

## Translation of Basic Concepts in Chinese Tai Chi Culture: Problems and Strategies

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### Abstract

*As one of the typical traditional Chinese martial arts, Tai Chi has been loved by an increasing number of people in this world. However, the ancient cultural ideas within it are not well understood by westerners, mainly resulted from the inappropriate translation of basic concepts in Tai Chi culture. The causes of the translation problems include inconsistency in multiple translated versions for a single concept, failure in understanding the source culture and unacceptable rendering of translated language expressions. Meanwhile some strategies are proposed to improve the translation quality, such as establishing a translated terminology bank, strengthening understandings of source language and culture, and holding the reader-centered attitude.*

**Keywords:** Tai Chi culture; translation; basic concepts; problems and strategies

### Introduction

Tai Chi has been generally accepted as one of the most essential parts of traditional Chinese culture. It is evolved from the ideas and notions of ancient Chinese philosophers about natural laws and human activities. Having been developed for about five thousand years, Tai Chi culture is now deeply rooted in Chinese people's minds. Today, Tai Chi is well known as one of the typical martial arts or sport activities with Chinese characters. As the globalization is increasingly intensified, Tai Chi culture is gradually known and loved by people from other countries and regions. Without any doubt, translation has played a very important role in the cross cultural activities. However, there still exist some problems in translation of Tai Chi texts, which have, to a large extent, exerted a negative impact upon the communicative effect of Tai Chi culture around the world. Therefore, it is obviously of great significance to find out the problems and at the same time to put forward some practical strategies to improve the quality of those translated texts. The present article will focus on the discussion of the translation of basic concepts in Chinese Tai Chi Culture.

### 1 An Overview of Basic Concepts in Chinese Tai Chi Culture

Basic concepts in this article mainly refer to those fixed or semi-fixed key expressions, similar to technical terms, which convey essential names, ideas and theories about Tai Chi culture. Therefore, discussion of basic concepts will surely be of great importance for the whole process of the cross cultural communication. In this section, the connotative meanings of some representative concepts of Tai Chi culture will be depicted by different categories, which are expected to be helpful for the understanding of translation issues.

#### 1.1 Philosophical Concepts

Tai Chi, as one of the essential parts of traditional Chinese culture, consists of a number of philosophical concepts. First and foremost is the concept of "unity of man and nature", in which the natural and harmonious relationship between man and nature is stressed. All the living creatures including man have to abide by the natural law of the universe, instead of trying to challenge or violate it. This is especially significant today when man has been relentlessly damaged the earth environment at any cost. The second philosophical concept is the theory of yin and yang, which indicates the universal principle of development of the whole world. Yin and yang refer to the seemingly opposite forces in the natural world which are actually complementary, interconnected, and interdependent, and they may give rise to each other as they interrelate to one another, such as the heaven and the earth, the sun and the moon, men and women, day and night, heat and cold, movement and stillness, and etc.

Philosophically, it contains a dialectic view of dichotomy that stresses complementation and mutualism, with the focus on pursuing harmony and balance in the universe (Wu, 2012). Another philosophical concept is the theory of five elements, represented respectively by Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. This order of presentation is known as the “mutual generation” sequence. In the order of “mutual overcoming”, they are Wood, Earth, Water, Fire, and Metal. They define the various stages of transformation in the recurring natural cycles of seasonal change, growth and decay, shifting climatic conditions, sounds, flavors, emotions, and human physiology (Reid, 2016). Like yin and yang, the five elements maintain their internal harmony through a system of mutual checks and balances known as “creative” and “control” cycles. Both these cycles, which counteract and balance one another, are in constant operation, maintaining the dynamic fields of polar forces required to move and transform energies. Tai Chi Chuan uses the five elements to designate different directions, positions or footwork patterns, namely, forward, backward, left, right and center (Chen, 2014). Apart from the basic philosophical concepts mentioned above, there are many others such as Taoism, Tai Chi, Wu Chi and etc. They are not less important for the thorough understanding of Tai Chi culture, and will be mentioned in the later part of this article.

### **1.2 Medical Concepts**

Tai Chi culture contains various philosophical concepts, and has also taken in much from the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). TCM is a style of traditional medicine informed by modern medicine but built on a foundation of more than 2,500 years of Chinese medical practice that includes various forms of herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage, exercise, and dietary therapy (Sun, 2002:36). Acupuncture, which is often accompanied by moxibustion, is the insertion of needles into superficial structures of the body (skin, subcutaneous tissue, muscles) – usually at acupuncture points (acupoints) – and their subsequent manipulation, aiming at influencing the flow of qi, relieving pain and treating various diseases. In Tai Chi culture, acupoints or other parts of the human body are repeatedly mentioned, such as Dantian, Mingmen, Baihui and etc. Besides, the meridian system is also a typical concept of TCM that is widely used in Tai Chi culture. The meridians are actually different paths through which the life-energy known as “qi” flows, although scientists have found no evidence that supports their existence. Diseases will be caused if the paths are blocked. Therefore, one of the typical ideas of treating diseases is to dredge the meridians and keep the “qi” paths clear. In Tai Chi culture, this idea has been well taken in to strengthen the physical exercise, aiming at promoting the flow of “qi” and blood and dredging the meridians.

### **1.3 Martial Art Concepts**

As one of the indispensable parts of traditional Chinese culture, Tai Chi has a long history with more than five thousand years, and explains the principles of almost all the changes and developments in the world. However, Tai Chi is nowadays well-known among the world mainly as a Chinese martial art. In this sense, Tai Chi may be better referred to as Tai Chi Chuan, or Taijiquan. Actually Tai Chi Chuan was created by some martial artists, assumedly by Chen Wangting (about 1600-1680) at the end of Ming dynasty, who took in ideas from the ancient Tai Chi culture based on the traditional Chinese martial arts (Shen, et al. 2014:26). Therefore, it is also a must to know the basic concepts of martial arts for gaining a better understanding of Tai Chi Chuan. First, there are various names for different movements of hands, feet and other parts of the body, such as peng, lv, ji, an, cai, lie, zhou, kao, forward, backward, leftward, rightward, standing and etc. Besides, with different focuses and features, Tai Chi Chuan develops into several different schools or styles, represented by Chen, Yang, Woo, Wu, and Sun. Even the same school of Tai Chi Chuan has been creatively reorganized or simplified into different variations for particular purposes. In addition, in the tradition of Chinese martial arts, different acts of various types of animals are frequently used to refer to the movements of the body. For instance, the crane, the horse, the rooster, the ape and the tiger and others are vividly described in certain movements of Tai Chi Chuan.

## **2 PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATION OF BASIC CONCEPTS IN CHINESE TAI CHI CULTURE**

To promote the international communication of Tai Chi culture, translation quality of the basic concepts is one of the key factors. However, there exist a lot of problems about the translation of the basic concepts of Tai Chi culture, among which the following three points are especially obvious.

### **2.1 Inconsistency in Multiple Translated Versions for the Same Concept in Source Texts**

Without any doubt, basic concepts are quite essential parts of a text with a professional topic, which are sometimes referred to as terminology. The whole text couldn't be well understood if the basic concepts are not fully interpreted. Similarly, when a text is translated into another language, the quality of translated versions of the basic concepts within it is a crucial issue to be discussed.

It cannot be denied that in literary works of Tai Chi culture, such words as “太极” and “太极拳” are the most frequently used concepts. However, there exist nearly ten kinds of translated English versions for each of them, which has exerted a great impact on the understanding of the translated Tai Chi works. Take “太极” as an example first. According to the investigation of translated Tai Chi works, there are totally eight translated English versions, such as “Tai Chi”, “taiji”, “the great ultimate”, “the supreme extremes”, “the supreme pole”, “the great extreme”, “the superior ultimate” and “the high peak”. It is no difficulty to find that the character “太” is mostly translated into English modifiers such as “great”, “supreme”, “superior”, while the character “极” is translated as “extreme”, “pole” and even “peak”. Frankly speaking, target readers will never get the full meaning of the Chinese culture-loaded word. Furthermore, they will easily get confused of so many different translated versions, or greatly misled by the improper translated versions. Therefore, it is strongly advised that the version “Tai Chi” be used to replace other versions. In this way, the problem of inconsistency of translated versions is able to be solved, and at the same time, the translation method transliteration is used to retain the cultural connotations of the source text as much as possible, which is beneficial for target readers to get a correct and full understanding of Tai chi culture.

It is also true for the translation of another basic concept “太极拳”. The versions includes “Tai Chi”, “Tai ji”, “Tai Chi Chuan”, “Taijiquan”, “Tai chi boxing”, “Tai ji boxing”, “the shadow boxing”, “the traditional Chinese boxing”, “Tai chi fist”. For the first four versions, the method of transliteration is used, only with a slight difference. Considering the concept of “Tai Chi” is sometimes quite different from the martial arts “Tai Chi Chuan”, it is suggested that the version “Tai Chi Chuan” be used to refer to the name of the Chinese marital arts. For the following versions, the character “拳” is directly translated as “boxing” or “fist”. These versions are not quite acceptable since the traditional Chinese martial arts are totally different from the “boxing” game, which has been very popular among westerners. In westerners’ mind, the boxing is a competitive game or match that usually takes place in a high stage with railings and ropes around it, which is often associated with strength, speed and cruelty. However, Tai Chi Chuan has nothing to do with them, but lay emphasis on peace, balance and health-keeping (Lin, 2013). As for the version of “fist”, it is not quite used and also seems to westerners that Tai Chi Chuan is only related to fist. In a word, a single properly understood translated version is greatly demanded to replace the various incorrect or misleading versions to ensure the translation quality of the basic concepts.

## 2.2 Misleading Translations Caused by the Lack of Cultural Implications

Since the end of the 20th century, translation has been studied from a cross-cultural perspective. The culture turn of translation studies was firstly put forward by Bassnett and Lefevere (1990). As important representatives of cultural approach in translation studies, Bassnett and Lefevere attached great importance to the role of culture in translation, the social background, the influence that cultural tradition imposed on translation, the subjectivity of translators and researching shift from linguistic to culture. Translation is no longer the simple transformation between two languages, but it has been deeply involved into special cultural elements. It is now universally accepted that culture is one of the most important factors that influence the translation quality. However, in translating some Tai Chi texts, cultural misunderstanding is still one of the major problems that affect the quality of translated texts. Take the concept “缠丝劲” as an example. It is one of the most important cultural elements of the Chinese martial arts Tai Chi Chuan, and specifically a typical attacking skill of Chen Style Tai Chi Chuan, one of the several schools of Tai Chi Chuan (Shen, et al. 2014:45). It puts much emphasis on the energy released by the rotational movement of hands, arms, feet, waist and other parts of the body, which may be demonstrated throughout the whole process of the practice of Chen Style Tai Chi Chuan. However, in the present translated works, it is frequently transformed into the English translated versions such as “the silk reeling force” or “Chan Si Gong”. Actually they are not considered satisfactory translated versions. For the former, the word “silk” is literally translated from the source language “丝”, which is obviously misunderstood. The Chinese character “丝” in this concept actually means the screw that is able to be rotated, although it may in other cases be explained as silk, which is a high-quality material used for making clothes. What is more, the act of “reeling silk” will never deliver the meaning of the rotational energy in the source text. For the latter version, the method of transliteration is obviously adopted. However, the concept is not so widely accepted as yin and yang, and is better to be translated based on the general meaning. Both “Chan Si” and “Gong” are quite hard to understand for westerners.

Considering the features of Tai Chi culture, the concept “缠丝劲” is advised to be translated into another version “the rotational energy”, which may properly deliver the meaning of the source text and at the same time sound easier for westerners to understand.

In a word, when translating the culture-loaded concepts, translators should try to properly deliver, not distort, the general meaning at least, if the cultural image cannot be retained.

### 2.3 Unacceptable Language Expressions for the Translated Tai Chi Concepts

From the linguistic perspective, acceptable language expressions are undoubtedly very essential to the quality of translated texts. However, there still exist a lot of errors of such kind in the process of translating Tai Chi texts. Take the following two sentences as examples:

1) ST: 棚捋挤按须认真；上下相随人难进。

TT: *In Ward Off (peng) Roll back (lv), Press (ji) and Push (an), you must be conscientious. Upper and lower follow one another; the other has difficulty advancing.*

2) ST: 左重则左虚，右重则右杳。

TT: *When the left feels weight, then the left empties. When the right feels weight, then the right is gone.*

(Fu, 2006)

In the first example, “棚”, “捋”, “挤”, “按” are used to indicate the different acts by hand and arms. “上下” refers to the upper part and lower part of the body. The whole sentence means that one should be earnest and sincere enough to do each movement such as warding off (peng), rolling back (lv), pressing (ji), pushing (an) and etc. If the upper part of one’s body is well coordinated with the lower, no one can be close enough to attack. Nevertheless, in the target text (TT), it is obviously a grammatical mistake to directly use “Ward Off”, “Roll back”, “Press” and “Push” as the names of hand movements. In addition, it is also unacceptable to only use “upper” and “lower” as the subjects of the clause. Also the phrase “follow one another” cannot show the original meaning clearly. Besides, “the other” will make readers confused for the reference.

For the second example, the problem mainly lies in the confusion about the meaning in the whole sentence. The target text cannot give readers a clear picture about what is said. The key characters “重”, “虚” and “杳” are not well defined in the translated sentence. Readers will be perplexed about what the clause “the left empties” means. Actually, the sentence means that if attacked from the left side, you dodge it on the left; if attacked from the right, you evade it on the right.

To sum up, to acquire a correct understanding and put it into proper language patterns is quite essential for improving the quality of translated texts.

## 3 Strategies of Translating Into English Basic Concepts In Chinese Tai Chi Culture

### 3.1 To Establish a Generally Accepted Translated Terminology Bank

Each field of texts will have its own set of terminology. It is without any exception for the text of Tai Chi culture. However there has not been any translated terminology bank for the Tai Chi texts. As mentioned in the above sections, there exist multiple translated names for a single technical term, resulting in the great confusion of the major concepts for target readers. Once the significance in establishing a translated terminology bank is taken into consideration, then next issue is naturally coming. That is how to establish a well-accepted terminology bank or what is the criterion of a good terminology. Here are three principles. First, the term should involve the basic and significant concept of Tai Chi texts, including major philosophical concepts, health-maintaining concepts and martial art concepts. Second, the translated version of terms should be correct, concise and clarified. Third, the translated version of terms should try to be unique and prescriptive.

### 3.2 To Strengthen Understandings of Source Language and Culture

As is well known, translation consists of two processes. One is the process of understanding the source text, which is also called decoding, and the other is the process of expression in the target language, which is also called recoding. Each of the two is quite significant and deserves no any negligence. To improve the translation quality of Tai Chi texts, it is a must to strengthen understandings of Tai Chi culture and Chinese language. Generally speaking, Tai Chi was evolved from a cosmological idea into a rich and coherent philosophical system, and then was deeply involved in the traditional Chinese medicine and the Chinese martial arts.

It clearly illustrates the origin and evolvement of the universe, and also provides guidance for profound understanding of formation and development of various types of social practices, such as social reforms, environmental changes, interpersonal relations, international policies, occurrence and cure of diseases, health maintenance, martial art practice, artistic designing and so on. Chinese language is also quite different from English. The uniqueness of Chinese language mainly lies in the Chinese-characterized thought pattern, which is focused on images, subjectivity, implicitness and indirectness.

### 3.3 To Hold the Reader-Centered Attitude

Since 1980s when Nida's "Dynamic Equivalence" and "Reader's Response Theory" was introduced into China, translation studies in China have been greatly impacted, and especially the latter has aroused the heated debate on choice of translation strategies: foreignization and domestication (Jia, 2009). However, these two strategies are not diametrically opposed. It is most probable that both are used in a single piece of translated work. As for the translation of Tai Chi texts, the suggestion is that the strategy of domestication should be put on more stress, especially at the beginning stage of going abroad of Tai Chi culture. The first and foremost goal is to give the target reader a good understanding of what is Tai Chi. Unfortunately, some of the Tai Chi texts are translated by assuming the Chinese people instead of westerners as target readers. As a result, the translated texts are readable and understandable to Chinese, which are actually confusing or misleading to westerners. Therefore, when translating Chinese culture-loaded texts, translators are not expected to pay all the attention to the retaining of original cultural elements, and at least take rules and habits of target language usage to ensure the readability of translated texts.

### Conclusion

As the globalization is strengthening, people from various countries are getting more closely contacted than ever before. Chinese Tai Chi culture also has the opportunity to go abroad and is loved by the increasing number of westerners. Without any doubt, translation plays a very important role in the cross cultural communication. However, there inevitably exist some problems about the translation of Tai Chi texts, particularly about the basic concepts. Generally speaking, inconsistency of multiple translated versions for the same concept, lack of cultural implications and unacceptable language expressions are the major problems that have brought great confusion and misunderstanding to target readers. In order to solve these problems and improve the translation quality, the whole academic circle and individual translators are strongly encouraged to establish a generally accepted translated terminology bank, strengthen understandings of source language and culture, and hold the reader-centered attitude.

### Note

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