

Translation of Qi-related Words in Su Wen

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Abstract: The concept of qi and its related words are abundant in TCM literature works such as Su Wen, and the correct and standard translation of qi-related words has direct effect on the dissemination of TCM knowledge and culture. Due to the ambiguity and polysemy of those qi-related words, it is difficult to conduct proper translation. This essay probes into the classification and translation strategies of qi-related words in Su Wen.

1. Introduction

In Chinese literature works, the etymological interpretation for qi (气) is “steam rising from cooking rice.” Later, it developed further with various implications. For example, in the Analects of Confucius, qi means “breath”, and it often used with another Chinese character Xue (blood), making Xueqi (vigor)^[5]; Xun Zi in ancient used qi to refer to the vital forces of the body^[5]; in the field of Confucianism, qi is mainly defined as three different connotations, that is qi is breath, Xue Qi or ethos or habit^[5]. Besides, qi refers to cloud, climate, gas, solar terms, odor or smell, atmosphere, energy in human body, morale, arrogance, etc. In TCM, qi is the primary state of the universe, and basic material to form the universe. All things in the universe are generated by the movement of qi.^[4q]

The concept of qi plays a vital role in the theoretical system of TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine), thus the precise translation of this term is of great importance for target readers to correctly understand literature works of TCM, such as Su Wen (The Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Internal Medicine). However, it is generally challenging for translators to undertake the translation task due to the linguistic features of TCM languages as stated by Li Zhaoguo (1993), “From the perspective of Phylogenetics, TCM language integrates both Chinese philosophy and medicine; from the perspective of lexicology, most of the words and phrases in TCM are obscure, ambiguous, and abstract; from the perspective of language styles, it is low in professionalization and standardization and rich in literary flavor.”^[1]

During the past three decades, the translation activity of TCM nomenclatures developed from the irregular self-exploring by translators to the regulation and unity under official guidance by certain authorities, which is marked by the five versions of standard translation of TCM nomenclatures. The translation of the concept of qi goes through a process from transliteration to free translation and back to transliteration again, which witnessed the tortuous dissemination of TCM to the global world.^[2] Originally, there were about seven kinds of translations to the concept of “气” (qi) in Chinese culture, such as Chi, air, refined substance, vital energy, vital material, vital force and ether^[6]. However, these translations fail to disclose the connotation of qi in Chinese. Based on statistics, qi-related words are widely existed in Su Wen. Specifically, there are 2,900 words concerning qi in this book, and 19 titles contain qi.^[2]

2. Classification of Qi-related words in Su Wen

Gu Feng^[2] divided the qi-related words in Su Wen into four types: 1) the physiological qi in human body, such as “肾气” Shenqi (Kidney-Qi), “肝气” Ganqi (Liver-Qi), “心气” Xinqi

(Heart-Qi), “脾气” Piqi (Spleen-Qi), “胃气” Weiqi (Stomach-Qi) etc.; 2) Pathogenic qi, which means the abnormal and disease-causing qi. For example, the six kinds of abnormal natural phenomena which often lead to sickness are called “六气” (six pathogenic factors), namely, wind, cold, summerheat, dampness, dryness and heat; 3) qi-words related with the colors from the surface of human body, especially complexion, for example, “五气” (five colors), namely the black, white, red, blue and yellow color reflected by human body; 4) qi-related words used to designate the nature of Chinese medicines. For example, “四气五味”(four properties and five tastes) refers to the four types of medicinal nature: Warm, hot, cold and cool and the five kinds of flavors: sour, bitter, sweet, pungent and salty.

However, he ignored an important sort of qi-related words, that is philosophical qi-related words, since qi itself embodies rich philosophical implications in TCM. For example,

“黄帝曰：夫自古通天者，生之本，本于阴阳。天地之间，六合之内，其气九州，九窍，五脏，十二节，皆通乎天气。其生五，其气三，数犯此者，则邪气伤人，此寿命之本也。”

The Emperor said: ... the nine orifices, five zang-organs and twelve joints all correspond to the qi of the yin and yang of nature, which yields the five elements and the three qi. If the numbers infringe these (five or three), the evils will impair people. The yin and yang are the basis of life.^[8]

In the original text, the qi in the “通乎天气” refers to the vital qi (yin qi and yang qi) that generates everything in the universe.

3. Translation strategies of qi-related words in Su Wen

Generally, two possible reasons lead to the errors or flaws in the translation of qi-related words. Firstly, translators fail to recognize the exact meaning of qi in specific context. The other reason lies in the lack of universal standard for the translation of TCM terms.

Gu Feng^[2] compared the translation strategies applied by several translators and drew a conclusion on the translation methods concerning different types of qi-related words. He stated that the integrated usage of transliteration and free translation is the better option for qi-words about human physiology, such as “肝气” [Ganqi (Liver Qi)] –both the vital energy and function of the liver. However, this translation method is retorted by some translators who argue that it fails to deliver the exact meaning of the original word, instead they suggested the combined translation methods be used by adding “the functional activity of ...” in order to complete the meaning of the original words. Thus, “肝气” should be translated as Ganqi (the functional activity of the liver). However, this strategy seems not that recommendable, because it is too redundant and obviously goes against the concise feature of TCM terms. Free translation or explanatory translation are used for pathogenic qi-words, such as “精气夺”(consumption of vital essence). As for qi-words related with colors of human body, he proposed the comprehensive translation method using annotation, for example,

“五气” (Five colors) “Note: In traditional Chinese medicine, the five colors, blue, white, red, black and yellow correspond to the liver, the lung, the heart, the kidney and the spleen respectively. the extent of seriousness of the disease can be known when examining the floating or sunken condition of the colors manifesting on various parts of the human body.”

Lastly, he suggested free translation for qi-related words on the medicinal properties. For example,

“夫芳草之气美，石药之气悍，二者其气急疾坚劲，故非缓心和人，不可以服此二者。”

Fragrant herbs are aromatic and mineral drugs are drastic. These two kinds of drugs are swift and violent in action. So they cannot be used to treat those who are not gentle in disposition.^[3]

As shown by the translation, “芳草之气” and “石药之气” are conveyed by “aromatic” and “drastic” respectively. And there is no need to translate the “气” into “air” in the two terms.

As for the translation of TCM nomenclature, professor Li Zhaoguo put forward the Five Principles^[1]: 1) naturalness, the translation of some TCM terms should be equivalent to those in western medicine; 2) conciseness, that is to say the translation of TCM terms should be short and

complete when conveying the meaning of original words; 3) nationality, the translation of some culture-loaded TCM terms should retain the unique culture carried; 4) back-translation, the translation of TCM terms should be identical with the original terms both structurally; 5) designation, for translation of some long-term argued terms, such as “辩证” (syndrome differentiation), the principle of definition could be used to settle down the dispute.

Besides, the concept of qi and its related words are often translated into pinyin – Qi, which is, in certain cases, reasonable considering the complexity of this concept from the field of philosophy, but some scholars disperse this method. They believe that transliteration is merely the conversion of sound in source text and it is ineffective in conveying the connotations of the original words. Thus, transliteration should be used with caution.

4. Conclusion

Qi is an important concept in TCM literature words, including Su Wen., thus the exact translation of qi-related words is critical for the spread of TCM knowledge and culture to the western world. However, due to its polysemy and complexity, it poses great challenge for translators. Thus, proper understanding of qi-related words in specific context and adherence to standardized translation conventions such as the five principles proposed by Professor Li Zhaoguo are recommended.

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