

A Study on Translating Chinese Cultural Words in International Communication -----Taking Transcript of History Museum Tourist Brochure as a Case Study

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Abstract

In recent years, the translation quality makes great progress wholly in China, but there are mistakes in translating Chinese cultural words. The unsatisfying translation quality has heavily influenced target readers' knowing and understanding Chinese culture. The purpose of this paper is to attract more attention from both translators and readers to cultural words translation. Only in this way can Chinese culture better reach out to the world and let foreigners truly understand the Chinese culture. Taking the representative cultural words gathered in Shaanxi History Museum as an example, it discusses the existing translation problems of the Chinese cultural words from two macro categories, summarizes the typical errors in details, analyses the cause of the mistakes. In the end, some improving methods and suggestions are argued to further improve the translation quality.

Key words: international communication and translation; translating Chinese cultural words; translation problems; translation methods and suggestions

I. Introduction

After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee in 1978, China started to carry out the reform and opening-up policy deeply and to have a closer contact with the outside world. It has an increasingly frequent exchange and cooperation with the rest of the world, which makes the international communication particularly important. The international communication translation aims to translate all aspects of China's information, including politics, economy, culture and religions, into foreign languages. Translation, as an important means of international communication, is directly related to the quality of the international communication.

1.1 International communication

Before discussing international communication translation, we have to know what the international communication is. What must be pointed out here is that we use "international communication" referring to the Chinese term "对外宣传"(duiwai xuanchuan) not the other versions like "foreign propaganda", "foreign publicity", "overseas information" and "foreign publicity" and so on. International communication (also referred as global communication or translational communication) is the practice that occurs across international borders (Fortner, 1993:6). The need for international communication (short for IC) was due to the increasing efforts and influence of globalization. As a field of study, IC is a branch of communication studies, concerning with the scope of "government to government", "business to business", and "people to people" interactions at a global level (Thussu, 2006: 224).

1.2 Translation of cultural words

This paper will use data from tourist brochure on the C_E cultural words translation of the Shaanxi History Museum (SHM). Cultural words refer to the words that contain the social and cultural meaning. Cultural meaning includes the extended meaning, associative meaning, figurative sense and symbolic meaning of words and so on, which is endowed by the certain society. Cultural words are the most active part of the vocabulary, which are closely related to the national psychology, social customs and habits and social change.

II. The Major Characteristics of the Cultural Words in International Communication Translation

International communication translation is a translating practice of taking the foreign readers as its audience-oriented, taking the communication for the purpose and then translating the source information into the target information.

2.1 The ways of transmission

The cultural words have such a wide range of areas, including politics, culture, economy, religion, history, social customs and habits and tourism, and the list is going on. It can be divided into four groups in point of their ways of transmission:

- (1) Printing media like newspapers, magazines, books and pamphlets, product manuals, signs, etc.
- (2) Electronic media like TV and radio.
- (3) Audiovisual media like films, VCRs, VCDs, DVDs, ect.
- (4) The so-called fourth media—the Internet.

2.2 Translation techniques of Chinese cultural words

The potential readers may have a huge difficulty in understanding Chinese cultural words. Translators have to bear in mind that readership is different in modes of thinking and language habits. IC translation, just as its name implies, translators must accomplish the translation of the international communication materials into the target language. "It has a sharp character, namely, international communication translation is to translate the Chinese into foreign language on the whole" (Huang 2004:6). The obvious character of Chinese cultural words' translation is to translate all kinds of the Chinese cultural words into foreign languages and spread it to the whole world, which lets more foreigners know China in all directions. So, in this point, Chinese cultural words' translation is a cross-cultural communication.

III. Translation Problems

The main purpose of the international communication translation is to make the foreigners well informed of Chinese society, politics, economics and culture in China, so is the Chinese cultural words translation. This paper aims at delivering Chinese information and culture to the foreign travelers. There are many highlights in Chinese cultural words C-E translation; it uses appropriately translation standard of faithfulness, expressiveness and closeness. Most of the translations of cultural words are the literal translations of the original text. In case of lack of corresponding English expression, it will adopt the free translation. However, there are still many problems. First, some translations are seriously lack of the relevant cultural background. If one doesn't know the Chinese culture, even if the most precious cultural relic is just an ordinary exhibit, it can't reach the goal of cultural transmission. Second, there are some information loss and bad translation. These problems can be divided into two categories: the explicit mistakes and the implicit mistakes.

3.1 Explicit Mistakes

Explicit mistakes seen as "type-A mistakes" according to Duan Liancheng are "characterized by misspelling, grammatical mistakes and inappropriate wording" (1990:2). Duan's definition of type-A mistakes corresponds to Lin Wusun's definition of "external injuries". That is "mistakes concerned with proofreading and grammar like pinyin, capitalization and so on" (Editorial Department of *Chinese Translators Journal*, 1992:7). They are unlikely to cause misunderstanding but give others the impression that translators are under-educated and perfunctory" (Duan 1990:2). In this paper, the explicit mistakes are discussed from five aspects.

3.1.1 Transliteration mistakes

Transliteration mistakes are the most common mistakes of the Chinese cultural words C-E translation in the Shaanxi History Museum, especially the misspelling in pinyin, for example:

ST1: 狮子和雕刻狮子的工艺也沿着丝绸之路传入了陕西

TT1: The lion and the craft of carving lions spread to Shanxi along the Silk Road

The English version occurs the misspelling of "陕西" into "Shanxi" for 29 times. Shanxi is a province of China, which is located in the north China. Its one-character abbreviation is Jin(晋), and its capital city is Taiyuan. Whereas Shaanxi is located in the Northwest China, and its capital city is Xi'an. So, the misspelling of "陕西" will let the foreigners get confused.

ST2: 方形的叫做仓、廩; 圆形的为困、囤。

TT2. The square is called Clang and Lin; the round is called Qun and Dun.

Obviously, the "Clang" must be "Cang". Cang is an instrument for grain storage, *Clang* is kind of big noise in English. Another example, "Jiaozi, or Xianyin" ("交子", 也称"钱引"), "Xianyin" has to be translated as "Qianyin".

3.1.2 Spelling mistakes

Spelling mistakes are too numerous to mention one by one among the Chinese cultural words C-E translation in the Shaanxi History Museum. The main one is the erratum of letters. This kind of mistake may make our translation look ridiculous and incomprehensible to our readers.

ST1. Stone Drug

TT1. 石鼓

When foreigners glance at the display and the name, they will be shocked by the Chinese translators. From the Chinese version, we may know that the "Drug" must be "drum". A drug is a substance which may have medicinal, intoxicating, performance enhancing or other effects when taken or put into a human body or the body of another animal and is not considered as food or exclusively a food. And the drum is a member of the percussion group of musical instruments. They have a huge difference. So, when doing translation, the translators must be too careful to make jokes.

ST2. Barber system

TT2. 物物交换

A barber is a person whose work is mainly to cut, style and shave the male person's hair, and his work is known as "barber shop". So, we know the "barber system" must be "barter system". Barter is a system of changing goods or services directly by another goods and services what you need without using a medium of exchange, such as money or ivory, salt and so on.

3.1.3 Capitalization mistakes

Capitalization mistakes are a kind of mistakes because of carelessness.

ST1. Being the largest one in china's history, it is honored as the Chinese First lion or the East First.

ST2. this relic is probably a musical instrument Stand's base produced during the Warring States Period.

ST3. In the outer layer, every layer was engraved with a different animal like Mandarin duck, parrot, and fox and so on.

Obviously, in the last three examples, "china" should be "China"; "Stand's" should be corrected as "stand's"; the "Mandarin" should be "mandarin".

According to The English-Chinese Dictionary, in the following situations, the first letters have to be capitalized. "The first letter of the first word in the first sentence; the first letter of the proper names, like nation, province, city, county, state, such as Province of Jiangsu; the first letter of street, plaza, garden, church, library, bridge, such as Fleet Street; the first letter of brand, service logo and so on, such as Air Express, and so on" (Lu 1996:2226-2227).

3.1.4 Incorrect writing

This kind of mistake is obvious. Such as, Shan's family, Shiji, Wangmang, Yang Jia Wan of Xian Yang City, An jia Tomb, Wu Ze Tian, the list goes on. The correct ones are Shan family, Shi Ji, Wang Mang, Yangjia Wan of Xianyang City, Anjia Tomb and Wu Zetian.

3.1.5 Common sense mistakes

“大月氏” is translated as “Da Yueshi”. In fact, “‘月’ is the old style of ‘肉’, and ‘氏’ is read as ‘支’ in ancient sound. So, it must be ‘Da Rouzhi’.” “四足鬲” is translated as “Four-legged Ge”. The “鬲” is a kind of common cooking utensil in the ancient China, similar to the present pot for cooking food and boiling water, and it pronounces as the Chinese letter “li”. The revised translation is “Four-legged Li”.

3.2 Implicit Mistakes

Duan Liancheng describes implicit mistakes in this way, “An article with implicit mistakes contains no spelling or grammatical mistakes, but foreign readers find it hard or even impossible to understand, to say nothing of enjoying it” (Duan 1990:4). Lin Wusun's definition of “internal injuries” identifies with Duan Liancheng's implicit mistakes—“implicit mistakes are not concerned with spelling or grammatical mistakes. Seemingly good as it is, an article with implicit mistakes causes obscurity, misunderstanding and even dislike” (*Chinese Translators Journal*, Editorial Department, 1992:7). Lin Wusun also points out that “...though there are less implicit mistakes than explicit mistakes, the former may yield worse effects” (*Chinese Translators Journal*, Editorial Department, 1992:7).

3.2.1 Inconsistent translation

Keeping the cultural words translation consistent is highly important in international communication translation. The consistency means to translate the proper names such as the names of places of historical interest, streets and road names, college and university names and so on into one term, which can convey the information clearly to the foreign readers. If the translation is not consistent, such as two or more translated versions for one place or a name, it may let the foreigners difficult understand—sometimes they may think there are two or more different places. The followings are some examples.

- ST1. 黄河: Huanghe River, Yellow River.
- ST2. 瓦当: Wa Dang, Eaves Tiles
- ST3. 鼎: Ding, Tripod.
- ST4. 博山: Poshan, Boshan.
- ST5. 胡服: Hu clothing, Hu dress.

Like the preceding list, the examples are too numerous to mention. All of the versions can't be distinguished as wrong, but in fact, it will pose difficulties for foreigners to understand.

3.2.2 Chinglish

Joan Pinkham defines Chinglish in her book *The Translator's Guide to Chinglish*. Chinglish, of course, is the misshapen, hybrid language that is neither English nor Chinese but that might be described as ‘English with Chinese Characteristics’” (Pinkham, 2000:1). In this paper, we mainly talk about word-for-word translation of Chinglish. Let's see some examples:

- ST1 黄河壶口瀑布: Yellow River Hukou Waterfall
- ST2 骊山: Li Mountain
- ST3 法门寺地宫: Si Di Palace in Fa Men

In order to be well-accepted by foreigners, the three terms have to be respectively corrected as Hukou Waterfall of the Yellow River, Mount Li and Underground Palace of Famen Temple.

3.2.3 Underloaded translation

Alexander Fraser Tytler once put forward three famous principles in *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (1790). The three principles include (1) translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work; (2) the style and manner of writing should be of the same character with that of the original; (3) the translation should have all the ease of the original composition.

The underloaded translation is obviously against Tytler's first principle of complete transcription. The examples are as follows:

- ST1. “天下刺史进奉，自肃始”
- TT1. “Every Ci Shi pays tribute to the emperor.”
- ST2. 到唐朝则明确规定，皇帝、亲王和三品以上官员用玉鈿
- TT2. In the Tang Dynasty, as is stipulated, Kings, Kings and officials above the third official rank use jade plaques.
- ST3. 纸是中国古代四大发明之一。
- TT3. Paper is one of the four great inventions in ancient China.

The previous three examples can be revised as follows:

Every Ci Shi (a kind of official position in Han Dynasty in China, equivalent to prefectural governor.) pays tribute to the emperor; in the Tang Dynasty, as is stipulated, Kings, Kings [Emperor (*huangdi*), first- grade prince (*qinwang*)] and officials above the third official rank use jade plaques; paper is one of the four great inventions (Compass, Gunpowder, Paper-making and Printing) in ancient China.

The added notes in the brackets will help understand what these cultural words would tell. The potential readers may feel confused about the Chinese culture, even they may lose interest in Chinese culture.

3.3 The Reasons of the Problems

In this section, we will discuss the reasons of translation problems existing in Shaanxi History Museum from the aspects of explicit and implicit mistakes.

3.3.1 The Reasons of Explicit Mistakes

In a strict sense, explicit mistakes cannot be counted as “translation mistakes”. They may be caused by the carelessness of translators or typists. The translators’ unclear writing and poor language proficiency and the typists’ negligence are the major reasons. Transliteration mistakes often arise from the similar pronunciations of some Chinese consonants and vowels, such as “Shaanxi” and “Shanxi”, “Lv” and “Lu”. The misspelling, capitalization and the writing mistakes are often caused by the translators’ carelessness and the negligence of the typist. The common sense mistake relates to the translators’ little knowledge about Chinese traditional culture and carelessness.

3.3.2 The Reasons of Implicit Mistakes

The reasons of the implicit mistakes are more complicated, and they are much related to the translators’ qualities. The inconsistent translation is the important reflection of that. Chinglish and underloaded translations also have some relations to the translators’ qualities and translating methods. Translation process is composed of comprehending and expressing, and translators’ thorough comprehension plays a fundamental role. In a sense, translators are both the first reader and receptor of the original text. The lack of the thorough comprehension is a great reason of the implicit mistakes. Furthermore, the translators’ inadequate knowledge to foreign cultures, different aesthetic standards from English natives, different ways of thinking and unsatisfying language proficiency are the vital reasons of making implicit mistakes.

IV. The Suggestions to solve the Problems

The reasons of the explicit mistakes and implicit mistakes have been analyzed at large in the previous chapter. Different mistakes need different ways to revise them. There are no unified methods to solve all the mistakes in international communication translation. Therefore, a lot of suggestions have been put forward to minimize the mistakes. The translators should check their translations carefully before and after printing. In fact, in this way many mistakes can be found in time, such as transliteration mistakes, misspelling, capitalization, writing mistakes. According to the cause of the implicit mistakes, suggestions are given for the each kind of implicit mistakes.

As for inconsistent translation, two different names or even more for one place or one thing may lead to misunderstanding. So, in order to well transmit Chinese culture, the government has to strengthen the management of the proper names and special Chinese cultural words. The following section will discuss the suggestions to deal with underloaded translation.

4.1 Transliteration and semantic translation

If there are no paralleled words in the target culture when translating the special cultural words into target language, the transliteration and semantic translation are good ways to smooth the regret.

ST1. 这件戈特点鲜明，戈援呈三角形，是陕南汉中早期蜀文化的典型造型

TT1. This spear’s triangle Edge is typical of early Shu Culture in the Southern Shaanxi Province.

ST2. 陈列的椁木属于葬具也出自该墓

TT2. The Guo wood on show here also came from the tomb.

ST3. 我们的左手边主要陈列了几幅反映秦始皇陵园现状的景观照片。

TT3. On our left side are some pictures on the current status quo of the Tomb of Emperor Qin Shihuang.

“蜀文化”、“椁木”和“秦始皇” are semantic vacant words in English, so translators have to employ both transliteration and semantic translation methods. Transliteration contributes to help foreigners to know these cultural words’ mandarin pronunciation, and the semantic translation is conducive to convey the implication to foreign readers. Therefore, the proceeding examples can be dealt with in this way:

This spear’s triangle Edge is typical of early Shu Culture (Shu Culture is a regional culture, essentially, it is the inland agricultural culture) in the Southern Shaanxi Province. The Guo wood (not any kind of wood, it is a palace to pack the coffin, namely, an underground buildings) on show here also came from the tomb; on our left side are some pictures on the current status quo of the Tomb of Emperor Qin Shihuang (Qin Shi Huang, namely, Ying Zheng, is the first emperor in Chinese history and unified China in 221 B.C).

4.2 Semantic translation and phonetic notation

Many Chinese auspicious words and ancient official position names can’t find the corresponding expressions in English. The semantic translation and phonetic notation are used together to convey the meaning.

ST1. 钟鸣鼎食

TT1. Noble lords in the past eat with tripods in array while servants playing bells

ST2. “托古改制”

TT2. “Follow the examples of the ancient to remanufacture”

ST3. “长生无极”

TT3. “the immortal is limitless”

ST4. “汉并天下”

TT4. “Chinese will rule the whole country”

Above examples contain several Chinese four-character idioms and two official names. These special cultural words are vacant in the target language, therefore, the semantic translation and phonetic notation are accessible to deal with them. The semantic translation is able to deliver the Chinese four-character idioms' connotation; meanwhile, the phonetic notation conduces to help the English readers know these expressions' pronunciation in Chinese. Therefore, it can be improved in this way:

Noble lords in the past ate with tripods in array while servants playing bells (*zhongming dingshi*); "follow the examples of the ancient to remanufacture" (*tuogu gaizhi*); "the immortal is limitless" (*changsheng wuji*); "Chinese will rule the whole country" (*hanbing tianxia*).

4.3 Semantic translation and explanatory note

Semantic translation and explanatory notes are useful to translate the special Chinese cultural words.

ST1. 过去仅见于文献记载，而且所记其烧造年代为五代时期。

TT1. In the past, it was only recorded in the literature, recording it was made in the period of Five Dynasties

ST2. 同时与《史记》相对应

TT2. This lends some support to Shiji (*Historical Records*)

The last two examples can be revised as follows:

In the past, it was only recorded in the literature, recording it was made in the period of Five Dynasties [That is an upheaval period in China during 907-960AD, between the decline of the Tang Dynasty and the rise of the Song Dynasty. During that period, five dynasties rapidly replace one another. They are Later Liang (June 1, 907-923), Later Tang (923-936), Later Jin (936-947), Later Han (947-951 or 979, depending on whether Northern Han is considered part of the dynasty), Later Zhou (951-960)]; this lends some support to Shiji (*Historical Records*) [Shi Ji, written by Sima Qian, records the period from the age of legendary Yellow Emperor about 3000BC to the first year of the Yuan Shou of Emperor Wu of Han in the 122BC, totally more than 3000 years' history in ancient China.].

4.2.3.4 Addition

Special cultural words contain some information that might be unfamiliar to foreign readers, so we have to apply the additional translation methods to fill in the connotative information.

ST1: 展览共分为史前、周、秦、汉、魏晋南北朝、隋唐和唐以后的陕西七大部分，从不同侧面反映出陕西的历史地位。

TT: The exhibition is divided into seven parts: Prehistoric, Zhou dynasty, Qin Dynasty, Han dynasty, the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, the Sui and Tang dynasties, and the dynasties after Tang.

In this example, as the names of these dynasties are firstly mentioned in the material, we need to describe them in details. So we can revise them as:

The exhibition is divided into seven parts: the first part is Prehistory; the Prehistory is a span of time before the human have the ability of recording history in writing ways. The second part is Zhou Dynasty, Zhou falls in Western Zhou and East Zhou, and it spans from 1046BC to 256BC in ancient China, in that period, the iron is introduced to China and the bronze is popular. The third part is the Qin Dynasty; it's the first imperial dynasty also the first unification of China, and lasts from 221BC to 206BC. The fourth is Han Dynasty; this interregnum also separates into two periods: the Western Han and the East Han, the former is from 206BC to 9AD, the latter lasts from 25AD to 220AD.

It totally spans over 4 centuries and is a golden age in Chinese history, that's why China's majority ethnic group is called as "Han people" and the Chinese character as "Han characters". The fifth part is called the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties; spanning from 220 to 589, it's a period of being full of civil wars and political chaos, but also it's a blossoming time in arts, culture and technology. In that period, the Daoism and the Mahayana Buddhism is prevailing. The next part is the Sui and Tang Dynasty, the Sui Dynasty only lasts for 37 years from 581-618 and Tang is from 618 to 907. The Tang dynasty falls into the early Tang and the late Tang, the early one is a Golden Age, while the late one is a time of decline. The last exhibition is the dynasties after Tang, that is, 907 year later. It contains the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the Ming Dynasty (1368-1662) and the Qing Dynasty (1616-1912).

It has to be noticed that addition leads to heavy-loaded information and redundancy, presumably reduces the fluency of reading.

ST2. 张骞出使西域后，狮子和雕刻狮子的工艺也沿着丝绸之路传入了陕西。

TT2. Zhang Qian, a famous Chinese envoy, went to western region, the lion and the craft of carving lions spread to Shanxi along the Silk Road.

In this example, the notions of Western Region and the Silk Road need to be further explained, otherwise it is difficult for the foreigners to get some knowledge about the ancient Asian history in China. More explanation is added as follows:

Zhang Qian, a famous Chinese envoy, went to western region, which is referred to the west of Jade Gate, including the West of China and parts of Central Asia, the lion and the craft of carving lions spread to Shaanxi along the Silk Road, a series of routes connecting the West and the East with trade and cultural transmission.

ST3. 仰韶文化晚期很多陶器上刻划着具有一定规律和共性的符号，姜寨遗址中发现的刻划符号有 38 种，半坡遗址中发现了 27 种。

TT3. Many late Yangshao culture potteries are carved with some regular and common symbols, among which 38 symbols are found in Jiangzhai Site and 27 in Banpo Ruins.

In this sentence, the Banpo Ruins is strange to most of the foreigners even some Chinese, so we need to elaborate it further. We can improve the translation as: Banpo Ruins, an archaeological site, is located in the Yellow River Valley, and it contains the relics of several well-preserved Neolithic settlements which can be dated back to 5600-6700 years ago.

All of the three examples above contain some unfamiliar information to the foreigners, which seriously limits them to understand Chinese culture and hider the transmission of Chinese culture.

Conclusion

In the new situation of global integration, with China's opening up to the outside world and the increasingly frequent foreign economic and cultural exchanges, the status and role of the international communication work is becoming significantly important. Translation serves as the media and bridge of the international links. Its importance is self-evident; the translation quality inevitably has a heavy influence on the mutual understanding. However, there are still many problems in the daily translation. Especially, translation quality of the Chinese cultural words, as a special part of international communication, is vital. The paper argues that when translating the materials into the target language in international communication, a translator has to deeply comprehend the original materials, learn the knowledge about foreign cultures profoundly, improve the language proficiency and always keep the target readers in mind. "Three 'Getting Close to' Principles of getting close to the reality of China's development, getting close to the foreign readers' need and of getting close to the thinking habits of the foreign audience are proposed in the end.

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