

Teaching English Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine Terminology: Lasswell's 5W Model Perspective

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How to cite this paper: Chen, X. X. (2025). Teaching English Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine Terminology: Lasswell's 5W Model Perspective. *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies*, 1(3), 162-168. ISSN Print: 3079-5095; ISSN Online: 3079-5109.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9052>

Published: 2025-06-25

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Abstract

The English translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) terminology is a crucial step in the international dissemination of TCM. Its accuracy directly impacts global understanding and acceptance of TCM culture. From the perspective of Lasswell's 5W Model, this paper explores the current state, challenges, and optimization strategies in teaching the English translation of TCM terminology. The study finds that current teaching practices face issues such as insufficient standardization of terminology, barriers in cross-cultural communication, and a shortage of qualified instructors. By analyzing domestic and international terminology translation standards, cross-cultural communication theories, and practical teaching cases, this paper proposes strengthening terminology standardization, optimizing teaching methods, cultivating interdisciplinary talent, and leveraging new media technologies to enhance communication effectiveness. The research provides theoretical support and practical pathways for the internationalization of TCM education.

Keywords

TCM Terminology; English Translation Teaching; International Communication; Standardization; Cross-Cultural

Introduction

As a treasure of Chinese culture, the international dissemination of TCM is not only a necessity for medical exchange but also a reflection of cultural soft power. However, the complexity and cultural uniqueness of TCM terminology pose significant challenges for its English translation. The accuracy of terminology translation directly influences international audiences' comprehension and acceptance of TCM theories. In recent years, with the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative and the growing global demand for healthcare, the internationalization of TCM has accelerated. Nevertheless, standardization in terminology translation and systematic teaching approaches remain inadequate. From the perspective of international communication, this paper combines literature analysis and teaching practices to explore strat-

egies for teaching the English translation of TCM terminology, aiming to provide insights for the internationalization of TCM education.

1. Current Status and Challenges in English Translation of TCM Terminology

1.1 Insufficient Standardization of Terminology

Currently, multiple standards coexist for the English translation of TCM terminology. The World Health Organization's (WHO) International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine and the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies' (WFCMS) International Standard Chinese-English Basic Nomenclature of Chinese Medicine represent two major systems, yet discrepancies exist between them. For example, "五运六气" is translated as "five circuits and six Qi" in the WHO standard, while WFCMS adopts "five movements and six Qi." Such inconsistencies create confusion in teaching and practice, making it difficult for students and translators to adopt a unified approach.

Furthermore, domestic scholars disagree on translation principles. Taking "营气" as an example, Xie Zhufan advocates for "nutritive Qi" to align with Western medical concepts, while Nigel Wiseman insists on "construction Qi" to preserve TCM's cultural connotations. This debate between "scientific translation" and "cultural translation" further complicates standardization efforts.

1.2 Barriers in Cross-Cultural Communication

TCM terminology carries profound philosophical and cultural meanings. Concepts such as "阴阳" (yin-yang) and "气" (Qi) lack direct equivalents in Western medicine. Students often face two dilemmas in translation: excessive domestication (e.g., translating "伤寒" as "typhoid"), which distorts TCM theories, or excessive foreignization (e.g., direct translation or transliteration like "Qi"), which hinders audience comprehension.

For instance, in the English introduction of Lianhua Qingwen Capsule, "清瘟" was translated as "to clear scourge." However, "scourge" in English typically refers to "disaster" or "calamity," which deviates from TCM's concept of "瘟疫" (epidemic febrile diseases). Such mistranslations not only impede the international promotion of TCM products but may also lead to cultural misunderstandings.

1.3 Shortage of Qualified Teaching Resources

Teaching English translation of TCM terminology requires instructors with expertise in both TCM and foreign languages. However, universities currently face a severe shortage of such interdisciplinary faculty. Most language teachers lack systematic TCM training, while TCM specialists often have limited English proficiency. Additionally, outdated teaching materials and the absence of authoritative terminology reference manuals and case studies further constrain teaching effectiveness.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Domestic Research Status

The Chinese government places high importance on the dissemination and inheritance of TCM culture. The *Implementation Plan for TCM Culture Communication Action (2021-2025)* has been issued to promote its development. Initiatives such as introducing TCM culture into school curricula aim to enhance younger generations' interest in TCM. Meanwhile, contemporary communication channels like social media and short videos are utilized to showcase TCM culture and strengthen cultural identity[1-2].

There remains insufficient exploration of TCM's cultural connotations and a lack of creative cultural products, with most offerings being overly simplistic. The communication environment for TCM culture requires optimization, necessitating stricter market regulation[3]. Additionally, the dissemination of TCM culture is uneven—rural areas exhibit weaker cultural foundations, grassroots awareness remains inadequate, and the public generally lacks systematic understanding of TCM.

2.2 International Research Status

TCM has reached 196 countries and regions, with cooperation agreements signed with over 40 nations and inclusion in 16 free trade agreements. Multiple TCM-related institutions have been established globally, including 15 Confucius Institutes focused on TCM, 17 national TCM service export bases, 30 overseas TCM centers, and 56 international TCM cooperation bases—all broadening the channels for TCM's global dissemination [4].

The overseas promotion of TCM culture remains in its nascent stages with unsatisfactory outcomes. State-led translations of TCM classics, such as the Library of Chinese Classics edition of Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), have achieved limited international circulation[6]. This demonstrates that TCM's global spread is not merely a translation issue but fundamentally a cross-cultural communication challenge [9]. Certain translated terms and concepts have led to skepticism among foreigners, causing misunderstandings and biases. Moreover, the complexity of TCM has raised doubts about its safety and efficacy abroad. Practices like guasha (scraping therapy) and acupuncture, for instance, are sometimes misinterpreted as "Eastern witchcraft" or "barbaric methods."

2.3 Overall Development Trends

With societal progress, digitalization has become an inevitable communication pathway. The rationale for this shift includes: Diversified communication actors in the digital era.

Expanded communication channels through digital platforms. Content trends toward diversification, fragmentation, and personalization, contrasting with tradition-

al media's authoritative and specialized outputs (e.g., newspapers, TV).

Enhanced real-time interaction and resource sharing, as digital technologies (AI, 5G, big data) enable instant cross-border information exchange, overcoming historical spatiotemporal barriers.

To address translation challenges, collaboration between professional linguists and TCM experts is essential. A proposed translation model combines pinyin transcription + explanatory notes. Communication channels should diversify, integrating online and offline methods. Partnerships with international talent can reduce dissemination barriers. Ultimately, quality assurance and proven efficacy serve as the cornerstone for TCM's global trust and acceptance—reliability remains the ultimate key to understanding[5].

3. Theoretical Framework

Lasswell's 5W Model helps students analyze terminology translation from five dimensions: communicator, content, channel, audience, and effect. Harold D. Lasswell's 5W model is a foundational framework in communication studies, introduced in his 1948 article "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society." The model breaks down communication into five key components: Who, Says What, In Which Channel, To Whom, With What Effect? (6). This linear model emphasizes the basic elements necessary for analyzing communication processes, making it a useful tool for media, political communication, and sociological research.

The first component, "Who," refers to the sender or communicator, such as a journalist, politician, or advertiser. The second, "Says What," examines the content or message being conveyed. The third, "In Which Channel," focuses on the medium (e.g., television, social media, newspapers). The fourth, "To Whom," identifies the audience, while the fifth, "With What Effect," assesses the impact of the communication (7).

Lasswell's model has been widely used in mass communication research, particularly in propaganda and media effects studies. The model simplifies communication into a process that can be empirically studied, though critics argue it overlooks feedback and interactive elements present in later models like Shannon and Weaver's or Berlo's SMCR model[8].

Despite its limitations, the 5W model remains influential. As Severin and Tankard (2014) note, it provides a clear structure for analyzing media messages, making it valuable for content analysis and media effects research. Its simplicity ensures its continued relevance in understanding basic communication dynamics.

4. Teaching Strategies for the English Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Terminology

4.1 Promoting Terminology Standardization

Teaching should prioritize internationally recognized terminology standards, such as those from the WHO and WFCMS, while guiding students to understand the cultural logic behind different translations. For example, when explaining "经络" (jīngluò), instructors can compare the differences between "channel" and "meridian," analyzing their semantic and cultural adaptability.

Additionally, students should be encouraged to participate in terminology database development. For instance, online platforms like Nanjing University of Chinese Medicine's "International Standard Query System for TCM Terminology Translation" can be used for term retrieval and comparison, fostering standardization awareness[9].

4.2 Integrating Cross-Cultural Communication Theories

Teaching should incorporate communication theories, such as Lasswell's 5W model, to help students analyze terminology translation from five dimensions: communicator, content, channel, audience, and effect. For example, when translating "虚邪贼风" (xū xié zéi fēng), a "literal translation + annotation" strategy (e.g., "the depletion evil and the robber wind (climatic pathogenic factors)") can be adopted to preserve cultural uniqueness while ensuring audience comprehension.

Case-based teaching is also crucial. For example, students can analyze translations of Huangdi Neijing by scholars like Nigel Wiseman and Paul Unschuld to understand how cultural differences influence translation choices.

4.3 Innovative Teaching Methods and Resources

Innovative teaching methods include Modular teaching, integration of new technology, strengthening faculty and teaching materials and Industry-academia collaboration. Modular teaching involves categorizing terminology by themes such as foundational theory, diagnostics, and prescriptions, and then combining them with case studies and practical exercises to enhance learning. Technology integration can be achieved by utilizing corpora and AI tools, such as TCM parallel terminology databases, to aid in translation practice and improve accuracy. Industry-academia collaboration can be strengthened by partnering with TCM enterprises to involve students in translating drug instructions or international research papers, which helps enhance their practical skills[10-11]. Strengthening faculty and teaching materials can be accomplished through interdisciplinary training, such as organizing TCM basics courses for language teachers and English workshops for TCM instructors, to bridge knowledge gaps.

5. Teaching Practices from Lowell's 5W Model Perspective

Firstly, Cultivating Audience Awareness. Teaching should emphasize an "audience-centered" approach. For example, when addressing Western students, borrow analogies from Western medicine (e.g., translating "气血" as "Qi and blood"); for

cultural researchers, retain more philosophical connotations (e.g., rendering "阴阳" as "Yin-Yang"). Secondly, Leveraging New Media for Dissemination. Encourage students to explain TCM terms in English via short videos or social media. For instance, creating animated clips like "Understanding 'Jingluo' in One Minute" with visuals and simple language can enhance communication effectiveness. Thirdly, Institutional Support. Universities should establish specialized programs in "TCM Translation," offering core courses such as TCM Fundamentals, Terminology Translation, and Cross-Cultural Communication, and align them with international certification exams (e.g., WHO terminology standards tests).

6. Conclusion

The English translation of TCM terminology is a foundational project for global dissemination, requiring a balance of accuracy, cultural fidelity, and audience receptivity. Through standardization, cross-cultural pedagogy, and innovative practices, we can cultivate interdisciplinary talents proficient in both TCM and translation, providing linguistic support for TCM's globalization. Future efforts should focus on international collaboration to unify terminology standards and harness new technologies to enhance communication efficacy, ultimately achieving the goal of "transmitting correctly, transmitting clearly, and transmitting universally" for TCM culture.

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