

A Study on the Translation and Introduction of Henan National Music Culture from the Perspective of Knowledge Translation

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Abstract

The translation of national music culture is key to spreading excellent traditional Chinese culture globally. This paper uses the three major logical laws and critical tools of knowledge translation studies to explore translating ancient Henan national music culture into English, aiming to boost its international visibility and acceptance. Results show that the principles of seeking truth, establishing good deeds, and pursuing beauty positively affect translation practice in knowledge fit, difference, and conflict areas. These principles also significantly expand practical paths for national music culture translation and enrich knowledge translation studies

Keywords

Knowledge translation studies; ancient Henan national music culture; Translation strategy and method

1. Introduction

In the broader endeavor of narrating China's stories and amplifying its cultural voice, the practice of "Translating China" assumes a central role. Ancient ethnic musical traditions, as a dazzling gem embedded in the treasury of Chinese cultural heritage, embody profound historical depth and a distinct national character that has evolved continuously since remote antiquity. Among these traditions, the ancient ethnic musical culture of Henan stands out as a paradigmatic form of localized knowledge. Rooted in the lived experiences of the people and nurtured by their everyday practices, it has grown into a repository of information—a "cultural mine" that encodes collective wisdom, aesthetic ideals, and social customs accumulated across generations. In this sense, Henan's musical culture functions as a "living fossil" for understanding the dynamics of ethnic spirit and cultural transmission.

However, the significance of such localized cultural knowledge extends beyond its regional boundaries. To transform it into globally recognizable knowledge and to facilitate

intercultural dialogue, translation and knowledge mediation become indispensable. Research into the ancient ethnic musical culture of Henan thus constitutes not only a scholarly inquiry into a regional tradition but also a crucial process of knowledge production that fosters cultural integration and exchange. By focusing on the English translation of exhibition texts at the Henan Provincial Museum of Music as a case corpus, this study adopts the theoretical lens of Knowledge Translation Studies to examine methodological pathways for engaging with ethnic musical culture. The ultimate aim is to offer fresh insights and practical strategies for enhancing the visibility of Henan's ancient musical traditions on the world stage, thereby contributing to the broader project of cultural preservation, dissemination, and innovation.

2. Theoretical Framework and Critical Tools of Knowledge Translation Studies

In 2021, Professor Yang Feng introduced the concept of Knowledge Translation Studies, asserting that: "There is no discipline that does not accumulate knowledge through the method of translation; no discipline that does not present the development of thought in translational form; no discipline without its own history of knowledge translation. All disciplines must pay tribute to translation. Within the field of Knowledge Translation Studies, translation is understood as a cultural act and social practice of cross-linguistic knowledge processing, reconstruction, and re-dissemination." (Yang, 2021: 2).

Specifically, Knowledge Translation Studies places its focus on the ontology of "knowledge." It holds that "all knowledge is essentially local knowledge generated by human experience, experiment, and practice." In connection with this, global knowledge is defined as the "universal understanding, transmission, application, and justification of local knowledge." Translation, therefore, becomes "the process through which local knowledge is transformed into global knowledge." (Yang, 2021: 2).

At the practical level, Knowledge Translation Studies advocates the principles of truth, goodness, and beauty. "Truth" refers to the faithful rendering of the knowledge ontology; "goodness" concerns the ethical dimension of the translator's conduct—the benevolence of the translating mind; and "beauty" relates to the aesthetic reconstruction of language in presenting knowledge (Yue & Chen, 2022: 65 – 73). Within this framework, the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty functions as a scientific methodology of translation, operating historically, culturally, socially, and politically with the logic of seeking truth for knowledge, establishing righteousness through goodness, and expressing beauty in writing (Xu & Zhou, 2023: 1 – 9).

The discursive construction and conceptual system of Knowledge Translation Studies continue to expand. Key notions such as the "zone of knowledge convergence," "zone of knowledge divergence," and "zone of knowledge conflict" embody its essential definition of translation and serve as major critical tools for analyzing the translation process (Meng, 2023: 55 – 64).

Further scholarly contributions have enriched this field. Li Ruilin (2022: 47 – 59), building on Yang’ s conceptual framework, incorporated translation into the epistemological space, and examined the ontological, logical, and discursive facts of translation to explore the foundational identity underlying all translational phenomena. Qin Jianghua (2022: 30 – 71), also adopting the perspective of Knowledge Translation Studies, redefined the essence and value of translation from the standpoint of knowledge production, management, and transformation, highlighting its vital role in enabling local knowledge to reach the world. Similarly, Yu Xudong and Fu Jingmin (2022: 22 – 30) categorized translational knowledge into three forms—structural knowledge, reconstructive knowledge, and thematic knowledge—and explicated their internal logical relations within the theoretical framework proposed by Yang.

3. Current Research on the English Translation of Ancient Henan Ethnic Musical Culture

Over the past decade, the English translation of ethnic musical culture has gradually attracted scholarly attention, with researchers exploring both theoretical construction and translational practice. Studies include preliminary attempts at theoretical building from an interdisciplinary perspective (Chen Liming & Ma Shuang, 2021: 82 – 87); investigations into the dissemination of Chinese national music in the West through the integration of traditional translation theories and prototype theory (Chen Rongfeng, 2019: 26 – 53); research on the translation of classical titles of Chinese traditional opera from the perspective of cultural translation (Yang Yang, 2021: 67 – 68); reflections on the “trade deficit” phenomenon in the translation of Chinese traditional music literature (Qian Fang, 2015: 115 – 114); explorations of English renderings of local ethnic instrument names (Xiao Nianhua & Jiao Junyi, 2020: 89 – 93); and studies on the translation of culture-specific musical terms in scientific and technical texts (Chen Chuanxian & Zhang Yu, 2023: 29 – 36).

From a paradigmatic perspective, existing research largely follows the analytical frameworks of Western translation theories, without breaking away from the conventional patterns of translational practice and critique. As Knowledge Translation Studies emphasizes, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural transfer is only the surface of translation; the essence lies in the processes of knowledge production and dissemination (Shi Chunrang & Chen Quanyou, 2018: 108 – 113). In today’ s context of accelerating knowledge circulation and intercultural exchange, neglecting the knowledge-producing and knowledge-disseminating dimensions of translation risks obscuring the profound essence of ethnic musical culture and the complexities of its cross-cultural transmission.

Ancient Henan ethnic musical culture resembles a grand historical chronicle, condensing the shared traditions and customs of generations of Henan people. It stands not only as a paradigmatic representative of China’ s localized knowledge but also as an indispensable component of the global knowledge system of musical culture. Recognizing its essential nature as local knowledge deepens cultural identity while also highlighting the ur-

gency of integrating it into the world's musical knowledge framework. To promote the global dissemination of this regional cultural essence is to advance its profound dialogue and fusion with world knowledge systems.

4. English Translation of Ancient Henan Ethnic Musical Culture from the Perspective of Knowledge Translation Studies

This study takes the English translations of exhibition texts from the Henan Museum of Music as its case corpus. Ancient Henan ethnic music, with its rich content, diverse forms, melodious tunes, and distinctive styles, represents a precious part of China's outstanding traditional culture. The knowledge dimension of ethnic musical culture is embodied in its unique ethnic instruments, the historical legends that nurture its development, the customs and traditions of the people, and the cultural allusions it contains, thereby revealing its national, regional, and profound cultural connotations. From this perspective, ancient Henan ethnic musical culture may be understood as a localized knowledge system that integrates extensive musicological insights with a deep ethnic-cultural background.

By examining selected translation examples, and drawing upon the principles of truth, goodness, and beauty proposed in Knowledge Translation Studies, this research explores how translation strategies function in practice, investigating ethnic musical culture translation as a form of cross-linguistic transformation, as well as a process of knowledge production and social practice.

4.1. Zone of Knowledge Convergence — Seeking Truth through Knowledge

Knowledge Translation Studies defines the material to be translated as knowledge, namely the collective sum of human experience accumulated in the exploration of both the natural and spiritual worlds, and upholds the pursuit and transmission of truth. Different social groups accumulate and internalize their distinctive cultures, thereby forming localized knowledge. Inevitably, however, there exist common patterns among such localized knowledge, which enable their transformation into universal knowledge. These commonalities constitute what is referred to as the “zone of knowledge convergence.” The principle of “seeking truth through knowledge” indicates that translation, as a process of knowledge production, should faithfully and scientifically transform the source knowledge, reconstructing and representing it authentically within the context of the target language. Translation methods that embody this principle are primarily characterized by foreignization strategies, which preserve the essential features of localized knowledge while ensuring its accurate transmission.

ST1: 此夜曲中闻折柳，何人不起故园情。”

TT: Hearing the tune of ‘Breaking the Willow’ this night, who wouldn’t be reminded of their hometown?”

Analysis: The translation of “折柳” as “Breaking the Willow” preserves the culturally distinctive imagery of the source text, allowing readers to perceive the unique sen-

timent and cultural connotation of willow-breaking as a farewell gesture in Chinese tradition. Rather than replacing it with a more familiar Western image of parting, this translation maintains the authenticity of the original cultural symbol, thereby conveying the embedded emotional and cultural essence of Chinese farewell rituals.

ST2: 骨笛, 新石器时代, 舞阳贾湖遗址出土。

TT: The bone flute, from the Neolithic Age, unearthed at the Jiahu site in Wuyang.

Analysis: The rendering of “古笛” as “bone flute” effectively preserves both the technical term and the original Chinese designation of the instrument, enabling readers to perceive its uniqueness and antiquity rather than reducing it to the more generic term “flute.” Similarly, the translation of “贾湖” as “Jiahu” remains faithful to the original name of the archaeological site, allowing readers to appreciate the distinctiveness of this Chinese archaeological discovery and its rich regional cultural background.

ST3: 距今约 8000 年左右的骨笛,是用鹤鸟肢骨所制,一般长 20 厘米,口径一厘米左右,形式固定,制作规范,骨笛一侧钻有 7 个形音孔,每孔间距基本相等,其中在 6 孔与 7 孔之间靠近 7 孔处另钻一调音小孔,说明骨笛的制作者已有了明确的音观念。经测音,可以演奏河北民歌《小白菜》。

TT: Approximately 8,000 years old, the bone flute is made from the limb bones of a crane. It is usually about 20 centimeters long, with a diameter of around one centimeter. The form is standardized and the craftsmanship is regulated. On one side of the bone flute, there are seven sound holes drilled, with each hole spaced almost equally apart. Additionally, there is a small tuning hole drilled near the seventh hole, between the sixth and seventh holes, indicating that the maker of the bone flute already had a clear concept of pitch. After pitch measurement, it is capable of playing the Hebei folk song “Little Cabbage.”

Analysis: The expression “距今约 8000 年左右” is translated as “approximately 8,000 years old,” which accurately reproduces the temporal concept and numerical information of the source text, allowing readers to grasp the antiquity of the instrument. The phrase “用鹤鸟肢骨所制” is rendered as “made from the limb bones of a crane,” preserving the source’s detailed description of the raw material and thereby enabling readers to appreciate the unique craftsmanship involved in its production. Likewise, “一般长 20 厘米,口径一厘米左右” is translated as “usually about 20 centimeters long, with a diameter of around one centimeter,” faithfully conveying the original’s precise measurements and units, so that readers can visualize the size and specifications of the instrument. Finally, the folk song “小白菜” is directly rendered as “Little Cabbage,” translating the title of the Chinese folk tune while foregrounding the distinctive features of Chinese folk music.

ST4: 研究结果认为: 贾湖骨笛音阶结构至少是六声音阶,也有可能是七声齐备的古老的下徵音阶。此外,还存在着多宫演奏的可能性。贾湖骨笛的出土,导致了先秦音乐史的补写,由于它的问世而逐渐完善起来的整部中国古代音乐史也有着再度认识的估价和必要,毫无疑问,贾湖骨笛史是迄今为止所见年代中最为久远的乐器。

TT: Research results suggest that the Jiahu bone flute has at least a six-note scale struc-

ture, and it might even possess the ancient lower Zhi scale with all seven notes. Moreover, the possibility of playing in multiple modes exists. The discovery of the Jiahu bone flute has led to the rewriting of pre-Qin music history. The entire history of ancient Chinese music, which has been gradually perfected due to its emergence, also needs to be re-evaluated and reconsidered. Undoubtedly, the history of the Jiahu bone flute is the oldest known musical instrument to date.

Analysis: The term “六声音阶” is rendered as “six-note scale structure,” which preserves the technical terminology of music theory in the source text. The phrase “七声齐备的古老的下徵音阶” is translated as “the ancient lower Zhi scale with all seven notes,” faithfully maintaining the specific description of the scale structure in the original. Similarly, “多宫演奏的可能性” is translated directly as “the possibility of playing in multiple modes,” retaining the source text’s reference to performance practice. The expression “先秦音乐史” is translated as “pre-Qin music history,” remaining faithful to the source and reflecting China’s unique historical periodization. The sentence “贾湖骨笛的出土，导致了先秦音乐史的补写” is translated as “The discovery of the Jiahu bone flute has led to the rewriting of pre-Qin music history,” reproducing the source text’s emphasis on the historical significance of this archaeological discovery. Finally, “整部中国古代音乐史也有着再度认识的估价和必要” is translated as “The entire history of ancient Chinese music also needs to be re-evaluated and reconsidered,” which conveys the original text’s call for a renewed understanding and reassessment of the history of Chinese ancient music.

ST5: 距今 8700 年的骨笛，是用鹤鸟肢骨所制，上钻七孔。经测定，已经具备七声音阶结构，至今仍可吹奏旋律。

TT: An 8,700-year-old bone flute, made from the limb bone of a crane, has seven holes drilled into it. It has been determined to have a seven-note scale structure and can still play melodies to this day.

Analysis: The phrase “用鹤鸟肢骨所制” is translated as “made from the limb bones of a crane,” remaining faithful to the source text’s detailed description of the instrument’s material and allowing readers to appreciate its distinctive craftsmanship. The term “七声音阶” is rendered as “seven-note scale,” which reflects the use of professional terminology in musicology while also conveying the characteristics of Chinese music theory.

4.2. Zone of Knowledge Divergence — Establishing Righteousness through Goodness

Within the theoretical framework of Knowledge Translation Studies, translators are assigned a crucial role: they are not merely linguistic mediators but also the bridge between localized knowledge and global knowledge. The concept of “goodness” emphasized in this framework permeates the entire process of translation practice and constitutes an indispensable ethical principle in the production of knowledge.

When reconstructing knowledge across languages, translators are required to uphold the

principle of “acting with goodness,” adopting a reader-oriented approach and selecting strategies that facilitate the audience’s understanding and assimilation of unfamiliar knowledge. In this way, translation becomes an effective form of knowledge production and social practice, thereby achieving the desired outcome of cross-cultural communication.

In short, when choosing translation methods, translators should take the transformation of localized knowledge into global knowledge as their core objective. In practice, this often implies a preference for domestication strategies, which enhance the affinity and readability of the translated text within the cultural context of the target language.

ST6: 春秋浙川下寺楚墓出土。

TT: During the Spring and Autumn period, a remarkable set of stone panpipes was unearthed from the Chu tombs in Xiasi Village, Xichuan County, Henan Province.

Analysis: The phrase “春秋浙川下寺楚墓出土” is domesticated as “During the Spring and Autumn period, a remarkable set of stone panpipes was unearthed from the Chu tombs in Xiachuan, Xichuan.” This translation enables Western readers to grasp both the historical background and the geographical location, thereby facilitating cross-cultural understanding of the archaeological context.

ST7: “箫韶九成，凤凰来仪”以排箫演奏的远古韶乐，不仅可以招来凤鸟。也使圣人孔子闻后，陶醉得三月不知肉味，叹为尽善尽美。古人对排箫有许多溢美之辞。

TT: These ancient instruments, capable of producing melodies so enchanting they were said to attract the mythical phoenix, hold a special place in Chinese musical history. The ancient “Shao” melody, when played on these panpipes, was so captivating that it left the great sage Confucius so entranced that he was oblivious to the taste of meat for three months, describing the music as the epitome of perfection. The ancients praised the panpipes for their elegant form.

Analysis: The phrase “箫韶九成，凤凰来仪” is domesticated as “the ancient ‘Shao’ melody, when played on these panpipes, was so captivating that it left the great sage Confucius so entranced...” This rendering allows Western readers to grasp both its cultural significance and Confucius’s reaction. The term “phoenix” is retained as a familiar concept within Western culture, making its symbolic meaning accessible while preserving the cultural imagery of the source text. The name “Confucius” is used directly, supplemented with “the great sage” to highlight his cultural stature in the Chinese context, thereby deepening the reader’s understanding of his importance. Furthermore, the choice of “panpipes” as a common Western term for the instrument conveys its shape and function in an accessible way, while still retaining “paixiao” as a culturally specific designation of Chinese origin.

ST8: 《北堂书钞》对排箫有这样的描述：“像风翼，如风鸣，其形参差，长声肃箫”，陶注云：“其形象风之翼，十管长二尺”。故排箫又称参差、风箫。

TT: The “Beitang Shuchao” describes the panpipes as follows: “They resemble the wings of the wind and sound like the wind’s song. Their shape is uneven, and their long, clear sound is solemn.” Tao’s annotation says: “Their shape resembles the wings of the

wind, with ten pipes each two feet long.” Therefore, the panpipes are also called uneven or wind pipes.

Analysis: The title “北堂书钞” is rendered directly in pinyin as “Beitang Shuchao,” which preserves the cultural background of the original and allows readers to appreciate its identity as a classical Chinese text. Likewise, the phrase “陶注云” is translated as “Tao’s annotation says,” retaining the name of the annotator in the source text and thereby enabling readers to recognize the provenance of the commentary.

ST9: 这件石排箫管孔深度与管外长度不尽相同，管孔内径自最长管至最短管依次递减。除少数管口部残损过甚外，余管均能吹出高低不同的音调。

TT: This particular stone panpipe has holes of varying depths and lengths. The inner diameter of the holes decreases from the longest to the shortest pipe. Except for a few pipes with severe damage, the rest can produce different pitches.

Analysis: The phrase “不尽相同” is rendered with the term “varying,” which emphasizes the differences in the depth and length of each pipe hole. This choice aligns with the meaning of the original expression while conforming more closely to natural English usage.

In English, when describing changes in size, words such as “decreases” are typically employed to indicate gradual reduction. This expression, more idiomatic to English readers, conveys the sense of “依次递减” in the source text, highlighting the gradual decrease in the inner diameter from the longest pipe to the shortest. Such a rendering helps readers grasp the structural features of the instrument, namely that the inner diameter decreases progressively, directly influencing its pitch and timbre. Through this domesticated translation, readers can intuitively understand the design and function of the instrument. At the same time, this description underscores the precision of its craftsmanship, reflecting the sophisticated artistry of ancient artisans.

4.3. Zone of Knowledge Conflict — Practicing Beauty in Writing

From the perspective of Knowledge Translation Studies, the concept of “beauty” primarily addresses the target audience of knowledge reconstruction in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural contexts. Since audiences from different cultural backgrounds possess distinct aesthetic orientations, their reception of culture and knowledge will inevitably vary. The tensions and contradictions arising from these differences constitute what is termed the “zone of knowledge conflict.”

In this sense, “beauty” is closely linked with “goodness.” The notion of beauty is directly concerned with whether the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural knowledge product can resonate with the aesthetic expectations of its audience. As previously noted, this connection implicitly places an ethical demand of goodness on the translator: in facilitating the production of knowledge across languages and cultures, translators must remain attentive to the audience, using readers’ aesthetic standards as the basis for encoding and transforming localized knowledge. Only in this way can localized knowledge achieve effective dissemination within a foreign cultural environment and be genuinely integrated

into global knowledge.

Under the logic of beauty in translation, methods must demonstrate a degree of flexibility. Translators are therefore required to adjust their approach to specific contexts, employing both domestication and foreignization strategies as needed, so as to balance fidelity to localized knowledge with the aesthetic and cognitive expectations of the target audience.

ST9: 编钟是先秦时期的宫廷乐器，王孙诰编钟为双音编钟，一个编钟以正鼓部和侧鼓部可以同时敲出一个非常和谐的三度音程，其音域可跨越四个半八度，到明代的十二平均律由朱载堉王子提出时，其律制在春秋时期已十分广泛地应用于实践之中了，王孙诰编钟的出土即是明证，它集中体现了皇室威严、古朴、辉煌、凝重之大气。钟上有 113 字铭文，意谓：王孙诰作钟以乐楚王、诸侯嘉宾及父兄诸士，万年无期。

TT: The bianzhong (编钟) is a court instrument from the pre-Qin period and also a symbol of ancient imperial power. The Wangsun Gao bianzhong are double-toned bianzhong, capable of producing a very harmonious third interval when struck simultaneously on the central and side drum parts. Their range spans four and a half octaves. The 12-tone equal temperament, which was proposed by Prince Zhu Zaiyu in the Ming Dynasty, was already widely applied in practice during the Spring and Autumn period, as evidenced by the Wangsun Gao bianzhong. They epitomize the grandeur, simplicity, brilliance, and solemnity of the royal family. The bells are inscribed with 113 characters, which express that Wangsun Gao made the bells to entertain the Chu king, feudal lords, distinguished guests, and his father and elder brothers, wishing for their enjoyment to last forever.

Analysis: The term “编钟” is rendered as “bianzhong,” a culturally specific transliteration that preserves the original cultural features of the source text, allowing readers to appreciate the uniqueness of ancient Chinese court music and to recognize the instrument’s historical significance and function within palace rituals. Meanwhile, “十二平均律” is translated as “12-tone equal temperament,” a term rooted in Western music theory. This choice enables readers to understand the theoretical background of the scale system. By employing the technical term “12-tone equal temperament,” Western readers can immediately grasp its function in music—namely, the division of an octave into twelve equal semitones to achieve a uniform distribution of pitches.

4.4. The Translator’s Dimension in the English Translation of Ethnic Musical Culture from the Perspective of Knowledge Translation Studies

“The essence of translation lies in transforming the localized knowledge of the Other into universal knowledge through processes of defamiliarized learning, selective absorption, and creative reconstruction” (Yang, 2022: 1 – 2). From this perspective, the translator’s subjectivity becomes increasingly prominent in translation practice, implying that translators must actively select, study, transform, and reconstruct localized knowledge within specific contexts. In the actual process of knowledge production, the exercise of translator subjectivity varies depending on the object of knowledge processing.

In the case corpus adopted in this study, the objects of knowledge production—the Chinese texts introducing the exhibits—are prepared by research institutions affiliated with the museum. Since translators are neither the selectors of the museum exhibits nor researchers specializing in the relevant fields of ethnomusicology, the conscious acquisition of cultural and knowledge-related background information becomes the primary step for translators to effectively exert their subjectivity. In other words, the translator's engagement in defamiliarized learning constitutes a crucial manifestation of subjectivity in this case study.

During the English translation of the museum's exhibition texts on ethnic musical culture, translators frequently need to consult domain experts on issues such as the structural features of ethnic instruments, specialized terminology in ethnomusicology, and the cultural connotations and historical background of culture-specific items within musical narratives. Through such consultations and collaborations, translators undertake conceptual interpretation and information verification, further highlighting another essential aspect of translator subjectivity—namely, acting as organizers within the process of knowledge production and coordinators of this broader social practice.

5. Conclusion

The English translation of ethnic musical culture constitutes an essential component in bringing China's fine traditional culture to the world. By applying the three logical principles and critical tools of Knowledge Translation Studies—pursuing truth, establishing goodness, and practicing beauty—this study has examined strategies for translating ancient Henan ethnic musical culture into English, with the aim of enhancing its visibility and reception on the international stage. Such an approach offers practical guidance for translation practices within the zone of knowledge convergence, zone of knowledge divergence, and zone of knowledge conflict in the English translation of ancient Henan ethnic musical culture. Furthermore, it contributes not only to expanding research on translation strategies for ethnic musical culture but also to enriching the broader field of Knowledge Translation Studies.

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