

Original Paper

Translation and Explanation Strategies for Culturally Loaded Words in “Chinese Language + Intangible Cultural Heritage”

Instruction

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Abstract

The international Chinese education industry is currently shifting from providing language proficiency to promoting cultural understanding. Intangible cultural heritage, as a living carrier of national wisdom, has become an instrumental point in the reform and development of teaching practices. Culture-loaded terms also carry cultural genes and historical memories in the inheritance of intangible culture. The translation of these terms faces the dual challenges of both the loss of cultural information and loss of contextual information. Teaching practice today must transcend the limitations of traditional language-centered pedagogical methods and reconstruct the transmission pathway of intangible cultural heritage terminology from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. The handling of such terminology makes a difference to the accuracy and successful representation of cultural heritage and ultimately contributes to the level of international society's understanding of civilization and culture in general. Educators face the dilemma of intention to maintain the local elements while simultaneously considering the cultural context of the target population. This balancing act presents the crux to success in teachings on intangible cultural heritages.

Keywords

“Chinese + Intangible Cultural Heritage” teaching, culture-loaded words, translation, explanation

1. Introduction

The specialized vocabulary employed in intangible heritage initiatives often represents accumulations of local knowledge and the materialization of wisdom that has been transmitted from generation to generation, as literary translations usually cannot take the place of the nuance and deeper cultural contexts held within terminology. Culture-loaded terminology often suffers semantic attrition in

cross-linguistic transformation, for example, losing the context surrounding phenological observation and agricultural wisdom behind traditional solar term names, as learners try to employ and use this terminology in the context of a new culture and language. Current pedagogical practices used to address such vernacular instruction still remain within the context of surface-level interpretation of vocabulary versus engaging with and unpacking the cultural contexts and meaning and maximizing the former without losing the latter. Learners of specialized vocabulary exist in a cognitive dilemma where they engage with the “what,” but not the “why.” In such cases and with such vocabulary, the teaching approach and strategies must shift to be more culturally responsive with changes made to ensure terminological accuracy while eliciting cultural storytelling and emotional connection.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Culturally Loaded Words in “Chinese Language + Intangible Cultural Heritage” Instruction

2.1 Definition and Classification of Culturally Loaded Words

Culturally-loaded words refer to those that embody unique cultural connotations and lack a complete equivalent in foreign languages. They serve as living fossils of national culture, recording the way of thinking and life imprints of specific groups. In teaching practice, they are typically categorized into four types: material, behavioral, institutional, and ideational. For example, cloisonné craftsmanship belongs to the material category of culturally-loaded words, Tai Chi represents the behavioral category, the 24 solar terms embody the institutional category, and the doctrine of the mean falls under the ideational category. Such words are rooted in the historical traditions and social environment of a specific nation, and their semantic boundaries are often shaped by local customs and values. In the context of intangible cultural heritage teaching, when students encounter specialized terminology such as “kesi”, they need to understand not only the weaving technique it refers to but also the craftsmanship spirit and aesthetic pursuit it embodies. The classification framework helps teachers systematically analyze the cultural layers behind words, transforming abstract cultural concepts into perceivable teaching elements and providing a theoretical basis for the selection of subsequent translation strategies (Chen & Zhou, 2025).

2.2 Application of Translation Theory to Culturally Loaded Words

Translation theory emphasizes the correspondence of meaning between the source language and the target language when dealing with culturally loaded words. The principle of functional equivalence requires that the translation enables readers with different cultural backgrounds to have similar understandings and feelings. Translators often adopt free translation to present the core craft characteristics when converting intangible cultural heritage proper nouns, such as expressing “Paper Cuttings” as “hand-cut decorative patterns”. For concepts with unique cultural identities, it is necessary to retain the original artistic conception and adopt explanatory translation to convey the historical information they carry. The application of theory always seeks a balance between maintaining cultural authenticity and ensuring smooth understanding, avoiding cognitive barriers caused by excessive literal

translation. In practical operations, appropriate translation methods need to be selected based on the position of words in a specific cultural context, so that the cultural connotation can be preserved to the greatest extent during the language conversion process.

2.3 Cultural Transmission Characteristics and Requirements in ICH Instruction

Intangible cultural heritage teaching carries the special mission of inheriting living culture, with its core lying in conveying the spiritual connotations and values behind the skills to learners. The inheritance process emphasizes authenticity and integrity, requiring teaching to not only present the skill processes but also restore the cultural soil on which they rely for survival. Folk artists often teach through oral instruction, simultaneously explaining craft formulas and industry taboos in specific operational scenarios. Many intangible cultural heritage projects rely on specific rituals during festivals and seasons, and the teaching process needs to simulate authentic folk contexts to allow learners to experience the organic connection between skills and life. This inheritance model requires teachers to possess dual qualities, mastering both the skill itself and understanding the local knowledge system, in order to accurately interpret the deep information contained in culturally loaded words (Tang & Chen, 2023).

3. Challenges in Translating and Explaining Culturally Loaded Words in “Chinese + Intangible Cultural Heritage” Instruction

3.1 Semantic Misunderstandings and Losses Due to Cultural Differences

In specific teaching practices, cultural differences often lead to the misinterpretation or even loss of the core meaning of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) vocabulary. When translators simply equate the character “福” (blessing) with auspicious meanings, the underlying context of Spring Festival customs and the symbolic significance of the red color are difficult to fully convey, especially the cultural significance of the homophonic meaning of “福到” (blessing arrives) implied by the upside-down “福” character. When students encounter the colorful patterns of “Peking Opera facial makeup,” due to a lack of knowledge about the various roles in traditional opera, they often misinterpret the white facial makeup as a symbol of treachery, failing to recognize its multidimensional representation of characters’ ambitious and bold personalities in different plays. Certain local ICH terms, such as “Shehuo” (community festival), are forced to be simplified to the concept of festival performances during translation, resulting in the weakening of the traditional worship and community cohesion functions they embody, and the deep value of serving as a carrier of folk beliefs is difficult to highlight. Learners from different cultural backgrounds, when appreciating “ink and wash painting,” usually focus on the characteristics of brush and ink techniques, but struggle to grasp the philosophical concept of harmony between nature and humanity behind the artistic technique of combining void and solid. This semantic loss gradually forms cognitive gaps in cross-cultural communication, preventing learners from accurately perceiving and understanding the complete cultural genes carried by ICH projects.

3.2 Monotonous Explanation Methods and Student Comprehension Difficulties

Currently, there is a prevalent issue of monotonous teaching methods in the vocabulary instruction of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Teachers often rely on textual explanations accompanied by simple picture displays to convey knowledge. When presenting the concept of “Paper Cuttings” in the classroom, the focus is often on technique descriptions, failing to showcase its vivid connection with festival customs, resulting in students forming fragmented cognition. When introducing complex concepts such as “tea ceremony”, many teachers tend to break down individual action terms, neglecting the spiritual pursuit embodied in the overall ceremony. When students encounter professional terms such as “seal cutting”, due to the lack of physical observation and practical experience, they tend to understand artistic creation as mere manual replication. Single teaching methods are difficult to stimulate learners’ multi-sensory channels, making the originally rich cultural content dull and flat. This one-way indoctrination model weakens learners’ emotional resonance with ICH projects, making it difficult for them to establish a systematic cultural cognitive framework.

3.3 Insufficient Teaching Resources and Lack of Case Studies

The scarcity of teaching resources directly hinders the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary related to intangible cultural heritage. Existing textbooks often provide only brief definitions of specialized terminology. When teachers demonstrate the craftsmanship of cloisonné, they mostly rely on flat schematic diagrams, making it difficult for students to understand the three-dimensional process of cloisonné through these static images. Many schools lack a systematic case library of intangible cultural heritage terminology, leading to content discrepancies among different teachers when explaining the concept of shadow puppetry. Some emphasize the performance form, while others focus on the inheritance of carving techniques. Digital teaching resources are particularly scarce. Teaching about the 24 solar terms is often limited to reciting solar term rhymes, lacking dynamic visual representations of corresponding phenological changes and agricultural civilization. The teaching of folk handicraft terminology faces the dilemma of a shortage of physical teaching aids. Students’ opportunities to experience embroidery techniques are mostly limited to video materials, preventing them from appreciating the control of force and rhythm of stitching in the intricate weaving of threads. The uneven distribution of resources is prominent. While some regions are able to invite intangible cultural heritage inheritors to demonstrate on-site, many other regions struggle to provide even basic craft atlases for teaching (Peng, 2016).

3.4 Teachers’ Inadequate Cross-Cultural Competence and Professional Expertise

Some language teachers are unfamiliar with the specific practical aspects of traditional handicrafts. When explaining paper cutting techniques, they often only repeat the characteristics of symmetrical shapes, but struggle to elucidate their inherent connection with auspicious meanings in folk beliefs. Teachers tend to fall into the trap of literal translation when translating Kunqu opera terminology, directly translating “shui sleeves” as a decorative part of the costume, while ignoring its theatrical linguistic characteristics of expressing character emotions through movement. Art teachers often lack

foreign language expression skills, unable to accurately explain the sound effects of the “yin yao” fingering technique in Guqin playing, which produce a sound effect of interplay between void and solid. Many teachers, when explaining dietary customs related to solar terms, tend to simply list seasonal foods, failing to combine the background of agricultural civilization to illustrate the relationship between health preservation wisdom and natural laws. The lack of interdisciplinary knowledge reserves leads to teaching that remains superficial in terms of terminology, making it difficult for students to construct a complete cultural cognitive map.

3.4 Imperfect Evaluation Mechanisms and Learning Effect Feedback

The current evaluation mechanism struggles to comprehensively assess students' mastery of intangible cultural heritage vocabulary, with standardized tests often limited to merely testing memorization of terminology. When designing assessment questions for paper cutting skills, teachers typically require students to list the names of tools and production steps, but rarely set up scenarios for students to explain the auspicious meanings behind patterns. There is a significant lag in teaching feedback; students often receive their corrected results a week after completing translation exercises on solar term customs, by which time the confusion they encountered during the creative process has long faded. The evaluation criteria lack consideration for cultural understanding dimensions, with assessments of tea ceremony etiquette focusing on the reproduction of action sequences while neglecting the degree of comprehension of the spiritual connotation of “harmony, respect, clarity, and tranquility”. Teachers often rely on limited classroom observations to record student performance, failing to establish a continuously tracked personal growth profile. Although students can accurately recite the classification of roles in shadow puppetry, they still cannot flexibly use relevant terminology to express artistic characteristics in actual communication. This one-sided evaluation approach leads to a lack of precise basis for teaching adjustments, making it difficult to specifically strengthen students' cultural cognitive blind spots.

4. Innovative Strategies for Translating and Explaining Culturally Loaded Words

4.1 Multimodal and Contextualized Explanation Methods

The multimodal and contextualized teaching method offers new possibilities for teaching intangible cultural heritage terminology. Teachers can design multi-level teaching activities based on the case of shadow puppetry, utilizing video materials to present the complete craftsmanship process of shadow puppet making during the demonstration phase. In the classroom practice phase, prepare cowhide shadow puppet teaching aids, allowing learners to experience the characteristic differences in movement patterns of different roles by manipulating the puppets themselves. Prepare cowhide shadow puppet teaching aids in the classroom, and learners can understand the physical expression patterns of role characteristics by manipulating the martial arts gait of the Guan Yu puppet and the female role technique of the White Lady puppet. In the situational reconstruction phase, set up a light and shadow environment of a traditional theater stage, and participants are required to synchronously recite the

lyrics and manipulate the puppets while arranging a segment of “Nezha Wreaks havoc in the Sea” in groups. Term analysis is combined with the craftsmanship of shadow puppets, allowing students to observe how carving techniques express character traits through hollowed-out lines. After-class extension tasks organize students to shoot modern-themed shadow puppet short films, mastering the accurate expression of professional movements such as “picking the stick” and “shaking the stick” through innovative practice. This teaching method transforms abstract concepts into tangible physical experiences, naturally integrating skill inheritance and terminology learning into the operational process.

4.2 Cultural Comparison and Case Analysis Approach

In the module of cultural comparison and case analysis, teachers should carefully select representative intangible cultural heritage (ICH) projects for cross-cultural analysis. For example, the auspicious patterns of Chinese Paper Cuttings can be juxtaposed with the religious totems of Mexican Paper Cuttings, guiding students to observe the cultural differences in decorative composition and symbolic meaning between the two. The case library needs to systematically include ceramic samples from different regions. By comparing the freehand landscape of Jingdezhen blue and white porcelain with the geometric patterns of Delft blue pottery, students can understand the unique expressions of Eastern and Western aesthetic traditions. During the teaching process, a comparative study of the 24 solar terms and Mediterranean seasons can be designed, allowing students to grasp the cognitive ways of different civilizations towards natural rhythms through the comparison of climatic characteristics and agricultural activities. The analysis of typical mistranslation cases should be integrated throughout the teaching process, such as clarifying the fundamental differences between Chinese Loong and Western dragon in mythological origins and image characteristics, to correct students’ conceptual confusion caused by cultural cognitive biases. Teachers also need to organize students to collect different translation versions of the same ICH term, and analyze the accuracy of various translations in conveying cultural connotations during classroom discussions. The restoration of authentic contexts can be arranged during traditional festivals, allowing students to record the actual use of terms in folk activities on site. These systematically organized comparative materials should be classified and archived according to craft categories and regional characteristics, forming a case resource system that is convenient for teachers and students to retrieve and use (Jiang, 2015).

4.3 Technology-Assisted Translation Tools and Applications

In the digital era, teachers can construct a specialized terminology database to include core vocabulary of intangible cultural heritage, systematically organizing standard translations for professional terms such as “yangke” (positive engraving) and “yinke” (negative engraving) in paper cutting techniques. Translation memory software can assist teachers in accumulating corresponding translation examples for names of opera roles, establishing accurate correspondence between roles such as Sheng (male role), Dan (female role), Jing (old man role), Mo (old woman role), and Chou (clown role). Corpus tools can compare and analyze the handling of ceramic art terminology in different translations, and summarize

common translation patterns for professional terms such as "glaze-in-red". Augmented reality technology can generate three-dimensional demonstrations of intangible cultural heritage craftsmanship, allowing students to disassemble the cloisonne wire-inlaying and blue-pointing process in virtual space. Speech recognition systems can assist in correcting the pronunciation of intangible cultural heritage terminology, especially for shadow puppetry vocal and spoken parts that retain a lot of dialect (Wang, Jiang, & Yang, 2024). Online collaboration platforms support teachers and students in jointly maintaining terminology entries and continuously improving explanations of agricultural proverbs related to the 24 solar terms. Intelligent retrieval tools should be linked to multimodal resources of intangible cultural heritage projects, enabling instant access to craftsmanship demonstration videos and professional terminology explanations. These technical means collectively constitute a digital teaching support system, providing basic guarantees for the accurate conveyance of culturally loaded words.

4.4 Interactive and Experiential Teaching Activities

In the teaching practice of "Chinese + Intangible Cultural Heritage", teachers can design shadow puppet role-playing tasks, allowing students to understand the characteristics of the roles of Shengdanjingmouchou (male and female roles, as well as roles for clowns, jester, and clown) through the manipulation of shadow puppets. Workshops should prepare paper cutting material kits, allowing participants to experience the skill differences between yin and yang carving techniques by personally cutting auspicious patterns. Campus intangible cultural heritage garden activities present opportunities for setting up different experience stations with different traditional craftsmanship production links. Tea ceremony study units engage students through having them experience and restore the process of the complete tea table layout to help them understand through serving tea and bowing the spiritual connotation of etiquette norms. Solar term-themed activities can also plug into local customs, with rice dumpling making on the Winter Solstice day and then documenting the usage cases of related sayings. Craft training courses should also allow students to visit the intangible cultural heritage inheritance bases to observe first-hand the key technical details of casting and forming ceramics. The intangible heritage crafty vocabulary challenge game can help to weave in professional vocabulary learning into the activity while creating competition with the need to correctly explain the craft steps associated with the term. All of the physical engagement activities create vivid and concrete learning situations and allow participants to transform vague cultural ideas into tangible operational experiences (Zheng, 2016).

4.5 Interdisciplinary Integration and Resource Consolidation

Teaching teams should proactively connect with local intangible cultural heritage protection centers to obtain first-hand craft video materials and oral records from inheritors. Schools can consider collaborating with museums to develop physical teaching kits, combining traditional embroidery samples and tools into tactile and sensory three-dimensional teaching materials. Course designers need to integrate the dual perspectives of historians and craft masters, analyzing painting techniques and interpreting the historical background when explaining the patterns of blue and white porcelain.

Information technology personnel can assist in building a virtual intangible cultural heritage experience hall, allowing students to independently explore the connection principles of ancient architectural tenon and mortise joints in a three-dimensional space (Xia, 2020). Education departments in various regions can establish an inter-school resource sharing network, enabling schools in remote areas to access high-quality intangible cultural heritage teaching case libraries. Intangible cultural heritage inheritors should regularly visit campuses to conduct workshop practices, guiding students to personally experience the yin-yang engraving techniques of paper cutting art. Community folk activities should be included as teaching observation points, allowing students to record the practical application of solar terms proverbs in real-life scenarios.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of innovative strategies has opened up diverse paths for the teaching of intangible cultural heritage terminology, transforming abstract cultural concepts into perceptible learning experiences. Multimodal explanations and contextualized practices effectively bridge the gap in cultural cognition, while technological tools and interdisciplinary integration provide a driving force for sustainable development in teaching. The improvement of teachers' professional competence and the perfection of resource sharing mechanisms will become the quality assurance for promoting the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. Future curriculum design should establish a more flexible evaluation system, focusing on students' understanding of cultural connotations rather than mechanical memorization. These explorations not only enrich the methodology of language teaching but also demonstrate profound significance in the protection of cultural diversity, allowing the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage to flourish with new vitality in the context of globalization.

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