

A Study on the Cultural Defaults and Translation Compensation Strategies in English Translation of TCM Classics—A Case Study of Lixu Yuanjian

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Abstract: In the external dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) culture, the English translation of TCM serves as an important medium, and the quality of English translation of TCM directly affects the effectiveness of the dissemination of TCM culture. However, due to the differences between Chinese and English languages and cultures, the phenomenon of cultural default often occurs in the English translation of TCM, which prevents target language readers from fully understanding the cultural connotations of the source language. Therefore, exploring how to make up for cultural defaults through translation compensation strategies has become an important topic in TCM translation. Taking the English translation of the medical work Lixu Yuanjian in the Ming Dynasty as an example, this paper explores how to make up for the cultural defaults in the English translation of TCM through different translation strategies, aiming to facilitate the cross-cultural communication of TCM classics.

1. Introduction

As a treasure of Chinese traditional culture, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has increasingly gained global recognition in contemporary healthcare systems. However, the cross-cultural dissemination of TCM knowledge faces significant linguistic and cultural barriers [1], particularly in the translation of classical medical classics [2]. The phenomenon of cultural default poses a critical challenge in TCM translation. This challenge is particularly acute when dealing with culturally embedded concepts such as yin-yang theory, five-element correspondences, and disease patterns rooted in Chinese philosophical traditions.

The English translation of Lixu Yuanjian (Primary Reflections upon Treatments of the Consumptive Disease), a seminal medical treatise in the Ming Dynasty by Wang Qishi, exemplifies these translation complexities. As a comprehensive guide to consumptive disease treatment integrating TCM theory with clinical practice, its translation requires not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural interpretation. Current translation approaches often oscillate between excessive domestication that erodes cultural specificity and rigid literalness that obscures meaning. This study investigates the effective compensation strategies to bridge the cultural-semantic gap while preserving the textual integrity of TCM classics. Through systematic analysis of cultural default

instances and corresponding translation methods in English version of *Lixu Yuanjian*, the research establishes a framework balancing fidelity to source culture norms with target language accessibility. The findings aim to enhance the intercultural transmission of TCM wisdom and provide methodological references for translating analogous cultural heritage texts.

2. Study on the English Translation of *Lixu Yuanjian*

2.1 Introduction to *Lixu Yuanjian*

Lixu Yuanjian was compiled by Wang Qishi, a TCM practitioner in the late Ming Dynasty, in 1644. It is the first classic work of TCM dedicated to the discussion of consumptive diseases. The whole book contains more than 20,000 characters and is divided into two volumes [3]. The upper volume mainly explores the causes, pathogenesis, symptoms, prevention and treatment methods of consumptive diseases, while the lower volume introduces the treatment formulas and taboos. In addition, the preventive methods for consumptive diseases proposed in the book laid a theoretical foundation for clinical prevention and health care.

2.2 Overview of the English Translation of *Lixu Yuanjian*

Lixu Yuanjian comprehensively explores the theories and practices of TCM, achieving remarkable results in the diagnosis and treatment of consumptive diseases, and is highly regarded within the TCM community. Mao Herong, an English teacher teaching at a university of TCM, discovered that although *Lixu Yuanjian* has an elaborate structure, it has received little attention from the academic community, and there is still much academic value waiting to be explored. Mr. Mao has always hoped to independently translate and publish a TCM classic into English. After nearly three years of unremitting efforts, the English translation of *Lixu Yuanjian* finally came out in 2021. According to the notes for the reader [4], this translation mainly adopts the method of literal translation, striving to faithfully present the content of the original text. At the same time, for the parts with cultural defaults in the original text, the translator supplements them with contextual explanations and annotations to help readers cross cultural barriers. Mr. Mao also carefully polished the language expression to ensure the accuracy and clarity of the translation, especially when conveying the unique professional terms and theoretical concepts of TCM, achieving precise transmission.

Overall, the English translation of *Lixu Yuanjian* provides a valuable example for those who deeply study the translation practice of classics. With its meticulous translation and in-depth research, this translated version has effectively promoted the cross-cultural exchange of TCM knowledge, enabling more people to deeply appreciate the profound insights put forward by Wang Qishi in *Lixu Yuanjian*.

3. Cultural Defaults in *Lixu Yuanjian*

The concept of “cultural default” was first put forward by the scholar Wang Dongfeng [5]. He believes that in the process of communication, if both parties want to achieve the expected communication purpose, they must have common background knowledge or pragmatic premises. Cultural default refers to the omission of relevant cultural background knowledge shared by the author and his intended readers during their communication. As an important part of the cross-cultural communication of TCM, Chinese translators and Western readers have different cultural background knowledge due to the different social and cultural environments in which they live, so the situation of cultural default will occur.

The *Lixu Yuanjian* is divided into two volumes. The lower volume mainly introduces specific formulas, and the author adopted a literal translation method for this part, so the cultural default

situations in it are not typical. However, the upper volume contains rich content and involves many cultural default phenomena. Therefore, this thesis mainly takes the upper volume as the research object. The cultural defaults in it are further refined and classified into three categories: medical terms, philosophical thoughts, and metaphorical rhetoric, so as to conduct a more in-depth study.

3.1. TCM Terminology

Example 1

ST: The first sentence of paragraph 8 on page 22.

TT: When the patient suffers from cough caused by the Deficiency Phlegm (xu tan), his or her left pulse is soft, fine and weak, while the Cunkou¹ pulse is slightly fine and rapid, or smooth, large and vacuous.

Cunkou is also named Qikou and Maikou, often refers to the Cunkou pulse. The Other Discussion on Meridians (Jing Mai Bie Lun), the 21 chapter of the Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine (Huang Di Nei Jing) says, "By taking the Cunkou pulse, doctors can see the seriousness of diseases".

In TCM theory, "Qikou" refers to the Cun Kou pulse, which is located at the pulsation site of the radial artery in the wrist area and is an important part for doctors to diagnose diseases by pulse-taking. TCM believes that Qikou is closely related to the qi and blood of the internal organs. By observing the changes in the pulse condition of Qikou, one can understand the functions of the internal organs, the prosperity and decline of qi and blood in the human body, and further determine the nature, location and prognosis of diseases.

Since English readers may lack an understanding of the concept of "Qikou" in TCM culture, this cultural default may make it difficult for them to accurately understand the internal connection between the description of the pulse condition and disease diagnosis in the original text, and affect their in-depth comprehension of TCM theories and related content.

The original text directly uses the TCM term "Qikou", while in the English translation, it only simply mentions that "Cunkou is... the Cunkou pulse", without giving a detailed explanation of the rich cultural connotations contained in "Qikou", thus there is a cultural default.

3.2. Cultural Defaults in the Context of Philosophy and Religion

Example 2

ST: The second sentence of paragraph 1 on page 36.

TT: The root of human diseases lies in the Yang Deficiency (Yang-xu) or the Yin Deficiency (Yin-xu). The chronic Yang Deficiency will lead to the Yin Deficiency, but the Yang Deficiency eventually is the root of the disease.

The source text "yang xu zhi ...sheng wei ben" profoundly reflects the dialectical relationship of mutual interdependence and mutual transformation between Yin and Yang in the Yin-Yang theory of TCM. It describes the dynamic changes of Yin and Yang in the process of disease development. Even if there are superficial manifestations of "Yang Excess" or "Yin Excess", the root cause may still be "Yang Deficiency" or "Yin Excess". The target text "The root of human diseases ... the Yin Deficiency" only briefly mentions that the root cause of diseases lies in Yang Deficiency or Yin Deficiency, completely ignoring the dialectical thought of the mutual transformation and dynamic changes of Yin and Yang in the source text. For Western readers who are not familiar with the Yin-Yang theory of TCM, this translation fails to convey the essence of the Yin-Yang theory in TCM, resulting in a serious cultural default.

The adopted compensation strategy is literal translation combined with transliteration, with Chinese characters added in parentheses. However, this is insufficient and will still lead to defaults.

Adding footnotes [6] to explain the specific manifestations of the syndromes is a good way to introduce these syndromes to readers.

3.3. Metaphorical Rhetoric

Example 3

ST: The fourth sentence of paragraph 1 on page 64.

TT: These two medicines can both restrict the hyperactivity of the Liver Yang (Gan-yang) and nourish the insufficient Liver Yin (Gan-yin), which is the proper way to regulate the relationship between the Metal or the Lung and the Wood or the Liver.

In the TCM theory of the Five Elements, there are distinctive metaphorical expressions. Among them, “Wood” is used to refer to the liver, and “Metal” refers to the lung. This corresponding relationship is derived from the theory in the Five Elements theory that “Wood corresponds to the liver, and Metal corresponds to the lung.” The expression “the interaction between Wood and Metal” actually implies the “xiang ke ” relationship of the Five Elements. Specifically, it means “Metal restrains Wood”, indicating that the lung (Metal) can restrict the liver (Wood) and prevent its excessive hyperactivity. However, for Western readers, due to their lack of background knowledge of the TCM theory of the Five Elements, it is very difficult for them to understand the metaphorical connection between “Wood” and “the liver”, as well as between “Metal” and “the lung”. It is even more challenging for them to grasp the therapeutic logic of “Metal restrains Wood” behind it.

Similarly, the metaphors derived from the concept of “Yin-Yang balance” also lead to cultural defaults. For example, “restraining the excess of Wood” corresponds to “hyperactivity of Liver Yang” in TCM, and “nourishing the withered Wood” corresponds to “deficiency of Liver Yin”. This fully reflects the dynamic regulation idea of “Yin-Yang balance” in TCM. However, in the Western medical system, there are no concepts of “Liver Yang” and “Liver Yin”. If they are directly translated as “Liver Yang” and “Liver Yin”, Western readers are likely to misunderstand them as descriptions of the physical properties of anatomical organs.

4. Translation Compensation Strategies for Cultural Defaults in the English Translation of Lixu Yuanjian

Translation compensation strategy means that during the translation process, when encountering words and sentences that are difficult to translate directly, the translator often needs to resort to the unique linguistic means of the target language to make every effort to compensate for the distortion and loss of the linguistic effect of the translated text, so as to make the translated text achieve roughly the same effect as the original text.

In what follows, this section will delve into the approaches to handling cultural defaults in the English translation of Lixu Yuanjian by commencing with two translation compensation strategies: the explanation method and the annotation method.

4.1. Explanation Method

Example 4

ST: The second sentence of paragraph 2 on page 136.

TT: If the patient suffers from predominant Dampness due to the Spleen Deficiency (pi xu shi sheng), then it will turn into yellowish edema (Huang-zhong)....

In the above translation case, the source text is a statement describing TCM syndromes, and there is an obvious phenomenon of cultural default. “pi xu shi sheng ” (Spleen Deficiency with Predominant Dampness) and “huang zhong ” (Yellowish Edema) are terms with specific TCM

connotations. For target language readers who are not familiar with TCM culture, it is difficult to understand their exact meanings just from the literal words.

From the perspective of the interpretive translation strategy, the translator has adopted various methods for handling. Regarding “pi xu shi sheng”, the translator not only translated it literally as “Spleen Deficiency due to the predominant Dampness”, but also thoughtfully attached the pinyin “Pi-xu Shi-sheng”. By doing so, it conveys the approximate meaning of the term through the English expression, that is, the state of a weak spleen with excessive dampness, and at the same time retains the form of the Chinese original text. For the term “huang zhong”, a similar method was also adopted. It was translated as “yellowish edema” with the pinyin “Huang-zhong” marked. “yellowish edema” explains the literal meaning of “huáng zhǒng”, that is, an edematous symptom with a yellowish appearance, enabling target language readers to have an intuitive understanding of the syndrome. The marked pinyin provides a clue for cultural tracing.

Through this interpretive translation strategy, the translator effectively makes up for the understanding obstacles caused by cultural default [7]. When reading the translated text, target language readers can relatively clearly grasp the basic information of the syndrome description in the source text.

4.2. Annotation Method

Example 5

ST: The first sentence of paragraph 3 on page 30.

TT: I just adopt appropriate therapeutic methods according to the specific conditions¹, taking the treatment of the Lung, the Spleen and Kidneys as a whole so that the harmony of Yin and Yang will be restored.

The idiom “zhi liang yong zhong” is from the Zhong Yong (Golden Mean) of Li Ji (The Book of Rites), which says “Emperor Shun is a great ruler because he employed the Golden Mean to rule his people, abandoning the overstrict or overrelaxing rules”. The idiom often means people should do everything in moderation for everything moves and develops according to its own rule.

In the above case, the source text “yu wei ...diao” exhibits a significant phenomenon of cultural default. The expression “zhi liang duan yi yong zhong” contains profound connotations of traditional Chinese culture and originates from the Zhong Yong (Golden Mean) in Li Ji (The Book of Rites). If it were simply translated literally, target language readers would find it extremely difficult to understand the cultural significance and philosophical ideas behind it.

From the perspective of translation compensation strategies, the translator has employed the annotation method for handling this situation. In the target text, apart from translating the general meaning of the sentence as “I just adopt appropriate therapeutic methods according to the specific conditions, taking the treatment of the Lung, the Spleen and Kidneys as a whole so that the harmony of Yin and Yang will be restored.”, detailed annotations are added. In the annotation, not only the source of the idiom “zhi liang yong zhong” is explained, but also its allusion is elaborated, along with the deeper meaning expressed by this idiom. Through this compensation strategy of the annotation method, the information loss caused by cultural default is effectively made up for. When reading the translated text, target language readers can understand the cultural connotations in the original text that are difficult to convey directly with the help of the annotations.

5. Conclusion

This article delves deeply into the issues of cultural defaults encountered during the English translation of TCM classics and the corresponding compensation strategies, taking the English translation of Lixu Yuanjian as the research object. Through analysis, the author has identified several

main types of cultural defaults, including TCM terms, metaphorical rhetoric, and philosophical concepts. These cultural elements hold a central position in TCM classics but often lack corresponding expressions in cross-cultural communication.

Mr. Mao, the translator, mainly adopted the strategy of literal translation to be faithful to the original text and supplemented it with explanatory translation for specific terms and cultural concepts. However, although literal translation has achieved some success in preserving the style of the original text, it may overlook the cultural background and acceptance ability of the target readers. In this regard, the author proposes several compensation measures to improve the translation effect and the reader experience. Firstly, it is recommended to add footnotes or additional annotations on the basis of literal translation to provide necessary cultural background information. Secondly, for some terms that have been widely recognized or standardized, the commonly accepted translation methods should be considered. This article may provide some practical guidance and theoretical reference for the future English translation of TCM classics to achieve the effective global dissemination and sharing of TCM culture.

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