

# A Study on the Issues and Solutions in Translating Terminology Related to Ecological Civilization with Chinese Characteristics

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**How to cite this paper:** Wen, X., & Zhang, L. (2026). A study on the issues and solutions in translating terminology related to ecological civilization with Chinese characteristics. *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies*, 5(2), 55–61. ISSN Print: 3079-5095, ISSN Online: 3079-5109.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9167>

**Published: 2026-05-20**

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## Abstract

Terminology related to China's ecological civilization embodies the wisdom of China's ecological governance, and the quality of its translation directly impacts the international dissemination of China's ecological civilization concepts as well as cooperation and exchange in global ecological governance. This paper analyzes the primary issues currently encountered in the translation of terms related to China's ecological civilization, including conceptual mistranslations, loss of meaning, the coexistence of multiple translations, and inconsistent formatting. It proposes corresponding solutions to these issues by focusing on two areas: enhancing translator competence and developing institutional platforms. The aim is to improve the accuracy and standardization of translations for terms related to China's ecological civilization, thereby facilitating the dissemination of China's ecological civilization concepts and governance solutions overseas.

## Keywords

Ecological Civilization; Terminology Translation; Countermeasure Research; Ecological Governance

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## 1. Introduction

Ecological civilization represents a new stage in the development of human civilization following industrial civilization. The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China incorporated ecological civilization into the “Five-Sphere Integrated Plan (五位一体),” marking the first time China had put forward the governing philosophy of ecological civilization. This initiative aims to guide society's transition from industrial civilization to ecological civilization, thereby realizing a new form of civilization characterized by the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature. This major strategic framework breaks with the traditional Western model of modernization—which prioritizes pollution over remediation—and offers a Chinese solution to developing nations exploring their own paths to

modernization.

All discourse has a distinct theme and clear direction, directly expressing or implying certain values. China's ecological civilization, with Chinese characteristics, integrates the nation's outstanding traditional ecological culture with modern ecological governance concepts, forming a theoretical and discursive system that combines national characteristics with an international perspective. This has given rise to a series of distinctive ecological civilization terms, such as the "Two Mountains Theory ( "两山" 理念 )", "Beautiful China ( 美丽中国 )", and "Eco-environmental Red Lines ( 生态保护红线 )." Rooted in China's specific policy systems and long-term ecological governance practices, these terms not only succinctly summarize the country's ecological governance experience but also embody unique theoretical connotations and excellent traditional culture. Currently, how China's ecological civilization philosophy can gain widespread social understanding and recognition is key to enhancing the influence of China's discourse. Furthermore, with the acceleration of globalization and increasingly close international cooperation on ecological governance, the translation of terms related to China's ecological civilization with Chinese characteristics has become increasingly important. However, in reality, many issues still exist in the translation of these terms, which affects the international community's understanding and perception of China's ecological civilization philosophy and practical development plans.

## **2. Major Issues in the Translation of Ecological Civilization Terminology**

### **2.1. Mistranslations of Concepts**

Most terms related to China's ecological civilization derive from policy frameworks and governance practices; they are not merely abstract conceptual expressions. If translators lack a sufficient understanding of the institutional context and practical logic underlying these terms, mistranslations can easily occur. For example, "wetland restoration" is often mistakenly translated as "湿地修复", but in most cases, "湿地恢复" is a more accurate rendering. Ecological governance of wetlands relies on nature-based restoration rather than large-scale human intervention. China's ecological civilization initiatives emphasize "the integrated protection and systematic governance of mountains, waters, forests, farmlands, lakes, grasslands, and deserts," explicitly proposing a policy of "prioritizing natural recovery supplemented by necessary artificial restoration." This reflects the scientific principles of "prioritizing recovery and supplementing with restoration" and "tailoring measures to local conditions and timing, with differentiated approaches by region and category." If translators cannot clearly distinguish between the two approaches of "natural recovery" and "artificial restoration," or if they lack an understanding of the current stage of the ecosystem

and the causes of its problems, they are likely to uniformly translate “restoration” as “修复,” thereby confusing “nature-based restoration” with “artificial restoration.”

## 2.2. Loss of Meaning

The loss of connotative meaning is the most prominent issue in the translation of Chinese-specific ecological civilization terminology. Such terminology combines theoretical depth with literary elegance, featuring concise language and profound implications. If translators focus solely on literal translation, they will be unable to fully and accurately convey the deep cultural connotations of these terms. “天人合一” is a core philosophical concept of traditional Chinese ecological wisdom. This concept encompasses three key layers of meaning: “天” does not refer to the “God” or “Heaven” of Western religions, but rather to the laws of nature and the way the universe operates; “合一” is not simply a “merging of two into one,” but emphasizes a holistic ecological view in which humanity is one with Heaven, Earth, and all things; Furthermore, this concept embodies the moral sentiment of “民胞物与” (regarding all people as fellow human beings and all things as fellow creatures), requiring humanity to treat nature and all living beings with benevolence. In the early translation “Unity of Man and Heaven,” the term “Heaven” carries strong religious connotations in a Western context, whereas “天” in Chinese philosophy refers to the laws of nature and the way the universe operates—a fundamental difference between the two. Subsequent academic literature has translated it as “Harmony between Man and Nature,” but “Nature” in the Western context is often understood as an objective world opposed to “humanity,” thereby losing the holistic concept of “heaven, earth, and all things as one” inherent in “天人合一.” In the second volume of Xi Jinping: The Governance of China, published in 2017, “天人合一” was translated as “Man is an integral part of nature.” While this translation accurately conveys the implication that “man is part of nature,” it sacrifices the expression of the dynamic, harmonious relationship inherent in “合一” . [4]

## 2.3. Coexistence of Multiple Translations

The same concept in Chinese-specific ecological civilization terminology often appears with multiple translations across different contexts, such as official documents, academic research, and news media. Taking the core term “ecological civilization” as an example, in the Xi Jinping: The Governance of China series, Volumes I and II translate “生态文明建设” as “ecological progress” and “ecological conservation,” respectively, while Volume III re-translates it as “ecological civilization.” During this evolution of translation, the coexistence of multiple translations can easily lead to ambiguity in defining the term’s connotations. Furthermore, the “Two Mountains” concept—that is, “绿水青山就是金山银山

山”——also exhibits this phenomenon of multiple translations, ranging from “Green hills and clear waters are as valuable as gold and silver./ Clear waters and green mountains are as good as mountains of gold and silver” to “Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets,” and then to “Clear waters and green mountains are invaluable assets.” In actual dissemination, translations such as “Green mountains are golden mountains,” “Clear waters and green hills are gold and silver mountains,” and “Two Mountains Theory” are used in parallel, with literal, free, and abbreviated translations intermingling. This not only hinders international audiences’ understanding but also undermines the rigor and authority of China’s ecological discourse.

#### **2.4. Inconsistencies of formatting**

Since there are currently no standardized guidelines for translating Chinese ecological civilization terminology, variations in capitalization, hyphenation, singular/plural forms, and article usage across different translations and contexts have significantly hindered the recognition and dissemination of these terms. “生态保护红线” is an institutional term uniquely developed by China in the field of ecological civilization. The official translation published by the China Keywords website is “Eco-Environmental Red Lines,” yet in actual international communication, the term appears in various forms such as “ecological red-line,” “ecological red lines,” “ecological red line,” and “Ecological Red Lines,” with inconsistent capitalization, hyphenation, and singular/plural forms. Over time, these non-standard expressions have increasingly appeared in media reports, leading to confusion in terminology and exposing the lack of a standardized terminology mechanism.

### **3. Recommendations for Translating Terminology Related to Ecological Civilization**

The aforementioned issues encountered in the translation of terminology related to China’s ecological civilization stem from a combination of multiple factors. Translators often lack a deep understanding of the theoretical framework of China’s ecological civilization ideology, exhibit insufficient policy sensitivity and cultural awareness, possess inadequate translation skills, and fail to adhere to formatting standards. Meanwhile, institutions lack mechanisms for the authoritative release and updating of terminology, and there is a lack of uniformity and coordination in industry-specific translation practices. In light of this, this paper proposes the following countermeasures from both the translator and institutional perspectives:

#### **3.1. Translators Should Strive to Improve Their Professional Competence**

Translators are the direct executors of the translation process, and their

professional competence determines the quality of the translated text. When translating terminology, translators should consult existing translations more frequently than they should invent new terms on their own; they should also rely on online resources, electronic dictionaries, online terminology databases, and print dictionaries far more often than they should attempt to translate terms from scratch.[5]

Translators should clarify the theoretical context and policy implications of key concepts such as “harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature (人与自然和谐共生),” “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets (绿水青山就是金山银山),” and “the community of life comprising mountains, waters, forests, farmlands, lakes, grasslands, and deserts (山水林田湖草沙生命共同体).” At the same time, they should deepen their understanding of traditional Chinese ecological wisdom and grasp the philosophical foundations of concepts such as “the unity of humanity and nature (天人合一),” “following the way of nature (道法自然),” and “moderation in consumption (取用有节),” thereby avoiding mistranslations resulting from superficial understanding.

In translation practice, translators should maintain a clear sense of cultural self-awareness. The translation of ecological civilization terminology is undergoing dynamic changes; to ensure that translations are more closely aligned with China’s own context and to establish national discursive authority, translation strategies must also evolve accordingly.[6] In the early stages, to enhance the international dissemination of China’s domestic ecological civilization theories and policy concepts, translators tended to favor foreignization; however, as the nation’s discursive authority has grown, translation strategies have increasingly emphasized a balance between domestication and foreignization. For discourses that embody China’s originality, such as “ecological civilization (生态文明)” and the “Two Mountains Theory (“两山”理论),” the strategy of “prioritizing foreignization while supplementing with domestication” is upheld. Through various methods—including literal translation, phonetic transcription with annotations, free translation, and explanatory translation—efforts are made to preserve Chinese characteristics as much as possible, rather than blindly adopting existing expressions from Western environmental discourse.

Translators should possess a high degree of contextual awareness and flexibly choose translation approaches based on the type of terminology and the communication context. For politically sensitive policy terms, a literal translation should be used to faithfully convey the original meaning, with annotations provided to supplement the context and minimize information loss. For terms derived from traditional ecological culture, phonetic transcription with annotations may be used to preserve cultural connotations. For terms with clear policy implications, a free translation may be employed to achieve functional equivalence. Once the translation of terms is complete, a rigorous post-translation review must be conducted, and the

text must be uniformly formatted in strict accordance with formatting guidelines.

### **3.2. Organizations Actively Building Resource Platforms**

Universities, research institutions, industry associations, and other organizations play a vital role in promoting the standardization of terminology translation. In the digital age, we should actively leverage big data and artificial intelligence technologies to build intelligent terminology resource platforms, thereby providing efficient and accurate language services for international exchanges on ecological governance.

Drawing on the experience of the “Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture project,” and in collaboration with institutions such as the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, and the China International Publishing Group, we could establish a “Multilingual Database of Terminology on Ecological Civilization with Chinese Characteristics.” This database will compile information on standard translations, definitions, usage contexts, and historical evolution of core terms, support keyword searches and translation example comparisons, and provide reliable reference materials for translators.

Organize experts to compile a handbook on the English translation guidelines for Chinese-specific ecological civilization terminology, clarifying formatting requirements such as capitalization rules, hyphenation, article usage, and numerical expressions. For example, specify that “生态文明” is consistently rendered as “Eco-Civilization/Ecological Civilization” (with the first letter capitalized), and that “双碳目标” is standardized as “carbon peak and carbon neutrality goals/dual carbon goals” (all lowercase, without hyphens), thereby reducing recognition barriers caused by formatting inconsistencies.

Collaborate with universities and research institutions to conduct translation workshops on topics related to ecological civilization. Invite policy drafters, ecological scholars, and experienced translators to co-teach these sessions, helping translators understand the institutional logic and cultural implications behind the terminology. Training content may cover multiple modules, including policy interpretation, translation practice, and the application of technology, to comprehensively enhance translators’ understanding of ecological civilization.

## **4. Conclusion**

The accurate translation of Chinese-specific ecological civilization terminology is fundamental to building China’s ecological discourse system. Current issues—such as conceptual mistranslations, loss of meaning, the coexistence of multiple translations, and inconsistent formatting—not only reflect the inherent complexity of translating ecological civilization terminology but also underscore the necessity of establishing a standardized terminology mechanism. Moving forward, sustained efforts should be made to enhance translator competence and develop institutional

platforms, fostering coordinated development between individuals and the industry. Only in this way can terminology related to ecological civilization with Chinese characteristics be both accurately translated and widely disseminated, thus contributing Chinese wisdom and solutions to global ecological civilization development.

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