

## Original Paper

# The Research Status of English Translation of Chinese

## Calligraphic Art

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### Abstract

*In this paper, the keywords “calligraphy” and “English translation” are used to search for relevant documents from 2008 to 2024. The aim of this paper is to summarize research on the English translation of Chinese calligraphic art. The current research situation can be divided into two aspects: the English translation of calligraphic art terms and the English translation of calligraphic theoretical classics. The former has witnessed extensive relevant research and continuous deepening. However, the latter mainly focuses on the translation of The Manual of Calligraphy. Meanwhile, practice and discussion of the English translation of other classics are relatively scarce. Problems existing in this field include the lack of translation standards for terminology, generalized and repetitive research content, and the absence of a systematic guiding theory. In the future, efforts should be made to strengthen the standardization of terminology translation, optimize research content, and establish a systematic guiding theoretical system to promote international dissemination and exchange of Chinese calligraphic art.*

### Keywords

*English Translation, Calligraphic Art, research status*

### 1. Introduction

Calligraphy, being a unique art form of Chinese characters, is a tangible manifestation of the essence of Chinese culture and one of the means to publicize Chinese culture to the world. Research on Chinese calligraphy translation began in 2008 when Wang Youfen's *Talking about Compiling and Translating Chinese Calligraphy* opened the prelude to research on calligraphy translation. In 2009, scholar Yang Xiaobo consecutively wrote two articles, which delved deeply into the English translation of the calligraphic styles of Chinese calligraphy and the names of tablets and posters, introducing the

translation of calligraphy into the category of in-depth performance. Since 2008, domestic academia has initiated an upsurge in the study of English translation of calligraphy, which is closely related to the successful bidding of Chinese calligraphy. This remarkable feat has not only significantly enhanced the global popularity and influence of Chinese calligraphy, but also promoted the emergence of related English translation results.

Taking “Calligraphy” and “English Translation” as the main research objects, this study searched for articles on Chinese calligraphy in English translation collected by CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) between 2008 and 2024. Among them, there were 25 journal articles and 23 master’s degree theses. According to the data, there are 48 theses in this field, 25 being journal theses and 23 being master’s degree theses. Nine out of the 25 journal theses are core journals. These data truly reflect the extensive participation in the research field and the diversity of academic levels. From the perspective of publication time, among the 48 academic articles, 36 were published after 2016, which fully demonstrates that the research in this field is very recent and strongly shows that the research in this field has a very high degree of activity.

Based on CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), this study employs the literature research method to systematically sort out the above 48 papers on the English translation of calligraphic art, deeply explore the research content and research results of the above papers, analyze the current problems and look forward to the future direction of development of calligraphy translation research. The aim is to further broaden the boundaries of research on the English translation of Chinese calligraphy and promote its international dissemination and extensive cultural exchange.

## **2. Research on English Translation of Chinese Calligraphic Art**

By combing through the relevant literature, the English translation of Chinese calligraphy can be roughly classified into two main categories. The first category is the English translation of calligraphic art terms. The second category is the English translation of calligraphic classics. Among them, the terminology of calligraphic art can be further subdivided into four subcategories: terminology of calligraphic tools, terminology of brushwork techniques, terminology of calligraphic aesthetics, and names of calligraphic inscriptions.

### *2.1 English Translation of Calligraphic Art Terms*

Among the 48 related literatures included in the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), the majority study the English translation of the terminology of calligraphic art. Analyzed from the perspective of the research object, these studies remain at the micro level.

In the field of English translation of calligraphic terms, scholar Yang Xiaobo has made remarkable contributions. Between 2009 and 2018, Yang Xiaobo published four articles, concentrating on the English translation of “calligraphic terminology”, “brushwork terminology”, and “tablet names”. All these articles present practical translation strategies based on the evaluation of translations and strive to

propose more practical reference translations. These studies, by analyzing existing translations, offer practical translation strategies and attempt to provide more useful reference translations.

At the same time, the academic team led by Gu Yi professor has also made significant contributions to the research in this field. Since 2009, Gu Yi and his team members have written more than ten academic papers in this area. Additionally, they have supervised graduate students to write seven dissertations in related fields. The English translation studies related to the terminology of calligraphy basically cover the above four aspects, namely, terminology of calligraphic tools, terminology of brushwork techniques, terminology of calligraphic aesthetics, and names of calligraphic tablets and posters. For instance, there are works such as *The English Translation of Chinese Calligraphy Aesthetic Four Character Grid from the Perspective of Aesthetics*, *The Translation of the Character 'Yi' in Chinese Calligraphy Aesthetic Commentary*, *The Study of English Translation of Chinese Calligraphy Brushstroke Terminology*, *The English Translation of Chinese Calligraphy Technique Terminology from the Perspective of Aesthetics*, and *The English Translation of the Names of Monument Posts*. These studies have greatly contributed to the development of Chinese calligraphy terminology and promoted the specialization, systematization, and standardization of the translation of calligraphic art terms.

In the past decade, an increasing number of scholars have conducted in-depth analysis and translation of the terminology of calligraphic art by combining it with a certain translation theory or aesthetic theory. As early as 2014, Zhao Jia combined semiotic theory with calligraphy translation to analyze the English translation strategy of calligraphy terms based on the symbolic features of language. Some scholars also focus on the English translation of certain or certain types of cultural calligraphy words. For example, in 2016, Ying Zhi deeply discussed the translation strategy of the aesthetic word “气势 qishi” in calligraphy and finally found a more comprehensive English interpretation. In 2020, Du Ruoyi combined the characteristics of translation, such as social, cultural, symbolic, creative, and historical aspects, to compile a list of culturally loaded Chinese words in calligraphy. In 2021, Cao Xinyu and other scholars even selected the English translations of the names of “贴 tie” works collected by important museums at home and abroad. They combined with the naming rules of “贴 tie” works and took the theory of behavioral criticism of the translator as a guide. By analyzing the degree of truthfulness and pragmatism of the translations and the degree of reasonableness of the translator's behavior, they formulated a gradient difference table to evaluate translation quality that integrates the three elements of translator behavior and proposed an evaluation model of translation quality.

All these studies reflect the efforts of domestic scholars in delving deeper into the connotation of calligraphy art, attempting to restore the aesthetics of calligraphy art, and promoting the standardization and normative development of the English translation of the names of Chinese calligraphic works. This not only enriches the research in the field of calligraphy translation, but also provides valuable references for the international dissemination of Chinese calligraphy culture.

## 2.2 English Translation of Calligraphic Classics

The dissemination of Chinese calligraphy overseas hinges not only on the accurate translation of calligraphic terms but also on the translation of Chinese calligraphic classics. Presently, there is a dearth of English translations of Chinese calligraphic classics. Moreover, existing studies predominantly revolve around the translation of Sun Guoting's *The Manual of Calligraphy* from the seventh century.

It is widely acknowledged that *The Manual of Calligraphy* is one of the classic works of calligraphy theory recognized in the history of ancient Chinese calligraphy. There exist three more renowned English translations, namely: *The Collection of English Translations of Ancient Poetry* by Sun Dayu, *Two Chinese Treatises on Calligraphy* by Zhang Chonghe and Hans Hermann Frankel, and the study on Chinese Calligraphy by the Italian Sinologist Pietro De Laurentis, titled *The Manual of Calligraphy by Sun Guoting of the Tang: A Comprehensive Study on the Manuscript and Its Author*.

In the domestic translation arena, graduate students have taken the initiative to begin the academic exploration of the English translation of *The Manual of Calligraphy*. Among the 23 master's theses related to calligraphy translation recovered from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), the theses on the study of the English translation of *The Manual of Calligraphy* account for five. Four of these authors meticulously compared and analyzed the translations of the three versions from diverse perspectives and ultimately reached the following conclusions. Pietro's translation makes an outstanding contribution to the preservation of historical and cultural information. Its detailed annotation and implicit in-depth translation strategy are particularly suitable for the communication of calligraphic allusions, providing a reference for the English translation strategy of calligraphic terminology. Sun Dayu's translation is known for its "poetic" rendition, which is delicate in language, but occasionally loses fidelity to the original text. The translations by Zhang Chonghe and Hans Hermann Frankel emphasize the precise reproduction of cognitive functions, thereby enhancing the overall accuracy of the translated text.

Graduate students majoring in foreign languages and literature have been conducting research on the English translations of the three editions of *The Manual of Calligraphy*. However, scholars engaged in this field of study are scarce. Since 2017, only two Chinese scholars, Liu Yanshi and Liu Yi, have been involved in this area. By comparing the three versions of the English translation of "The Manual of Calligraphy," the two scholars analyzed the differences in the concepts of translating Chinese calligraphic terms. They also studied the main translation strategies and methods employed in foreign dissemination of Chinese calligraphic terms and conducted an objective study of translation criticism. In so doing, they sought a more effective route for the overseas dissemination of the art of calligraphy. Although the classic *The Manual of Calligraphy* holds a prominent position in the research field of the English translation of calligraphy classics, other renowned calligraphic classics have also been practiced and explored to some extent in English translation. For instance, Jiang Kui's *Renewal of the*

*Manual of Calligraphy*, Jiang Li's *Chinese Calligraphy*, Xiang Mu's *Elegant Remarks on Calligraphy*, and *New Essays on Calligraphic Techniques* by contemporary calligraphers.

In general, Chinese calligraphy classics are as vast as an ocean. Their variety and richness provide a broad space for academic research. Unfortunately, modern academia's exploration of this field remains inadequate. Currently, the focus of research on the English translation of calligraphic classics still lies in the comparative analysis of existing translations. Few scholars have ventured into the professional and systematic translation of calligraphic classics.

### **3. Problems in the Study of English Translation of Chinese Calligraphic Art**

#### *3.1 Lack of Norms for Terminology Translation*

Translators should first be fully aware that when delving into the translation of calligraphic art terms, it is an extremely serious task to establish a unified and standardized translation method due to the richness and complexity of calligraphic terms. The terminology system of calligraphic art is extraordinarily extensive, encompassing profound and abundant cultural connotations and aesthetic values. These specialized calligraphic terms sometimes possess multiple meanings and derivations, leading different translators to interpret them differently in various contexts. Consequently, when translating calligraphy terminology, it is essential to retain its own cultural flavor while also adapting to the cognitive habits of target language readers.

Secondly, there is a relatively significant lack of authoritative materials and references on the English translation of calligraphic terms in China. This situation increases the difficulty of translating work to some extent. In the absence of a reliable basis, translators often need to make judgments through personal understanding and experience. Undoubtedly, this increases the risk of misinterpretation and mistranslation. In addition, the translator's knowledge of calligraphy is also one of the crucial factors affecting the quality of translation. Calligraphy is a highly specialized art form. It not only requires translators to have solid language skills and translation expertise, but also demands an in-depth understanding of the art of calligraphy. However, although many translators are proficient in foreign languages, their skills in the art of calligraphy are not profound. This greatly impacts their ability to translate calligraphic terms.

In addition, due to the substantial differences between Chinese and Western cultures, it is extremely difficult to find the exact counterparts of many unique calligraphic images in English. Simply borrowing foreign words may not be able to accurately convey the deeper meaning and aesthetic value of the original terminology, and may even lead to misunderstanding.

All in all, the problems of misinterpretation and mistranslation of calligraphic art terms as well as their confusion have presented great challenges to domestic translators in translating and interpreting the achievements of Chinese calligraphy art. Furthermore, these issues have hindered overseas dissemination and exchange of Chinese calligraphy culture. This emphasizes the urgent need for further

research and improvement in the field of calligraphy translation to ensure accurate and effective communication of the rich heritage and artistic value of Chinese calligraphy.

### *3.2 Generalized and Repetitive Research*

A careful examination of the content of domestic research on the English translation of calligraphy leads to the conclusion that despite the time and effort invested by domestic researchers in this field, there is a repetitive cycle in the exploration of the English translation of calligraphic art. Repetitiveness manifests itself in repeated discussion of known problems. Moreover, the proposed solutions are overly general and lack innovation and relevance. For instance, existing studies mention the difficulty of translating calligraphic terms, but merely generalize their obscure cultural connotations and abstract forms of artistic expression. There is a lack of in-depth analysis of the specific cultural contexts behind different types of terms, making it difficult to apply translation strategies effectively. For example, without in-depth research on philosophical thoughts, emotional expressions, aesthetic pursuits, and other deep-rooted contents of calligraphy, it is challenging for the target language audience to truly appreciate their charms.

In addition, the insufficiency of English translations restricts the depth of the development of English translation research on calligraphy. Compared to the abundant English translations of Chinese classical literature, there is a dearth of English translations of Chinese calligraphy. This not only causes researchers to lack a reference system in comparative studies, but also limits their summarization and refinement of practical experience. Although researchers have translated or organized their own materials to fill in the gaps, it is difficult for them to form a systematic and comprehensive English translation system due to the limitations of their personal abilities and resources.

Furthermore, the incomplete research object is also one of the prominent problems in current research on the English translation of calligraphy. Most studies focus on intuitive elements such as technical terms and names of tablets and posters, neglecting the exploration of deeper content such as personal experiences of calligraphers, calligraphic aesthetics, calligraphic styles, and historical backgrounds. This one-sidedness easily leads to a biased understanding of the art of calligraphy on the part of the researcher. This limited perspective can hinder a comprehensive understanding and accurate translation of calligraphic works, affecting the international dissemination and appreciation of Chinese calligraphy.

### *3.3 Lack of Systematic Guidance Theory*

In the field of calligraphy art translation, a diverse range of theories have been introduced into the English translation practice of this art form. Examples include semiotic theory, communication theory, hermeneutic theory, functional translation theory, and cultural translation theory. Guided by these theories, researchers have proposed translation methods such as alienation strategies, with the aim of striking a balance between preserving the cultural characteristics of the original calligraphic works and facilitating international dissemination. However, it should be noted that although these theories and strategies have their respective advantages, yet, no scholars have been able to conduct a comprehensive

and systematic comparison and sorting out of the differences, similarities, advantages, and disadvantages among them. They have also not achieved the effective integration and complementation of these theories and strategies to form a more systematic and effective translation guidance system for the translation of calligraphy into English.

The scholar Wang Hui has mentioned in her article that “researchers hold their own views. To date, no scholars have compared and sorted these theories and strategies, elucidated differences and similarities, as well as advantages and disadvantages, and failed to appropriately integrate and complement the numerous theories and strategies to form a more systematic and effective translation guide for the English translation of calligraphic arts.” For instance, when translating Wang Xizhi’s *The Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection*, different theories may guide the translator to tend to employ different types of translation strategies during the translation process. Semiotic theory might prompt the translator to meticulously analyze the symbolic meaning of each stroke. Cultural translation theory emphasizes an accurate grasp of the cultural background and literati spirit. Purposive theory requires the translator to adjust according to the cultural background and reading habits of the target reader. However, without a comprehensive theoretical framework to guide them, these strategies are likely to operate in isolation, making it difficult to form a synergistic force and thus affecting the overall quality of translation. This lack of a unified theoretical guidance system poses a significant challenge to the accurate and effective translation of calligraphic works and hampers the international dissemination and appreciation of Chinese calligraphy.

#### **4. Strategies and Recommendations**

##### *4.1 Enhancement of Terminology Translation Norms*

Establishing an authoritative corpus of calligraphic terms: Experts and scholars in the fields of calligraphy and translation should be organized to conduct in-depth studies on calligraphic terms. This involves clarifying their contextual meanings and cultural connotations, reaching a consensus within the industry, and formulating unified translation standards. Subsequently, by combining historical documents and contemporary research results, a unified and authoritative corpus of English calligraphy terms can be created and regularly updated to maintain the timeliness and accuracy of the corpus.

Enhancing translators’ specialized knowledge of calligraphy: Strengthening the training of translators in specialized knowledge of calligraphy and enhancing their accurate understanding of the art of calligraphy. This ensures that translators can accurately convey the cultural connotations and aesthetic values of calligraphy during translation practice.

Focusing on cultural adaptability and reproduction of cultural connotations. In the translation process, translators should not only retain the original cultural characteristics of calligraphic terms but also consider the cognitive habits of target language readers. Appropriate translation strategies should be adopted to achieve cross-cultural communication. For example, translators can use footnotes or

explanatory notes to help readers understand the cultural background and meaning of calligraphic terms. In addition, they can find inspiration from successful cross-cultural translations in other fields to improve the quality of calligraphy translation. By doing so, translators can better balance the preservation of cultural heritage and the communication needs of different cultures.

#### *4.2 Optimization of Research Content*

**Refinement of research content:** Researchers are encouraged to dig deeper into the problems highlighted in existing calligraphy translations and conduct in-depth and detailed analyses through specific cases. They should promote targeted and innovative translation strategies and avoid unsubstantiated empty talk. For instance, researchers can analyze the translation of a particular calligraphic work or a series of related works to identify specific challenges and propose practical solutions.

**Establishment of a systematic database:** Actively collect and organize existing works of calligraphic art and English translations of canonical works to create a database that is both systematic and comprehensive. This will provide future researchers with rich, accurate, timely, and effective reference materials. Such a database can include not only translations, but also annotations, explanations of cultural references, and analyses of translation strategies used in different works.

**Broadening the research object:** In translation research, we should not only pay attention to the translation of intuitive elements such as technical terminology and the names of tablets and posters, but we should also strengthen the research on the translation of deeper contents such as calligraphic aesthetics, calligraphic styles, historical backgrounds, and the experiences of writers. This will enable us to present the rich connotations of the art of calligraphy to the world from an all-round perspective. For example, researchers can explore how different historical periods and cultural backgrounds have influenced calligraphic styles and how these can be effectively conveyed in translation. In addition, they can study the role of personal experiences of calligraphers in shaping their works and how this can be communicated to a foreign audience.

#### *4.3 Constructing a Systematic Guidance Theory System*

**Theory sorting and integration:** Systematically sort out and compare the applicability of different translation theories in calligraphy art translation. Analyze their advantages and disadvantages and gradually construct a set of calligraphy art translation theory systems that not only suit the characteristics of calligraphy art but also meet the needs of international communication. For example, we examine how functional translation theory can be applied to convey the aesthetic and cultural values of calligraphy, while considering the constraints and opportunities presented by cultural translation theory in preserving the authenticity of calligraphic expressions.

**Interdisciplinary exchange and cooperation:** Promote interdisciplinary cooperation and exchange. Effectively integrate theories from semiotics, communication, hermeneutics, and other fields to provide diversified theoretical support for calligraphy art translation at a higher level. This could involve



collaborating with scholars from different disciplines to explore how semiotic analysis can enhance the understanding and translation of the symbolic meanings in calligraphy, or how communication theories can guide the dissemination of calligraphic works in an international context.

**Practical verification and optimization:** Through actual translation cases, verify the effectiveness of different theories in calligraphy art translation. Optimize and adjust them according to the feedback from the audience to form a more mature and systematic theoretical guidance system for calligraphy art translation. For instance, by conducting post-translation evaluations and soliciting feedback from target language readers and experts, translators can identify areas for improvement and refine their translation strategies based on a more comprehensive understanding of the theoretical implications and practical challenges.

## 5. Conclusion

Although certain achievements have been made in the research on the English translation of Chinese calligraphy art, the lack of translation norms for terminology, generalized and repetitive research content, and the absence of a systematic guiding theory have led to misinterpretation and mistranslation and even constrained in-depth research development. To address these issues, in the future, efforts should be made to strengthen terminology translation norms, optimize research content, establish a systematic theoretical system, promote interdisciplinary cooperation, and continuously improve through practical verification and optimization. In conclusion, the study of the English translation of Chinese calligraphy still has a long way to go. Scholars in the fields of calligraphy and translation need to work together to further expand the boundaries of research, enrich the paths of its international dissemination and exchange, and let the art of calligraphy shine on the world stage. For instance, collaborative research projects could be initiated to combine the expertise of calligraphers and translators, leading to more accurate translations that capture the essence and beauty of Chinese calligraphy. Additionally, regular conferences and workshops can be organized to facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences among scholars, promoting the continuous development and innovation of calligraphy translation research.

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