

# A Study on the Strategies for Translating Chinese Proverbs With Cultural Imagery Into Japanese

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## Abstract

Chinese proverbs serve as carriers of Chinese culture and crystallize the life experiences and wisdom of the people. Rich in cultural imagery, Chinese proverbs highly reflect the cultural characteristics and regional features of the Chinese language. This study focuses on the Japanese translation of cultural imagery in Chinese proverbs, exploring appropriate translation strategies to accurately convey the cultural connotations embedded in these proverbs, with the aim of providing reference for the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

## Keywords

Chinese Proverbs; Cultural Imagery; Japanese Translation Strategies; Cross-Cultural Communication

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## 1. Introduction

Proverbs are concise and meaningful expressions widely circulated among the people, typically transmitted orally, reflecting the practical experience of the working masses and constituting an essential component of the Chinese language. Characterized by strong colloquialism and clarity, proverbs cover a broad range of topics. Some are agricultural proverbs, such as "Plant melons and beans around Qingming Festival". Others are aphorisms conveying universal truths, such as "If you wish to keep something secret, don't do it yourself". Still others are common-sense sayings related to daily life, such as "Take a hundred steps after eating, and you'll live to be ninety-nine". The variety of proverbs is extensive and virtually inexhaustible.

It also includes numerous proverbs rich in cultural imagery, such as "Three ordinary craftsmen together are equivalent to Zhuge Liang, the wise strategist." This proverb employs the cultural image of Zhuge Liang, the renowned strategist of the Three Kingdoms period, to illustrate that when three people of modest talent unite their efforts and pool their wisdom, they can devise strategies even more thorough than

those of Zhuge Liang himself—emphasizing the importance of unity and collective intelligence.

Cultural imagery, in simple terms, refers to concrete entities imbued with fixed emotional and symbolic significance by a particular nation or culture. For instance, within the context of Chinese culture, the “plum blossom” symbolizes resilience against severe cold and steadfast nobility, while the “moon” represents mutual longing and family reunion. In Chinese proverbs, it is also quite common to employ cultural imagery to convey thematic meanings. However, from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, due to differences in geographical location, humanistic history, and resource environments, different cultures may share similar or identical understandings of the same cultural imagery, while in other cases, their interpretations may diverge significantly.

Since the implementation of China’s “Going Global” cultural strategy, Chinese culture has gradually spread globally through various forms, including literature, film and television, and music. As a cultural carrier, proverbs frequently appear in diverse cultural products. When foreign audiences comprehend these proverbs, they are also grasping the underlying Chinese cultural connotations embedded within them. However, when Chinese proverbs are translated and disseminated into other cultures, their unique Chinese cultural imagery may seem unfamiliar to foreign readers, thereby hindering their acceptance and understanding of both the proverbs themselves and the broader textual context. Consequently, how to appropriately handle the cultural imagery inherent in Chinese proverbs during translation and successfully convey their intrinsic cultural meanings constitutes an urgent issue requiring in-depth research (Xiufen Wang,2024). This study focuses on Chinese proverbs as its research object. Based on whether target-language Japanese possesses corresponding cultural imagery to that of source-language Chinese proverbs, it explores Japanese translation strategies for the cultural imagery contained within these proverbs.

## **2. Current Research Status on the Translation of Chinese Proverbs**

First, a search on CNKI using "translation of Chinese proverbs" yielded 73 academic papers, whereas a search using "Japanese translation of Chinese proverbs" produced only three results, with even fewer studies specifically addressing the translation of Chinese proverbs containing cultural imagery. It is evident that there remains substantial room for further research on the translation of cultural imagery embedded in Chinese proverbs.

Regarding the translation study of Chinese proverbs, Xiaobin Wang(2025) proposes adopting a "restitution" approach to preserve the original characteristics of the source text. However, this study focuses primarily on lexical "restitution" between Chinese and Japanese, leaving readers unfamiliar with the relevant Chinese cultural

allusions unable to fully grasp the underlying cultural imagery and thematic essence. Xiaoxi Tang (2024) suggests that different translation methods—such as literal translation, free translation, adaptation, amplification, and compounding—can be applied depending on contextual variations in proverb usage. Mingshu Feng(2016) categorizes Japanese translations of Chinese proverbs into three types: first, literal translation, directly rendering the Chinese proverb according to its surface meaning into Japanese; second, free translation, conveying the true underlying meaning of the Chinese proverb in Japanese; third, using equivalent Japanese proverbs to render Chinese proverbs. Nevertheless, these studies lack specific and targeted analysis concerning the translation of Chinese proverbs rich in cultural imagery. Meanwhile, animals—widely encountered in human life—have been the subject of meticulous observation regarding their appearance and behaviors. These observations have been integrated into the languages of various ethnic groups, giving rise to a rich variety of proverbs and idioms incorporating animals, offering future generations insights into life and philosophy (Xiaobin Wang,2025). In proverbs, animals are culturally imbued due to their physical characteristics or behavioral traits, becoming distinctive cultural symbols that convey the central meaning of the proverb. The appropriate translation of such animal-based cultural imagery in proverbs across different cultural contexts thus represents an important area worthy of scholarly investigation.

### **3. Translation Strategies for Target Languages with Corresponding Cultural Imagery**

Regarding translation strategies for Chinese proverbs containing cultural imagery, the following analysis is conducted through specific examples, initially focusing on cases where the target language contains corresponding cultural imagery.

Example 1: Jidan peng shitou.(Take an egg to hit a stone.)

Translation:Striking a rock with an egg / Attacking a far stronger opponent and bringing about one's own destruction / The mantis's axe.

In Example 1, the explanation provided by the Japanese-Chinese and Chinese-Japanese Dictionary for the Chinese idiom "Take an egg to hit a stone." is: "Attacking a far stronger opponent and bringing about one's own destruction",which accurately reflects the original meaning of the Chinese idiom. The author summarizes three translation approaches corresponding to three different methods: "Striking a rock with an egg" is a literal translation; "Attacking a far stronger opponent and bringing about one's own destruction" is an idiomatic translation; and "The mantis's axe" represents a method using a Japanese equivalent idiom as a counterpart.

The Chinese idiom “Jidan peng shitou” (literally, “Take an egg to hit a stone” ) denotes the futile attempt of a weak force to confront a vastly superior opponent, akin to an egg striking a rock—a scenario destined for failure and indicative of overestimating one’s own capabilities. In this context, the “egg” and the “stone”

function as cultural imagery, symbolizing, respectively, the weaker party and the stronger party in terms of power. The Japanese proverb “Tōrō no ono” (literally, “The mantis's axe” ) conveys a semantically equivalent meaning: it refers to the futility of attempting to stop an advancing chariot with outstretched arms, thereby expressing the same core message as the Chinese idiom. Consequently, this author posits that these two expressions may be treated as functional equivalents in translation.

Example 2: San ge choupijiang ding ge zhugeliang.

Translation: Three cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge Liang with his brain. / When many people gather to consult, brilliant ideas emerge. / Three people together bring the wisdom of Manjushri.

In Example 2, regarding the proverb “San ge choupijiang ding ge zhugeliang” ,the author likewise provides three translations. “Three cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge Liang with his brain” is evidently a literal translation that retains the original lexical items; “When many people gather to consult, brilliant ideas emerge” constitutes a free translation that elucidates the proverb’s meaning; and “Three people together bring the wisdom of Manjushri” selects a Japanese proverb containing a corresponding cultural image as its equivalent rendering.

Similar to the aforementioned examples where “Jidan peng shitou” is translated as “The mantis's axe” and “San ge choupijiang ding ge zhugeliang” is rendered as “Three people together bring the wisdom of Manjushri” , this method of translating proverbs by employing synonymous proverbs from the target language culture into those of the source language is known as “adaptation translation”. It involves borrowing certain idiomatic structures from the target language for translation purposes. The borrowed structure must be widely appreciated and universally recognized, either by convention or through widespread acclaim, because it already contains information familiar to readers, thereby facilitating a more immediate understanding of the proverb's intended meaning (Jichun Liu, 1997: 44-45).

Tong Chen, Yiran Hao, and Wenyun Lin (2025) argue that employing proverbs from the target language as equivalent translations does not compromise the integrity of the original meaning. On the contrary, through comparison and interpretation, this approach can render the essence of the original text more vividly. Such a translation method not only enriches the expressive forms of the target text but also enhances its emotional impact and persuasiveness, significantly improving translation quality and effectiveness. Therefore, when the target language contains proverbs that share equivalent cultural imagery, direct adoption of synonymous proverbs from the target language as corresponding translations is recommended.

On the other hand, due to substantial differences across historical backgrounds, customs, and social contexts among various languages and cultures, these disparities may impede effective communication between parties. Bridging such cultural differences in translation presents a significant challenge for translators.

Overemphasizing domestication may facilitate comprehension for target-language readers, but at the same time risks erasing the distinctiveness of the source culture. Therefore, when translating proverbs with strong cultural specificity, translators may also adopt foreignization strategies—opting for literal translation to preserve the "exotic flavor"(Xiaoxi Tang, 2024).

#### 4. Translation Strategies for Target Languages without Corresponding Cultural Imagery

Due to the unique characteristics of Chinese and Japanese cultures, the translation of Chinese proverbs likewise encounters situations where culturally specific imagery present in the source language context lacks equivalent cultural references in the target language. The following discussion analyzes translation strategies for such proverbs lacking corresponding cultural imagery in the target language, illustrated through specific examples.

Example 3: Haoma buchi huitoucao.

Translation: A good horse does not return to eat grass/ A noble person does not dwell on the past.

In Example 3, two translations of the Chinese proverb “Haoma buchi huitoucao” are provided: “A good horse does not return to eat grass” and “ a noble person does not dwell on the past” . The former is a literal translation that preserves the cultural imagery of the source text, whereas the latter constitutes a free translation that explicates the proverb’ s underlying meaning. The literal translation, by retaining the original imagery, maintains a stronger connection to the source content and more closely mirrors its expressive style. However, it may induce a sense of incongruity among readers unfamiliar with Chinese cultural imagery, primarily because such imagery is absent from common Japanese proverbs. Conversely, given the lack of a corresponding cultural image in the target language, the free translation omits the specific image of “the horse” and instead offers an explicative rendering aligned with the core message. This approach facilitates immediate comprehension and acceptance by readers; however, by discarding source-specific imagery, it inevitably diminishes cultural connotations.

When translating proverbs that lack corresponding cultural imagery in the target language, if the translator aims to emphasize the cultural imagery of the original text, a literal translation preserving the original imagery and syntactic structure may be adopted. If, however, the priority lies in accurately conveying and ensuring readers’ precise understanding of the proverb’ s central meaning, a free translation that slightly adapts or omits the original imagery while focusing on conveying the core message is preferable. If both preservation of original imagery and accurate expression of meaning are desired, this study suggests employing the conjunctive form "yō ni" derived from the comparative auxiliary verb "yō da" to combine literal and free translation methods. This approach not only retains the culturally specific

image—such as "a horse grazing"—present in Chinese proverbs but also accurately conveys their underlying meaning. Such a strategy is particularly suitable for explanatory translations found in dictionaries, glossaries, textbooks, and other reference works. When translators assume roles as compilers of dictionaries or textbooks, they should employ multiple translation methods simultaneously—ensuring both faithful transmission of the proverb's core meaning and full representation of Chinese cultural characteristics inherent in the source text.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, when translating Chinese proverbs containing cultural imagery into Japanese, if the target language possesses a corresponding proverb that aligns with the main theme of the original text, a substitution translation method can be employed to establish a mutual equivalence between the two. Conversely, if the target language lacks such a corresponding proverb, alternative strategies include literal translation that preserves the original imagery, free translation centered on accurately conveying the core message, or a hybrid approach that employs the simile auxiliary verbs “yō da” or “yō ni” to connect literal and free translations.

Furthermore, the selection of specific translation strategies is influenced by the translator's stance, translation priorities, and application contexts. If the translator approaches proverb translation from the perspective of a lexicographer or a proverb instructor, each proverb entry should ideally present multiple translations, following a sequence of literal translation first, followed by free translation, and finally the corresponding Japanese proverb. In cases where no equivalent Japanese proverb exists, a literal translation followed by a free translation suffices. This approach enables learners to comprehensively understand the literal meaning of proverbs, their deeper connotations, and their corresponding expressions in Japanese (Mingshu Feng, 2016: 30). For proverbs used in social contexts, translators should not only accurately grasp the underlying meaning but also select appropriate calques or free translations based on specific situational factors to avoid causing the sense of disobedience among the target audience.

Translation is the process of accurately, smoothly, and naturally converting information, emotions, and cultural elements from one language into another, enabling seamless communication among people who speak different languages. Investigating how various types of Chinese proverbs can be faithfully and fluently translated into other languages remains a significant research topic, as it further promotes the dissemination of Chinese culture in cross-cultural communication and allows people worldwide to appreciate the unique charm of China's outstanding traditional culture.

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