

Translation-Driven Regional Branding: Constructing TCM Narratives within Global Health Discourses

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Abstract: This study explores how translation empowers regional branding, focusing on Anhui traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) within global health discourses. Drawing on a tri-source corpus and audience surveys, three key challenges are identified: blurred terminology due to pinyin transliteration, insufficient integration between cultural narratives and scientific reasoning, and frequent misinterpretation of visual symbols. To address these barriers, the paper proposes a “translation–branding–discourse adaptation” model, supported by four strategies: terminology standardization, integrated narrative reconstruction, cross-cultural visual adaptation, and a layered communication framework. A case study of Bozhou Peony illustrates how translation enhances brand recognition, improves market acceptance, and strengthens cultural resonance. Methodologically, the study integrates corpus analysis, audience perception surveys, semiotic interpretation, and applied case studies to bridge theoretical inquiry with practical implementation. The findings not only broaden the scope of translation studies by highlighting translation as a tool of value co-construction, but also provide actionable strategies for enhancing the international visibility and competitiveness of TCM brands, contributing to both regional development and global health communication.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

The global health industry has expanded rapidly in recent years, with the World Health Organization (WHO) and other institutions issuing strategies that promote the standardization and integration of traditional medicine[1][2]. Against this backdrop, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has gained increasing opportunities for international dissemination. Anhui Province, with its strong medical heritage, local specialties, and Bozhou as China’s largest herbal hub, possesses clear advantages in this field. However, its international influence remains limited due to translation and communication barriers.

Currently, many key terms are transliterated directly into pinyin, offering little explanation of their functions or cultural significance. Narratives often emphasize history and tradition without sufficient connection to modern health concepts. Symbolic elements such as Hui-style architecture

are also prone to misinterpretation, which weakens cultural distinctiveness abroad. This “dual mismatch” of language and symbolism constrains brand building. To address these issues, translation must be repositioned as a means of empowerment—providing creative terminology, reconstructing narratives, and adapting visual codes—to enhance the cross-cultural expression of Anhui TCM.

1.2 Key Concepts

Translation empowerment is defined here as using translation proactively in brand construction and cross-cultural communication. Through creative terminology, cultural adaptation, and semantic alignment, translation shifts from simple language transfer to a process of value co-construction.

Regional brand equity refers to a recognizable system of values shaped by cultural and geographic contexts. In the case of Anhui TCM, this includes the legacy of Hui culture, traditional medical knowledge, and integration with contemporary health consumption practices.

Global health discourse, dominated by institutions such as WHO and the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), prioritizes scientific validity and standardization [3]. To participate effectively in this arena, medical traditions must demonstrate compliance with regulated terminology, evidence of efficacy, and cultural adaptability.

1.3 Research Significance and Methodology

This study proposes a “translation–branding–discourse adaptation” model to address the challenges facing Anhui TCM in global communication. Theoretically, the model broadens the scope of translation studies by highlighting its role in shaping cognition and constructing value. Practically, it provides actionable strategies for improving the international visibility and acceptance of TCM brands.

The methodology integrates corpus analysis, audience surveys, case studies, and semiotic interpretation. This combined approach enables the study to diagnose problems at the levels of terminology, narrative, and symbolism, and to suggest pathways for their optimization. By doing so, the research aims to link theoretical innovation with practical application, offering insights for both translation studies and the internationalization of regional health-related brands.

2. Diagnosis of Anhui TCM Brand Communication

2.1 Corpus and Analytical Framework

To examine the performance of Anhui traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in international communication, this study constructed a three-source corpus covering official publicity texts, market promotion materials, and overseas social media posts. A total of 218 texts from 2010 to 2023 were collected. The analysis applies a three-dimensional framework—terminology, narrative, and symbols—focusing on the clarity of translation, the logic of storytelling, and the cultural adaptability of visual expression.

2.2 Three Types of Disjunction in Brand Expression

Corpus analysis reveals significant disjunctions between language conversion and brand building:

(1) Terminology: blurred meaning through transliteration

Many key terms are rendered in pinyin without explanatory notes or functional labels, leaving

international audiences unable to grasp their meaning. For instance, Liuwei Dihuang Wan offers neither efficacy information nor cultural context. Moreover, inconsistent use of terms such as tonifying, nourishing, and invigorating dilutes precision and undermines professional credibility.

(2) Narrative: disconnection between culture and science

Official and commercial texts frequently highlight legends, historical figures, or local distinctiveness, but seldom translate these into modern health discourse. For example, Five-Animal Exercises are described as cultural heritage without reference to their therapeutic or rehabilitative value, while Bozhou Peony is promoted as a regional specialty but lacks pharmacological support. Such traditional, story-driven narratives may carry cultural charm but, in the absence of evidence, fail to build trust in global health contexts.

(3) Symbols: misinterpretation of visual elements

Visual designs often feature Hui-style architecture, landscape motifs, or classical prints intended to signal cultural identity. However, international audiences frequently mistake these for Japanese or Korean styles, or reduce them to generic “Asian traditional culture.” This misrecognition reflects the lack of semiotic re-coding and insufficient adaptation of design across cultures, weakening brand distinctiveness.

2.3 Findings from Audience Survey

To validate the corpus analysis, a survey of 200 respondents in the UK, US, and Australia was conducted to explore perceptions of “Anhui TCM [4].” Results indicate:

Brand recognition is vague: Only 18% of respondents correctly identified Anhui TCM as medicinal products, while most associated it with general herbal supplements.

Trust is weak: The primary concerns were safety and efficacy (32%), followed by insufficient explanations (21%) and incomprehensible names (18%), mirroring the problems in terminology and narrative.

Cultural recognition is confused: Forty-one percent misidentified Hui-style packaging designs as Japanese or Korean, underscoring risks of visual misinterpretation.

Word-association tests further showed that terms such as mystery, ancient, and unknown were far more frequent than safe, effective, or modern. This indicates that audiences still perceive Anhui TCM through vague cultural labels rather than functional or scientific attributes [5].

2.4 Synthesis

Overall, the challenge facing Anhui TCM does not lie in insufficient information but in a systemic mismatch of expression. Unclear terminology reduces comprehensibility, fragmented narratives diminish credibility, and misinterpreted symbols weaken recognizability. Together, these factors constrain the communicative effectiveness of Anhui TCM in the global health discourse and hinder the construction of its regional brand equity.

3. Strategies for Translation-Enabled Regional Branding

Building on the previous analysis of terminological ambiguity, narrative disjunction, and symbolic misinterpretation, this chapter outlines four interrelated strategies for enhancing Anhui’s traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) brand in the global health discourse: terminology strategy, narrative reconstruction, symbolic transcoding, and communication mechanisms. Together, these dimensions form a “language–cognition–visual–distribution” chain that supports the international visibility and credibility of the brand.

3.1 Terminology Strategy: From Literal Transfer to Conceptual Output

Terminology is the first entry point for brand recognition and strongly influences comprehension and trust. For TCM, literal pinyin translations are insufficient; what is required is conceptual communication [6].

Creative translation principles should combine scientific accuracy and cultural distinctiveness. Latin names may be paired with geographical markers to ensure traceability, while functional attributes can be embedded in product names (e.g., Huoshan Dendrobium® – Metabolic Regulator). Trademark registration further enhances distinctiveness and legal protection.

A core bilingual terminology database is recommended, covering major herbs, formulae, and therapies. Each entry should provide Chinese names, Latin equivalents, existing translations, and context-sensitive recommendations. Such a dynamic resource would serve academic, commercial, and social communication, creating consistency across domains.

3.2 Narrative Reconstruction: Triple Discourse Integration

In global health communication, branding is not simply about product export but about constructing a convincing discourse. To move beyond “traditional storytelling,” scientific, cultural, and consumer-oriented narratives must be woven together.

Scientific discourse emphasizes evidence and safety, expressed in precise yet accessible language.

Cultural discourse highlights Xin’an medicine and Huizhou traditions, conveyed through anecdotes or explanatory notes that give historical depth.

Consumer discourse adapts to international wellness preferences—such as stress relief or daily self-care—embedding TCM within everyday lifestyle scenarios.

This “triple integration” strengthens persuasive power by blending credibility, identity, and market appeal. For example, Bozhou peony (Baishao) can be repositioned from a classical materia medica reference to a women’s health supplement, linking heritage with modern relevance.

3.3 Symbolic Transcoding: Visual Translation and Cultural Adaptation

Symbols and visuals are also part of translation. Anhui’s TCM products often lose visibility in foreign markets due to symbolic misreadings, underscoring the need for a coherent visual translation system.

Traditional prototypes—such as woodblock illustrations, Huizhou architecture, or materia medica charts—can be reinterpreted into modern design languages like line drawings, geometric compositions, or functional infographics. At the same time, cross-cultural adaptation requires aligning with international aesthetic preferences. Traditional yellows, reds, and dark greens may be balanced with minimalist natural tones to improve acceptance. Elements prone to mystification, such as acupuncture or the five phases, should be presented through diagrams or data-driven visuals to avoid exoticizing misinterpretations [7].

Through visual redesign, Anhui’s TCM brand can retain cultural authenticity while asserting its distinct identity, rather than being subsumed under a generic “Asian tradition.”

3.4 Communication Mechanisms: Layered Output Matrix

Effective communication mechanisms ensure that translation strategies take root in practice. A multi-level content matrix can address diverse audiences. At the professional level, alignment with international standards and institutions is essential—such as contributing to WHO’s ICD-11

terminology revisions, publishing bilingual evaluation reports with universities, and developing open-access knowledge platforms. At the public level, interactive digital storytelling is key. Social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram provide opportunities for experiments, challenges, and visual campaigns that make the brand both visible and relatable. At the intermediary level, “brand translators” should be cultivated [8]. These professionals, developed through university–enterprise partnerships, need hybrid skills in language services, cultural interpretation, and digital communication. They form the backbone of a professionalized dissemination system.

By integrating terminology precision, narrative reconstruction, symbolic adaptation, and layered communication, Anhui’s TCM brand can shift from mere linguistic export to genuine value recognition within the global health discourse. This framework not only addresses existing issues of unclear terms, fragmented narratives, and symbolic distortion but also provides a systematic translation-based pathway for international brand development.

4. Case Study: Global Narrative Experiment of Bozhou Peony

4.1 Project Background and Objectives

Bozhou, known as the “Capital of Chinese Medicine,” possesses one of the largest traditional herbal markets and abundant authentic medicinal resources. Among them, white peony root has long been one of the most frequently used base ingredients in classical prescriptions. In recent years, under the policy drive of building pilot zones for trade in traditional Chinese medicine services and promoting export transformation, Bozhou white peony was selected as one of the first pilot products for international brand building [9]. The goal is to shift its role from a raw material exporter to a recognizable brand in the global health market.

This case study tests how translation empowers brand recognition, market acceptance, and audience response through the integrated design of naming, terminology, narrative, and communication pathways.

4.2 Implementation of Translation-Enabled Branding

The project was jointly executed by local enterprises and university teams, adopting a “linguistic system—narrative reconstruction—visual communication” three-pronged strategy.

(1) Terminology and Naming

The original translation Bozhou White Peony Root was overly literal and lacked distinctiveness. The project team rebranded the product as: Bozhou Peony® – Women’s Wellness Guardian [10].

This name integrates geographical indication, functional scenario, and emotional association. It not only conveys the product’s functional positioning but also projects a humanized image of protection and care. Additionally, the product description and website adopted terminology such as natural estrogen regulator and gentle hormonal balance, which enhance perceptions of scientific efficacy and health relevance.

(2) Narrative Design

The narrative follows the theme of “classical heritage + modern validation.” It emphasizes the continuity “from records in Treatise on Cold Damage (Shanghan Lun) to contemporary clinical trials,” thereby presenting both cultural depth and scientific credibility [11]. This dual approach avoids the limitations of a single cultural storyline and makes the brand more accessible to international health-conscious consumers.

(3) Communication and Media Strategy

The communication strategy combined social media with professional health channels. On TikTok and Instagram, the campaign PeonyBalanceChallenge encouraged users to share their

wellness experiences. At the same time, partnerships with overseas clinics, health influencers, and podcasts facilitated professional endorsements and testimonial-based storytelling. The visual style adopted a consistent palette of light pink, botanical line drawings, and functional charts—balancing scientific clarity with brand identity to resonate with international audiences [12].

4.3 Preliminary Evaluation of Promotional Outcomes (2022–2023)

After one year of implementation, both online metrics and market feedback indicate encouraging results (see Table 1).

Table 1 Preliminary Evaluation of Promotional Outcomes (2022–2023)

Indicator	Change	Notes
Product Premium Rate	+27.6%	Compared to average domestic export price of white peony
Search Volume Growth	+183%	Google and Amazon keyword data for “Bozhou Peony”
User Satisfaction Score	4.7 / 5	Based on reviews from Amazon, Etsy, and other platforms
Social Media Interactions	32,000+ videos	TikTok PeonyBalanceChallenge participation

In addition, analysis of social media comments revealed frequently recurring associations such as “gentle,” “relief,” “emotional support,” and “ancient wisdom.” These patterns suggest that international audiences have begun to form a dual perception of the brand that combines functional efficacy with cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

Centering on the concept of “translation empowering regional branding,” this study addresses the communicative challenges faced by Anhui’s traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in the global health discourse system. It proposes an optimized pathway integrating terminological innovation, narrative reconstruction, visual transmutation, and diversified dissemination, thereby constructing a three-dimensional coupling model of translation–branding–discursive adaptation.

From a translation studies perspective, the research transcends the traditional paradigm of equivalence by emphasizing the constructive value of translation in shaping meaning. In brand communication, it incorporates terminology, narrative, and symbolic representation into a unified framework, highlighting the foundational role of translation in the formation of brand equity. At the level of global health discourse, it responds to the real-world demand of balancing standardization with cultural specificity in the internationalization of traditional medicine.

5.2 Practical Recommendations

First, the establishment of a “Anhui TCM Translation Think Tank” is recommended, bringing together linguists and TCM experts to advance terminology standardization and co-create brand discourse, forming a sustainable support mechanism.

Second, a “Terminology Risk Early-Warning System”, which employs corpus monitoring and social media analytics to predict potential mistranslations or cultural misreadings, should be developed, thereby improving the precision of international communication.

Third, attention must be given to the promotion of the cultivation of interdisciplinary translation

professionals. By embedding training in health communication and cross-cultural storytelling within university curricula, a cohort of “brand translators” can be nurtured, providing essential human resource support for the global outreach of Anhui TCM.

5.3 Future Prospects

Future research may be extended in three directions:

- 1) Subsequent studies should incorporate cross-linguistic comparative analysis in non-English contexts to verify their broader applicability.
- 2) The development of a quantitative "Global Health Discourse Adaptability Index" is necessary to objectively evaluate the communicative performance of different brands.
- 3) Further exploratory work needs to examine the use of artificial intelligence in semantic generation, style transfer, and multimodal communication, thereby providing technological underpinnings for the internationalization of TCM brands.

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