

# *On the Translation of Architectural Culture in Chinese Classics from the Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory*

Beiyong Liu, Jiguang Xie\*

Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, Guangxi, 541006, China  
1017192831@qq.com, \*xiejiguang88@126.com

**Keywords:** Chinese architecture, Chinese classics, Chinese architectural culture, the translation of Chinese architectural culture

**Abstract:** Architecture and literature are both treasures of art. From numerous magnificent Chinese architectures, we learned of their practicality and beauty, and from the Chinese classics, we gained ideological inspiration and edification. Countless literati have splashed ink and chanted poems for the two, leaving behind masterpieces such as *The Story of the Stone* and *The Book of Poetry* which contain profound Chinese architectural characteristics and culture. Spreading Chinese culture to the West has always been our country's goal and telling Chinese stories well is our responsibility and obligation. Moreover, cultural translation theory has particular guiding significance when translators translate Chinese culture as well as in its dissemination and promotion. Therefore, the author studies the chapters describing Chinese architecture in Chinese classics from the perspective of cultural translation theory and analyzes its feasibility of revealing and promoting the Chinese architectural culture contained in the original texts, in an attempt to make a modest contribution to the field of the English translation of Chinese architectural culture.

## 1. Introduction

Architecture embodies the sagacity and wisdom of the people. The ancestors and countless architects have perfectly combined practicality and artistry with the spirit of exploration and innovation, leaving us with a large number of antique, majestic, and unique buildings. They represent the splendid culture accumulated in China for more than 5,000 years and the deepest spiritual pursuit of the Chinese nation, motivating the literati to praise them with pen and ink without stinginess, therefore precious Chinese architectural wealth as well as its profound culture can be recorded and passed down. Especially in Chinese poems and in the Chinese classics, where we can appreciate the richly brilliant and profoundly erudite architectural culture. Such a splendid Chinese architectural culture needs to be continuously promoted by the Chinese, and it has become a significant task for us to accelerate the translation and translation research of Chinese architectural culture. If this task is successfully carried out, it will not only attract more Western readers to read Chinese architecture books, or even to visit Chinese architecture in person, immersing themselves in China's profound and colorful architectural culture, but also deepen the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western

architectural cultures. Therefore, the author selects two notable Chinese classics as well as their English translations as the subject of study, based on cultural translation theory, studies and analyzes how the translators faithfully and effectively conveyed Chinese architecture and the profound culture behind it, to provide a reference for future research on the translation of architectural culture in the Chinese classics.

## 2. Cultural Translation Theory

"Translation Studies is not merely a minor branch of comparative literary study, nor yet a specific area of linguistics, but a vastly complex field with many far-reaching ramifications"<sup>[1]</sup>. When Western translators and some scholars gradually realized that the problems encountered in translation could not be completely solved from the linguistic perspective alone, they turned to applied linguistics and hermeneutics, etc. At the same time, cultural translation theories emerged. Susan Bassnett proposed a "cultural turn"<sup>[2]</sup> in *Translation, History, and Culture*, which means translators should not focus exclusively on the narrow perspective of linguistics, but should also pay attention to history, philosophy, poetry, and culture as well as understand translation as a cultural process rather than a linguistic process. If you compare culture to the adult body, "Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it"<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, rather than focusing solely on the language and discourse level, the translator should consider culture as a translation unit when translating and keep in mind that "a translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril"<sup>[1]</sup>.

## 3. On the Translation of Architectural Culture in Chinese Classics from the Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory

*The Story of the Stone* is a unique novel that embodies the profundity of Chinese culture, involving not only folklore, costumes, and medicine, but also the culture of Chinese garden architecture, of which the Jia Mansion and the Daguan Garden are prominent representatives. The article named *Small Mountain Stream* in *The Book of Poetry* describes the palace in which the slave owners and nobles of the Zhou Dynasty lived, especially the grand process of construction as well as its magnificent appearance and court. The architectural culture in these two Chinese classics has extremely high research value as well as deserves to be studied by scholars to promote the distinctive Chinese architecture and culture therein overseas. Thus, as a medium of transmission to the West, English translation bears the significant responsibility of cultural transmission. Cultural translation theory is different from traditional translation theory, which jumps out of the narrow semantic level for translation, requiring translators to start from a more macroscopic cultural background, cultural exchange, and cultural transformation level, and strive to better convey the cultural imagery and connotation implied in the original text. Therefore, the author takes the cultural translation theory as the guiding theory, from the two aspects of the purpose of cultural translation and intelligibility of the translation, combined with the typical examples in the above two Chinese classics, to study and analyze the methods and strategies of architectural culture translation, so as to achieve the purpose of faithfully conveying China's profound architectural culture.

### 3.1. The Purpose of Cultural Translation

Both the source and target languages reflect their cultural differences and diversity to some extent, and cultural translation is a way to promote the exchange between the cultures of various countries and ethnic groups while also converting the languages through translation. Through these cultural

exchanges, on the one hand, we can introduce the unique styles of each nationality and lead readers to experience their different charm. On the other hand, we can take the essence and remove the dross to enrich our own culture. Hence, when translating Chinese architecture culture in the Chinese classics, translators should keep in mind that "translation is to meet the needs of culture and the needs of different groups in a certain culture"<sup>[3]</sup>. Taking the theory of cultural translation as the starting point, in addition to considering the choice of vocabulary and sentences, it is more vital to pay attention to culture as the unit of translation, so as to reduce the obstacles to cultural dissemination caused by language, thereby preserving the cultural differences contained in the original text. In this way, the artistic characteristics of Chinese architecture and the profound cultural deposits behind it can be vividly presented to Western readers, which makes them deeply infected and inspired.

Example 1:

David Hawkes' translation: "Dai-yu passed through the ornamental gate into a courtyard which had balustraded loggias running along its sides and a covered passage-way through the centre"<sup>[4]</sup>.

Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's translation: "Lin Tai-yue entered the door with the creepers. On both sides was a verandah, like two outstretched arms"<sup>[5]</sup>.

Analysis: The "Chuihua door" in the original text refers to a significant door in the Chinese quadrangle dwellings and is named after its short, upside-down column, which is usually adorned with lotus petals and beads. David Hawkes translates the "Chuihua door" as "the ornamental gate" and highlights the adjective "ornamental" in his translation, which maintains the Chinese architectural features and informs the reader that it is not an ordinary door, but one with a dignified and ornate appearance. "Chaoshou veranda" is a unique Chinese architectural form, often an integral part of ancient architecture, which is an enclosed-shaped corridor, like a man holding his arms forward with his fingers crossed to form an enclosed space. Consequently, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang translated it by foreignization as "veranda like two outstretched arms", which is quite accurate, translating the ancient Chinese architectural elements and culture for Western readers. It is conducive to deepening the readers' understanding of the "Chaoshou veranda", reflecting that "foreignizing translation is beneficial to the mutual exchange and infiltration between two different cultures and languages, promoting cultural integration"<sup>[3]</sup>. At the same time, through the translation, the target language readers can clearly understand Yang Xianyi's concept of cultural translation, that is, he attaches great importance to translating Chinese culture and makes extraordinarily painstaking efforts.

Example 2:

David Hawkes' translation: "Passing round the screen and through a small reception hall beyond it, they entered the large courtyard of the mansion's principal apartments. These were housed in an imposing five-frame building resplendent with carved and painted beams and rafters which faced them across the courtyard. Running along either side of the courtyard were galleries hung with cages containing a variety of different-coloured parrots, cockatoos, white-eyes, and other birds"<sup>[4]</sup>.

Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's translation: "On the other side of this screen were three very small halls. At the back of these came at once an extensive courtyard, belonging to the main building. In the front part were five parlours, the frieze of the ceiling of which was all carved, and the pillars ornamented. On either side, were covered avenues, resembling passages through a rock. In the side-rooms were suspended cages, full of parrots of every colour, thrushes, and birds of every description"<sup>[5]</sup>.

Analysis: "Sanjian hall" in the original text does not refer to a room for people to live in, but a place for visitors to wait temporarily, while visitors are waiting, the servant will go to inform the master. David Hawkes then translates it as "a small reception hall", thereby skillfully conveying the architectural function of "Sanjian hall". This is in line with Susan Basnett's cultural translation theory, that is, "translation is never a purely linguistic act; it is deeply rooted in the culture in which the language is embedded, and translation equivalence is the cultural functional equivalence between the

source language and the target language"<sup>[3]</sup>. "Diaoliang Huadong" refers to carved beams and painted rafters. "Dong" are the large beams in the middle of the house. "Liang" has the similar function of the rafter and it is the parallel beam supporting the roof, so David Hawkes' translation of "carved and painted beams and rafters" is more accurate. In the translation of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, the "dong" is translated as "the pillars ornamented" but "pillar" generally refers to a large wooden post in Western culture. Therefore, this translation may cause confusion to Western readers and it is difficult to promote architectural and cultural exchanges between China and the West. In addition, what is even more concerning is that this translation can't correctly carry forward the ancient Chinese architectural art of carved beams and painted rafters.

### 3.2. The Intelligibility of the Translation

In literary works, authors frequently use novel vocabulary and metaphors to illustrate realities and ideas in their works, so when readers appreciate literary works, they need to read them carefully to perceive and comprehend the author's true intentions between the lines of the article. If the translator omits these unique metaphors and distinctive language styles or completely adopts a domesticating translation, although it can make the translation more intelligible, this practice makes the target readers comprehend the translation without careful reading and research, which is not in line with the original intention of the literary author. And to some extent, it also erases the differences between the original text and the target language text, as well as the unique culture of each nation. Therefore, when translating, it is imperative to take into account the actual situation of the original text, and if there are any symbols and metaphors, try to translate them as faithfully as possible. In order to avoid the loss of traditional architectural culture in literary works, translators must not assume too much that readers don't understand the translation and should adhere to the cultural translation theory, especially in preserving the characteristics of Chinese architectural culture in the original text, so that the translation can reproduce the content and charm of the original text. In other words, the intelligibility of the translation can be truly achieved if "the translator makes the source language and the target language equivalent in terms of their corresponding cultural functions, shifting the focus of attention and research to culture and function"<sup>[3]</sup>.

Example 3:

Zhiye Luo's translation: "The house is straight as a man stands. The angle of roof is like an arrow. Its space is like the bird with its wings open or the cock in gold feather. Junzi comes into it in pleasure"<sup>[6]</sup>.

James Legge's translation: "Like a man on tip-toe, in reverent expectation; Like an arrow, flying rapidly; Like a bird which has changed its feather; Like a pheasant on flying wings; Is the (hall) which our noble lord will ascend"<sup>[7]</sup>.

Analysis: "Ruqi Siyi" in the Chinese verse means that the palace is solemn like a man standing on tiptoe in a solemn manner. Zhiye Luo's translation though translates that the palace is like a man standing, he didn't translate the specific details because "qi" means a person standing on tiptoe. It is "tip-toe" in English culture that refers to people tiptoeing up so Legge applied it and use appropriate domestication to his translation, vividly translating the metaphor of the solemn palace like a person tiptoeing solemnly so that the translation reproduced the original style in both content and charm. Starting from "Rushi Siji" in the original verse, which is describing the eaves of the palace, Zhiye Luo's translation is better, from his translation, especially "with wings open" which conveys the national characteristics of China's ancient upturned eaves architecture, and readers can perceive the dynamic spirit in the original text as if these vivid and spectacular images are in front of them. In addition, we can find that Zhiye Luo translates "hui" into "cock", which represents Chinese culture, while Legge translates it into "pheasant". From the perspective of Chinese culture, "Xiongji" has the

characteristics of awe-inspiring and exuberant, and Zhiye Luo deems the word "hui" as "Xiongji", then translates it as "cock" can make readers perceive a strong Chinese cultural when reading this verse. At the same time, this translation can also highlight the grandeur and majesty of the palace.

Example 4:

Zhiye Luo's translation: "The courtyard is flat and broad. The pillars are tall and straight. It is bright by day, grey and serene by night. Junzi lives here without trouble"<sup>[6]</sup>.

James Legge's translation: "Level and smooth is the court-yard, And lofty are the pillars around it. Pleasant is the exposure of the chamber to the light, And deep and wide are its recesses; --Here will our noble lord repose"<sup>[7]</sup>.

Analysis: Based on a comparison of the first sentence translated by the two translators, the author contends that Zhiye Luo's translation is superior because his translation of the palace's courtyard is "flat and broad", while James Legge only translates it as "level and smooth". The author believes that native Chinese speakers who have lived in China for many years may understand that the door is the facade of the building and the courtyard is the soul of the building. Additionally, they may be aware that the door and courtyard of the royal will certainly be more glorious and broader than those of the commoners, as the door and courtyard reflect the Chinese hierarchy, that is, the higher the status, the wider the door and courtyard. Western readers, however, may not have this cultural background so the author asserts that it is crucial to translate the adjective "broad", which not only preserves the cultural characteristics of Chinese architecture but also allows the target reader to understand the door culture of the Chinese imperial palace and hierarchical culture in ancient China. The word "zheng" in the second line of the original poem refers to the main hall of an imperial palace. James Legge translates it as "chamber", although he uses domesticating translation to help the reader understand the concept of "zheng" as a hall semantically and make the translation fluent and coherent, "such smoothness and fluency come at the expense of other attached information between cultures"<sup>[3]</sup>. As readers have the concepts of "council chamber" and "the upper chamber" in their cultures, readers may equate the main hall of an imperial palace with them. In fact, there is a difference between the council chamber, the upper chambers, and the main hall of an imperial palace. For example, the council chamber and the upper chamber in English-speaking cultures are generally the places where parliamentarians debate government policy, while the main hall of an imperial palace in Chinese culture is primarily a place for meeting guests, discussing things, and performing rituals, symbolizing power and hierarchy. If domestication is completely utilized to make this translation more intelligible, the author holds that this approach is inappropriate because it can't make the original text and the target language text equal in cultural functions, and may even erase the cultural differences between Western countries and China. What's more, to a certain extent, it may mislead Western readers, thus it can't truly make the translation intelligible and promote cultural exchange.

#### 4. Conclusion

A unique Chinese architectural style emerged from over five thousand years of Chinese history and profound cultural deposits. The Chinese architecture not only contains national cultural confidence but also reflects the Chinese aesthetic style. It is because they are so colorful and significant that we can see the profound deposit of architectural culture and feel their unique charm, whether from short verses handed down from various dynasties or long Chinese classics full of great wisdom. And spreading their charm and culture to the west has become a top priority in our country and an effective way to promote cultural exchanges. As is known to all, the translation is the main way of transmitting architectural culture in the Chinese classics to the West, and the quality of the translation determines whether Chinese architecture and the profound culture behind it can be disseminated faithfully and efficiently. Through profound research and analysis, the author believes

that it is necessary to jump out of the traditional viewpoint of translation, start from the perspective of Chinese architectural culture, and apply the cultural translation theory advocated by Susan Bassnett. So, translators should focus on culture as the translation unit, and keep in mind that the purpose of cultural translation is to achieve cultural exchange while preserving the original charm of Chinese architectural culture through foreignization. Only in this way can the translators translate the real appearance features and connotation of Chinese architecture, making the target language readers better perceive the unique architectural colors and cultural deposits of China. Furthermore, after a comparative analysis of the translations, the author suggests that in the future translation of architectural culture, translators need to avoid omitting the figurative rhetoric and unique cultural connotations contained in the original text to make the translation more intelligible or using too much domestication. The translator should also translate according to the actual architectural and cultural content depicted in the original text, skillfully adopting a translation strategy based on foreignization and supplemented by domestication. Last but not least, it is imperative to refer to the traditional translation viewpoint and translation strategy as well as organically combine the macro-level of culture and the micro-level of language to present a more perfect English translation of Chinese architectural culture for Western readers, let China's colorful architectural style shine on the international stage, and finally carry forward the profound and unique Chinese architectural culture.

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