性味” translated as “nature and flavor” risks confusion with the Western concept of “flavor profile,” losing the cultural connotations of hot/cold properties in traditional Chinese medicine. A literal translation like “property and flavor” fails to establish its profound connection to health, bodily balance, and yin-yang harmony.

3.2 Difficulty 2: Challenges in Translating Interdisciplinary Terminology

K.C. Chang's work contains numerous terms spanning archaeology, history, ritual systems, and other disciplines. The difficulty lies in their dual nature—they are both professionally specific and culturally embedded. They must align with archaeological descriptions of artifacts and hierarchical definitions in

ritual studies while conveying underlying socio-cultural logic. Existing translations often suffer from incomplete information due to a narrow disciplinary perspective.

(3) Take "tailao" as an example: in archaeology, it refers to the bones of three sacrificial animals (ox, sheep, and pig) unearthed at the Yin Ruins. In ritual studies, it denotes sacrificial practices exclusive to emperors during the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Together, these two dimensions form the cultural link between diet and imperial hierarchy. Wang Chong's translation renders it as "tailao (a ritual sacrifice)," only identifies its "sacrificial" attribute but omits the archaeological evidence of "three animals" and the ritual connotation of "emperor-exclusive". A literal translation like "great sacrifice" is overly vague. The transliteration-plus-annotation strategy must be adopted Tai lao (the highest-grade sacrifice ritual involving ox, sheep, and pig), to achieve adaptation in both the linguistic and cultural dimensions.

3.3 Difficulty 3: Challenges in Modernizing Historical Context

Descriptions of ancient dietary practices in the book require transcending historical time and space to reconstruct scenarios for modern readers. The core issue is the irreducibility of historical contexts. Unique ancient Chinese dining and entertainment scenes have no direct equivalents in Western culture, where literal translation oversimplifies and liberal translation distorts cultural authenticity.

(4) For instance, descriptions of Song Dynasty urban dietary culture must convey the cultural scene of washe and goulan, which epitomizes urban prosperity during the Song Dynasty. A literal translation like "urban food stalls" loses its cultural and social functions of vibrancy, entertainment, and grassroots vitality. Wang Chong's version translates it as "street food in the Song Dynasty's washe and goulan," but "washe and goulan" lacks explanation, relying on reader's background knowledge. Drawing from Eco-Translatology's adaptive selection theory, it could be translated as "public food markets in Song Dynasty urban entertainment districts." This approach clearly communicates its function and setting at the communicative level, while preserving key terms through transliteration at the cultural level and providing historical context, achieving multidimensional balance.

Therefore, translating Chinese food culture texts requires moving beyond mere linguistic conversion to address cultural, disciplinary, and historical dimensions. By employing strategies like transliteration and annotation within the framework of Eco-Translatology's three-dimensional transformation, adaptive selection can be achieved through dynamic balance among linguistic, cultural, and communicative aspects. This ensures the accurate transmission of the deep connotations of Chinese food culture while avoiding the loss of cultural imagery.

4. Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

4.1 Adaptive Transformation at the Linguistic Dimension

Linguistic dimension transformation is the most fundamental aspect in translation, primarily involving conversions at the lexical, syntactic, and textual levels. At the lexical level, due to differences between the Chinese and English vocabulary systems, translators need to accurately select words based on specific contexts to ensure the translation precisely conveys the original meaning. Given the abundance of

culture-loaded terms in Food in Chinese Culture, establishing a multilingual terminology database is crucial. This database should comprehensively include proper nouns such as archaeological artifacts, cooking techniques, and dietary concepts, along with detailed explanations of their definitions, cultural backgrounds, and specific contexts in the book. By constructing such a terminology database, the standardization and consistency of term translations can be achieved, ensuring uniformity and accuracy for the same term across different contexts.

In terms of sentence-level translation, the text contains numerous complex sentences. To address this, a splitting and restructuring approach can be adopted, where long and intricate sentences are broken down and transformed based on logical relationships between clauses. This method ensures the translated text is logically clear and aligns with the reading habits of English-speaking audiences.

(1) 菘 song

译文: song (a type of primitive cabbage)

When translating archaeological artifacts and unique ingredients, the phonetic translation method is preferred to preserve the cultural identity, thereby ensuring that the translation can accurately convey the original meaning.

(2) 根据半坡遗址窖藏结构, 结合《齐民要术》记载, 可推断新石器时代晚期已出现初步的粮食储存与发酵技术。

译文: Evidence from the storage pit structures at the Banpo site, coupled with records in the Qimin Yaoshu (Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People), suggests that primitive techniques for grain storage and fermentation had emerged by the late Neolithic Period.

During the translation process, by adding components such as "Evidence from...", "coupled with...", and "suggests that...", the logical connections between sentences were made clearer, and it adapted to the reading habits of English readers.

4.2 Adaptive Transformation of Cultural Dimension

Adaptive transformation in the cultural dimension requires that "translators should focus on the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotations during the translation process" and avoid misinterpreting the source text from the perspective of the target language culture. Cultural allusions are an essential component of Chinese food culture, and their translation necessitates contextual restoration. While preserving transliteration, explanatory text within parentheses should be used to reconstruct the cultural context, enabling readers to understand the cultural background and symbolic significance of these unique references.

For dietary concepts carrying symbolic meanings, an analogical transformation strategy can be employed. While conveying the basic meaning, supplementary explanations should be provided to highlight the underlying cultural and philosophical connotations, achieving effective transformation and compensation in the cultural dimension.

(3) 解语杯 jie yu bei

译文: "Talking Cup" (a poetic wine vessel placed inside lotus flowers to absorb their fragrance, believed

to inspire drinkers during literary gatherings)

This object originates from an allusion of the Tang Dynasty, referring to a wine cup that was placed in a lotus flower and could inspire great poetic enthusiasm in drinkers while they were drinking. A literal translation would not work here, and the supplementary explanation in parentheses achieves the ecological compensation in the cultural dimension.

(4) 醢 hai

译文: hai (a fermented meat paste, somewhat similar to Roman garum or modern-day fish sauce)

The book mentions "hai" (a traditional Chinese fermented meat or fish paste) in ancient China. Effective cultural communication is achieved by drawing an analogy between this concept and familiar elements in Western dietary culture. By identifying functionally similar items in the target culture, this approach helps readers establish connections and deepen their understanding.

(5) 食疗同源 shi liao tong yuan

译文: Food as Medicine (reflecting the Yin - Yang principle in Chinese health philosophy)

The idea of "food and therapy sharing the same origin" embodies the concept in traditional Chinese medicine that food and medicine are interrelated and jointly maintain human health, while also containing the unique philosophical thought of yin-yang and the five elements. While conveying the basic meaning, supplementary explanations are used to clarify the underlying cultural and philosophical connotations, thereby achieving effective transformation and compensation in the cultural dimension.

4.3 Adaptive Transformation of Communicative Adaptability

The communicative dimension emphasizes that translators should fully consider the communicative intent of the original text and the communicative effect of the translated text in the target language environment during the translation process. Therefore, translators need to conduct translation from a communicative perspective and select appropriate translation strategies and methods to ensure that the translated text accurately conveys the communicative intent of the original while conforming to the cognitive habits and acceptance ability of the target language audience.

To enhance target language readers' understanding of Chinese dietary culture, translated texts can be supplemented with images for auxiliary explanation. For example, when translating the description of "urban dietary culture" in the Song Dynasty in the book, inserting images of relevant dietary scenes from *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (《清明上河图》) can visually present information such as the layout of food stalls on the streets of Song Dynasty cities and the state of diners, helping readers establish a more intuitive cognition. At the same time, during the translation process, full consideration should be given to the cultural background and acceptance ability of target language readers, and easy-to-understand language should be used to express complex dietary culture concepts. For cultural information that may cause misunderstanding, annotations or explanations should be provided in a timely manner to ensure that the translated text can accurately convey information in the communication process, avoid cultural conflicts, and achieve effective cross-cultural communication.

The "Three-Dimensional Transformation" theory of Eco-Translatology provides a systematic

methodology for dietary culture translation. The linguistic dimension achieves accurate transmission through terminology reconstruction and syntactic adjustment; the cultural dimension restores the context of cultural allusions and analogizes symbolic meanings by virtue of three-dimensional transformation and ecological compensation, enabling the transmission of cultural connotations; the communicative dimension enhances understanding by combining images and adopts a reader-oriented approach. The organic unification of these three dimensions can effectively improve translation quality, promote the dissemination of Chinese dietary culture, and achieve ecological balance in cross-cultural communication.

5. Conclusion

This study adopts Eco-Translatology as its theoretical framework and takes K.C. Chang's *Food in Chinese Culture* as its analytical focus, conducting an in-depth exploration of the translation of Chinese dietary culture—particularly the translation practice of academic cultural works. The research confirms that the translation of Chinese dietary culture is by no means a simple conversion of linguistic symbols, but rather a dynamic process of translator-centered adaptive selection and creative rewriting carried out within a complex "translation ecological environment".

Eco-Translatology provides systematic and practical methodological guidance for the translation of Chinese food culture, whose core lies in emphasizing that translators must comprehensively consider and dynamically balance the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions during the translation process, and complete adaptive selection within the translation ecological environment. Through the study of *Food in Chinese Culture*, it is found that the translation of Chinese dietary culture faces multiple challenges, such as the untranslatability of cultural images, difficulties in translating interdisciplinary terminology, and obstacles in transforming historical contexts. However, strategies proposed based on Eco-Translatology—including the reconstruction of terminology systems, three-dimensional transformation with ecological compensation, and reader-oriented adaptive selection—can effectively address these issues, improve translation quality, and promote the international dissemination and understanding of Chinese dietary culture.

References

- Chang, K. (2023). *Food in Chinese culture*. Guangxi Normal University Press.
- Gu, F. (2015). A study on Li Jiye's poetry translation from the perspective of 'three-dimensional adaptive selection and transformation' in eco-translatology: A case study of Li's translation of *The Mistress*. *Journal of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology* (Social Science Edition), (1).
- Hu, G. (2008). An interpretation of eco-translatology. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (6).
- Hu, G. (2011). Eco-translatology: Characteristics of ecological rationality and its enlightenment to translation studies. *Foreign Languages in China*, 8(6), 96-99.

- Hu, G. (2017). Several applied translation studies from the perspective of eco-translatology. *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, (05).
- Hu, G. (2011). The research focus and theoretical perspectives of eco-translatology. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (2), 5-9.
- Li, Y. (2001). Strategies for subtitle translation. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (4), 38-40.
- Sun, Y. (2012). Translation and strategies for intercultural communication. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (1).
- Wang, N. (2011). Ecocriticism and eco-translatology: Deconstruction and construction. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (2), 10-16.
- Xiong, B. (2003). Domestication and foreignization in cultural exchange translation. *Chinese Science & Technology Translators Journal*, (8), 9.
- Zhu, D. (2013). *A study on translation strategies for culture-loaded words in Chinese cuisine* (Master's thesis). Shenyang Normal University.