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The Misinterpretation and Reconstruction of English Translation of Chinese Calligraphy Terminologies

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Abstract

As is known that the translation of Chinese calligraphy terminologies has long been constrained by the misinterpretation predicament on account of the mismatch between Chinese and Western aesthetic paradigms. It usually happens that the cross-linguistic translation of many core concepts like qiyun and bili may encounter semantic drift and signifier loss. Based on the theoretical framework of translation studies and reception aesthetics, this study deeply analyzes the ontological limitations of the traditional literal translation strategy when dealing with such embodied cognition and culturally loaded words, which leads to the cultural discount phenomenon. Through comparisons of multi-dimensional cases in cross-cultural context, it explores the reconstruction path of calligraphy terminologies and advocates a shift from static equivalence to dynamic functional equivalence. The constructive role of the translator's subjectivity in meaning negotiation is another focus of this paper. It indicates that, under the perspective of purpose theory, the combination of dialectical strategy of assimilation and accommodation as well as the contextual compensation mechanism can effectively restore the aesthetic tension of the source language symbols and achieve cognitive resonance among target language readers. The research concludes that precise translation of calligraphy terminology is not only a language conversion technique but also a process of reconfirmation of cultural identity, which provides the theoretical support and practical references for constructing the international communication paradigm of the Chinese discourse system.

Keywords

Chinese Calligraphy Terminologies; English Translation Strategies; Cultural Misinterpretation; Terminology Reconstruction; Cross-Cultural Communication

I. Research Background and Objectives

In the context of globalization, Chinese calligraphy, as a unique visual art form, has long been constrained by the deep misalignment between the Chinese and Western aesthetic paradigms in the cross-linguistic dissemination of its core terminologies. The translation of calligraphy terminologies has long suffered from inconsistent

names and frequent mistranslations, for which one important reason is that calligraphy terminologies have distinct ethnic cultural characteristics. The sources of Chinese calligraphy terminologies can be traced back to traditional Chinese philosophy; that's why calligraphy terminologies have been carrying profound cultural connotations. For translators, it's important to fully consider cultural factors to retain the original meaning as much as possible (Wu, 2014). For example, the terminology qiyun (气韵) is very common in calligraphy, sharing the connotation of "artistic appeal" in Chinese. When dealing with such concepts of profound culture load, the traditional literal translation strategy often encounters the dilemma of semantic drift and signifier loss. If qiyun (气韵) is simply translated into "spirit and vitality" to the target language readers, it may cause cognitive barriers and even aesthetic misinterpretation. Such misinterpretation is not merely a translation error but stems from two heterogeneous cultures. Chinese shares the incommensurable nature of English, especially in the symbol system, thinking mode, and aesthetic expectations. With the increasingly rapid integration of global cultures, people are introduced to more hermeneutics-informed translation and reception aesthetics. The academic gradually realizes the fact that absolute semantic equivalence is difficult to either achieve in cross-cultural practice, or cope with the complex challenges at the embodied cognitive level for the traditional view of static equivalence.

In traditional studies of translation, there commonly exists a pursuit of mechanical fidelity to the original. It's both theoretically significant and practically valuable to re-examine the misinterpretation in translating Chinese calligraphy terminologies. In this context, the paper is designed to deepen the exploration of how to transform such terminologies into positive communicative resources. In the study, it suggests that in cross cultural communication misinterpretation can serve as an objective cultural negotiation mechanism. By discussion on the application effects of the dialectical strategies of domestication and foreignization in specific cases, the paper attempts to reveal the key to preserve the aesthetic tension of the source language symbols as well as to repair the cultural discount through the mechanism of contextual compensation. Based on the perspective of Skopos theory, it attempts to construct a translation framework. The focus is on revealing the key role of the translator's subjectivity in meaning construction and finally achieving the transition from language transformation to cultural identity reconfirmation.

It's commonly observed the absence of a discourse system in current international dissemination of calligraphy, for the analysis of which multi-dimensional cases comparisons as well as theoretical analysis are practical and effective. It thereby aims to provide academic support for construction of an international communication paradigm. What's more, the corresponding relationship of the terminologies themselves is also the focus of the study.

Based on the above, the English translation of Chinese calligraphy terminology is a

culturally informed bridge between civilizations—one that fosters mutual understanding and cognitive resonance. It is significant and urgent to enhance the interpretive power and influence of Chinese art discourse in the international academic community.

II. Theoretical Framework and Current Situation of the English Translation of Calligraphy Terminologies

2.1. Difficulties in Translating Chinese Calligraphy Terminologies

Chinese calligraphy terminologies are such unique, culturally specific items that they are deeply embedded in the context of traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. It has been always difficult to translate them into English for the reason of fundamentally different thinking patterns between China and the West. Chinese terminologies prefer rhetorical devices such as metaphor and metonymy to emphasize the embodied cognitive experience. For instance, the four literal terminology of yi zai bi xian (意在笔先) conveys that mind precedes the brush. While the terminology of wulou hen（屋漏痕）describes “the traces from a leaking roof”. The terminology of zhui hua sha（锥画沙）is used to demonstrate the drawing on sand with an awl. From the above examples we can easily find it is both the texture and rhythm of the brushwork that Chinese calligraphy terminologies convey through natural objects. Comparatively, the English language tends to focus on logical analysis and formal definition and lack corresponding subjective experience vocabulary. That dislocation between the signifier and the signified often leads to semantic vacuum or aesthetic misinterpretation in literal translation, which makes it rather difficult for the target language readers to capture the spiritual core behind the source language symbols.

Chinese calligraphy terminologies enjoy a high degree of historical accumulation and school specificity. During the long process of evolution, different calligraphic styles and technical terms have formed a complex semantic network, and it happened that even the same terminologies might present completely different connotations either in different historical periods or by different calligraphers. The translation of Chinese calligraphy treatises has become the main channel for its overseas dissemination. However, currently there have been many deficiencies in translating Chinese calligraphy works into English, especially for the translation of calligraphy styles (Li, 2024).

In response to the above-mentioned difficulties, simple lexical equivalence is no longer able to address deep cultural interpretation issues. The traditional static equivalence strategy becomes inadequate when dealing with such high-context-loaded words, and it is urgently necessary to introduce the concept of “deep translation,” that is, through means such as annotations and explanations to supplement background knowledge, in order to restore the integrity of the source language culture. At the same time, based on the differences in audience needs, the

translation strategy should distinguish between the different acceptance levels of professional readers and the public, adopt a dynamic functional equivalence path, and ensure the readability and acceptability of the translation while maintaining the acceptance quality of the target language audience towards heterogeneous cultures (Zhang & Li, 2015). This analysis indicates that the English translation of calligraphy terminologies is not only a conversion at the language level but also a process of reconstructing and reconfirming the cultural identity of the source language, which requires seeking a delicate balance between being faithful to the spirit of the original text and adapting to the target language culture.

2.2. Classification of typical misinterpretation phenomena in existing English translations

In the practice of translating calligraphy terminologies, due to the misalignment of aesthetic paradigms between China and the West as well as the limitations of the translator's subjectivity, typical misinterpretation phenomena mainly present in three forms: semantic drift, loss of cultural signifiers, and context breakage.

Firstly, excessive concretization at the semantic level leads to the dissipation of aesthetic tension. Some translations handle abstract concepts such as qiyun (气韵)and bili(笔力) by favoring their reduction to specific indicators in physical mechanics or anatomy. For example, gufa yongbi (骨法用笔) is mechanically translated as "bone structure of the brush." Although this translation strategy retains the literal imagery, it strips away the metaphorical connotations of the terminologies in traditional Chinese art theory regarding vitality and spiritual support, causing the target language readers to only obtain a form of visual association and lose the understanding of the intrinsic spirit of brush and ink. Such misinterpretations stem from the forced separation of Western analytical thinking from Eastern holistic thinking, resulting in the solidification of the source language symbol referents and the impoverishment of their meanings.

Secondly, the domestication deviation of cultural-loaded words causes cognitive barriers. For metaphorical terminologies such as wulou hen (屋漏痕) and zhui hua sha (锥画沙) derived from natural objects, early translations often adopt the interpretive strategy, such as translating them respectively as "traces left from a leaking roof" and "drawing on sand with an awl." Although reducing the reading threshold, this superficial domestication treatment cuts off the logical connection between the terminologies and the concept of Chinese classical philosophy of "道法自然" (Dao operates naturally). As Liu（2018）pointed out when comparing three translations of Shu Pu (《书谱》), for translators effectively disseminating the cultural connotations of source language and achieving acceptance in the target language culture are essentially two important aspects, otherwise it will be impossible to convey the unique artistic beauty of Chinese calligraphy. This misinterpretation is essentially a cultural filtering process, sacrificing the heterogeneity of the source

language to accommodate the acceptance habits of the target language, resulting in the occurrence of cultural discount phenomena.

Thirdly, the absence of historical context causes confusion in genre identification. In the translation of calligraphy styles and technique terminologies, due to the lack of unified norms, the same terminologies have various variants in different translations, such as the translation of the five calligraphy styles, namely Zhuan (篆书), Li (隶书), Cao (草书), Xing (行书), and Kai (楷书), have not yet reached a consensus (Li, 2024). Moreover, the English translation of the terminologies on Dunhuang Wooden and Bamboo Slips (敦煌简牍) if not combined with the knowledge translation principles of "真善美" (the true, the good, the beautiful), often fails to balance cultural fidelity and reader acceptance, leading to the misjudgment of the calligraphy style of a specific historical period. The research of Shi & Yang (2026) also shows that the unclear classification of terminologies and weak support of the corpus further exacerbate the chaotic situation in machine translation and manual translation. To a certain extent, misinterpretations may hinder the understanding of the profound connotations of Chinese calligraphy and unavoidably weaken the international interpretive power of Chinese art discourse.

III. Terminological Reconstruction Strategies and Analysis of Case Study from Cross-Cultural Perspective

3.1. From Literal Correspondence to Functional Equivalence: The Process of Terminological Reconstruction of Chinese Calligraphic Strokes

Terminologies of Chinese calligraphic strokes, as an essential carrier of knowledge of calligraphy skills, has been trapped in the formalistic approach of literal translation equivalence for a long time. Traditionally, the terminological reconstruction of Chinese calligraphy is confined to the process of mechanical translation of literal symbols from one language to another. This static definition of equivalence ignores the fact that there is huge dislocation between the aesthetic paradigms of Chinese and Western cultures. For example, when *wulou hen* (屋漏痕) is directly translated as "cracks in the wall", the visual meaning will be retained, but all the aesthetic implications of the natural growth and penetration will disappear, leading to the fixation of source language symbolization and the loss of the referents. Such misunderstanding not only results in the distortion of meanings, but also leads to the cultural discount effect, which makes it hard for target language readers to perceive the spiritual meanings of Chinese calligraphy.

In order to escape from this dilemma, the route of reconstruction must be changed into a dynamic functional equivalence with the help of purpose theory. In other words, the translator should change his role from the simple language converter into the cultural negotiator, reconstructing the source language information according to the cognition and reception capability of the target language readers. In

this way, the moderately creative misunderstanding is not a flaw but an inevitable strategy for bridging cultural differences. With the use of the contextual compensation methods, such as supplementation or analogical method, the translation not only keeps the characteristics of the different culture but also ensures the effectiveness of the communication. For instance, in the process of translating gufayongbi (骨法用笔), giving up the literal translation about the anatomical bone structure, instead stressing the vitality and tension it contains, thus realizing the functional equivalence from form description to resonance.

Translation standards for constructing scientific terminologies need a good knowledge system. As Shi & Yang (2026) mentioned, building up a well-structured corpus resource which contains both bilingual alignment and knowledge organization functions would make it easy to solve the problem of aligning Chinese and English materials, laying a good empirical foundation for terminology reconstruction. The construction of knowledge-based corpus would help trace the evolution of the terminologies, preventing misunderstanding about the genres. Research by Liu (2018) also shows that it is possible to objectively appraise the efficiency of translation strategies by comparing the treatment of different translations, thus finding an efficient way to disseminate overseas. Hence, the reconstruction of terminologies is not only the linguistic technique, but also the reconfirmation of the cultural identity, which aims to recover the aesthetic tension of source language symbols through the dialectical unity of domestication and foreignization.

3.2. Deep Transliteration of Aesthetic Conception and Artistic Appeal: The Reconstruction Practice of Artistic Terminologies

The deep transliteration of aesthetic conception and artistic appeal presents the most difficult aspect in the English translation of calligraphy terminologies. These terminologies are not limited to technical terms; rather, they describe an aesthetic experience and spiritual world. Conventional methods usually get themselves stuck in the problem of referential solidification where one tries to substitute the ontological meanings particular to Chinese calligraphy terminologies with some established Western aesthetic terminologies, thus causing serious semantic shift. In other words, when qiyunshengdong (气韵生动) is translated as “vivid spirit”, one still preserves its literal meaning but loses the philosophical connotations concerning the rhythm of life and the artistic appeal behind it. Therefore, the readers of the target language can only gain superficial visual impression but are unable to understand the spirit hidden in the stroke. This is because of the enforced separation between Western analytical thinking and Eastern holistic thinking, which results in the poverty of symbolic signification of the source language.

To escape from this dilemma, the practice of reconstruction must incorporate the deep interpretation procedure of interpretive translation theory, changing the static

process of vocabulary transformation into a dynamic process of meaning negotiation. The translator must, according to the cognitive expectations of the readers of the target language, combine the strategies of manifestation and analogy. In the first place, by adding explanations to make up for the cultural gap, for instance, by translating qiyun (气韵) into "rhythmic vitality and spiritual resonance," using "rhythmic" to highlight the temporal aspect of rhythm and using "spiritual resonance" to resonate with the resonance, the aesthetic tension of the source language can be reconstructed in the English context. On the one hand, drawing on relevant concepts from Italian literary and artistic theory for cross-cultural analogies, as some scholars have pointed out, even though there have been achievements in the English academic circle, if we start from the Italian literature, the source of European art, to reinterpret and translate fundamental terms, it might be more effective in promoting cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries (Pietro, 2024). This method of historically comparative research helps to build a bridge of understanding between heterogeneous cultures.

At the same time, the reconstruction of terminology also needs to take into consideration the principle of knowledge transfer, that is, while ensuring the conciseness and readability of the translation, the knowledge connotation in the source language will be fully explored. That is to say, translators should not only focus on the conveyance of surface meaning but should go further into the background and philosophy behind the terminologies. For instance, when translating gufayongbi (骨法用笔), one should give up the mechanical literal translation from an anatomical perspective, and highlight the vitality and spiritual tension in it to achieve the functional equivalence through depiction and artistic conception. It verifies that active reconstruction under the cross-cultural context is an effective way to connect Chinese and Western aesthetics. After being released from the bondage of misunderstanding, the terminologies of calligraphy become an effective medium to induce cognitive resonance and thus help the accurate expression and recognition of Chinese art discourse in international communication.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the ontological significance of misinterpretation in the English translation of calligraphy terminologies. It shows that traditional literal translation might lead to semantic drift and the loss of cultural referents in core concepts, for literally translating some words like qiyun (气韵) and bili (笔力) might neglect the misalignment of aesthetic paradigms between China and the West. The paper confirms that in cross-cultural communication misinterpretation is not merely a cognitive error but an inevitable negotiation mechanism. By introducing the framework of teleology, it advocates a shift from static equivalence to dynamic functional equivalence. Meanwhile, it emphasizes the constructive role of the translator's subjectivity in the meaning reconstruction.

It shows that the dialectical strategy of contextualized compensation for adaptation and accommodation can effectively restore the aesthetic tension of the source language symbols. For example, when translating some calligraphic terminology like wulou hen (屋漏痕), it's advisable to transform such concrete metaphor into dynamic descriptions that conform to the cognitive schema of the target language. The translation strategy can not only help avoid the cultural discount caused by mechanical literal translation but also achieve functional equivalence of the deep artistic conception. And this reconstruction process is essentially a reconfirmation of cultural identity, which can elevate the calligraphy terminologies from a simple technical vocabulary to an international communication carrier that embodies the Chinese philosophical connotation, and thereby promote the cognitive resonance of the target language readers.

The research on the English translation of calligraphy terminologies will focus on how to break through the technical limitations of language conversion. It will aim to further build an international communication paradigm with the characteristics of the Chinese discourse system. On one hand, it is necessary to enhance the integration of multiple disciplines. And the combination of knowledge translation studies and digital humanities' technology as well as a structured and bilingual knowledge base of calligraphy terminologies may be the effective solution to addressing the lack of corpus support and classification standards. On the other hand, further empirical research is needed to explore more targeted and differentiated translation and introduction strategies, especially on the acceptance psychology of overseas audiences and enhancement of the explanatory power and influence of Chinese artistic discourse. Only through continuous theoretical innovation and practical reflection, will it promote in-depth dialogue and value sharing of calligraphy culture in the global context.

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