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The Embodiment of Ancient Philosophical Thoughts in the English Translation of TCM Zang-xiang Terminology: A Cultural Analysis Based on the WFCMS Standard

Yun Zhao
Hangzhou Normal University, School of Foreign Languages, Hangzhou, 310000, China
Email: 2862785746@qq.com

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Abstract

The cross-cultural transmission of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) encounters significant challenges, primarily because its terminology is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese philosophical frameworks rather than modern anatomical science. This paper examines the English translation of Zang-xiang (visceral manifestation) terminology, drawing upon the standard nomenclature established by the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS). The objective is to analyze how core theoretical concepts—specifically Yin-Yang, the Five Elements , and the concept of holism—are negotiated and represented in English. By dissecting specific terminological entries, the analysis reveals a fundamental tension: the necessity to communicate functional and dynamic medical concepts using a target language heavily influenced by Western biomedical paradigms. The findings indicate that the WFCMS standard employs various translational strategies to preserve the socio-ethical metaphors and dualistic balance inherent in TCM theory, resisting the complete reduction of these terms to mere physical organs. Ultimately, this study argues that translating TCM is not merely a linguistic exercise but a complex cultural negotiation, requiring a delicate balance between conceptual authenticity and target-language accessibility.

Keywords

Traditional Chinese Medicine; Zang-xiang terminology; Translation strategies; Cultural linguistics; Yin-Yang and Five Elements; WFCMS standard

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is not merely a clinical system; it is a profound reflection of ancient Chinese philosophical thought1. As TCM continues to integrate into the global health landscape, the cross-cultural translation of its terminology has

emerged as a pivotal academic focus. Unlike Western biomedicine, which is primarily grounded in anatomical structure and biological reductionism, TCM is built upon holistic philosophies, most notably the theories of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements (Wu Xing)2. These fundamental concepts heavily influence the conceptualization of the human body, particularly in the theory of Zang-xiang .

Consequently, the translation of TCM terminology is far more complex than finding linguistic equivalents; it is fundamentally a negotiation between two disparate worldviews. To facilitate international communication, the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS) has established standardized English translations. However, rendering culture-loaded terms into a target language historically shaped by Western scientific paradigms presents a unique challenge. This is especially evident in Zang-xiang theory, which categorizes physiological functions based on the dynamic interactions of the Zang-fu organs, emphasizing functional balance over static anatomy.

This paper focuses on the English translation of Zang-xiang terminology within the WFCMS standard. By conducting a cultural analysis of specific terminological entries, this study explores how ancient philosophical constructs are embodied, negotiated, or occasionally adapted in English. Ultimately, this research aims to demonstrate that effective TCM translation requires moving beyond strict anatomical equivalence to capture the holistic and sociolinguistic essence of the original philosophical texts.

2. Research data methodology

2.1. data sources

The primary dataset for this analysis is drawn from the official English translation standard for basic TCM terminology established by the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS). The WFCMS standard serves as the central corpus for this study because it represents an authoritative, internationally recognized consensus. Utilizing this standardized framework ensures that the analysis evaluates institutional and systematic translation strategies, rather than the idiosyncratic or subjective choices of individual translators.

Specifically, the data is extracted from three foundational theoretical sections of the WFCMS document: Yin-yang and Five Elements/Phases (Section 02) , Visceral Manifestation (Section 03) , and Body and Orifices (Section 04). The source material is meticulously organized into a four-column format detailing the classification code, the original Chinese term, its Pinyin romanization, and the corresponding English translation.

These particular sections were deliberately selected due to their high concentration of culture-loaded concepts deeply rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy. The terminology within these sections ranges from discrete physiological components to complex, dynamic metaphors—such as "heart governing blood and vessels" (心主血

脉) and "spleen controlling blood" (脾统血). By anchoring the research in this specific bilingual dataset, the study secures an objective baseline to investigate how holistic frameworks and traditional dualistic theories are linguistically negotiated into the English medical lexicon.

2.2. Data analysis

The data were analyzed descriptively cultural discourse analysis.

3. Research results

3.1. The Translation of Yin-Yang and Holistic Correspondence

This section examines how the WFCMS standard translates terms reflecting the ancient Chinese holistic view and the dynamic balance of Yin and Yang. Rather than reducing these concepts to static anatomical parts, the translation strategies aim to preserve their relational nature.

Table 1. Translation Strategies for Yin-Yang and Holistic Terminology

Code	Chinese Term	Official English Translation	Philosophical Concept Reflected
02-007	阴中之阴	yin within yin	Fractal nature of Yin-Yang (Dualism)
02-011	阴阳交感	interaction of yin and yang	Dynamic balance and vitalism
02-012	阴阳对立	opposition of yin and yang	Dialectical contradiction
02-013	阴阳互根	mutual rooting of yin and yang	Interdependence of opposing forces
02-100	整体观念	concept of holism	Core holistic epistemology
02-101	人与天地相参	human correlating with nature	Macro-micro correspondence
02-102	天人相应	correspondence between nature and human	Unity of universe and humanity
03-007	五脏应四时	five zang-organs corresponding to four seasons	Integration of physiological and natural cycles
03-028	心为阳中之太阳	heart being greater yang within yang	Layered categorization of bodily functions
03-096	肝体阴而用阳	yin in property and yang in function of liver	Separation of physiological substance and function

3.2. Application status of each project

The Wu Xing (Five Elements) theory relies heavily on analogies drawn from human society and family ethics to describe the pathological and physiological relationships between internal organs. This section analyzes how these socio-ethical metaphors are handled in the English translations.

Table 2. Socio-Ethical Metaphors within the Five Elements Framework

Code	Chinese Term	Official English Translation	Philosophical Concept Reflected

02-063	五行相侮	counter-restriction among five elements/phases	Hierarchical inversion
02-064	木侮金	wood counter-restricting metal	Pathological rebellion
02-072	木为金之所胜	wood being restricted by metal	Power dynamics in organ relationships
02-082	悲胜怒	sorrow overcoming anger	Emotional suppression via elemental rules
02-092	母气	mother-element/phase qi	Kinship metaphor for generation
02-093	子气	child-element/phase qi	Kinship metaphor for derivation
03-030	五脏之长	top of five zang viscera	Metaphor of leadership/seniority
03-055	肺为娇脏	lung being delicate zang-organ	Anthropomorphic trait assignment
03-097	肝为刚脏	liver being firm-characterized zang organ	Anthropomorphic personality mapping

4. Discussion: The Discourse of Standardization and Cultural Negotiation in TCM Translation

4.1. Standardizing the Unstandardizable: Expanding the Biomedical Discourse

The endeavor to standardize TCM terminology, as exemplified by the WFCMS guidelines, lays bare a profound epistemological friction between two disparate medical paradigms. Western biomedicine operates predominantly on Cartesian dualism and biological reductionism, seeking to isolate diseases into precise anatomical or cellular components3. TCM, conversely, is anchored in macroscopic observation, dynamic functionalism, and a deeply philosophical worldview4. As evidenced in Table 1, the WFCMS standardization process makes a conscious, strategic decision to preserve these philosophical underpinnings rather than capitulate to Western anatomical equivalence. The official translation of "整体观念" (02-100) as "concept of holism" serves as the foundational epistemological declaration of this standard, establishing that the body cannot be understood as a mere collection of parts.

This holism is further crystallized in terms that bridge human physiology with cosmic rhythms. The official rendering of "天人相应" (02-102) as "correspondence between nature and human" and "五脏应四时" (03-007) as "five zang-organs corresponding to four seasons" deliberately injects a spatial-temporal dimension into the English medical lexicon. Rather than localizing internal organs as static, isolated physical entities, these standard translations define them through their fluid relationships with environmental phenomena and natural cycles. It proposes an ecological view of the body that challenges the closed-system approach of modern Western medicine.

Furthermore, the treatment of Yin-Yang terminology demonstrates a staunch refusal to adopt Western binary oppositions. The strategic zero-translation approach applied to "阴" (02-001) and "阳" (02-002) is fundamental, but the nuanced translation of their relational dynamics is even more telling. Translating "阴中之阴"

(02-007) simply as "yin within yin" and "阴阳互根" (02-013) as "mutual rooting of yin and yang" forces the target language to grapple with the fractal, non-absolute nature of traditional Chinese dualism. It communicates to the international audience that Yin and Yang are not mutually exclusive, static states (like positive and negative charges), but interdependent forces where one cannot exist without the ontological foundation of the other.

This dynamic equilibrium is vividly captured in the description of internal organ interactions as well. For instance, the complex physiological balance between the heart and kidneys is translated as "水火既济" (03-210), rendered officially as "coordination between water and fire". Here, clinical health is framed as an elemental harmony, completely bypassing biochemical terminology. By codifying these specific phrasing strategies, the WFCMS standard does not merely conform to the pre-existing boundaries of Western biomedical discourse. Instead, it actively disrupts and expands those boundaries, demanding that international medical English evolve to articulate dynamic, relational, and philosophical conceptualizations of the human body.

4.2. Shaping the International Discourse of Traditional Chinese Medicine

Ultimately, the translation and standardization of terminology is not merely an act of linguistic conversion; it functions as a powerful mechanism for constructing international academic discourse5. By institutionalizing terms that vividly embody ancient socio-ethical and political metaphors, the WFCMS standard actively claims theoretical independence for TCM on the global stage, resisting its reduction to a mere complementary subset of Western pharmacology.

As highlighted in Table 2, the epistemological framework of TCM utilizes ancient Chinese kinship norms and societal hierarchies to explain complex physiological and pathological mechanisms. The official WFCMS translations faithfully, and strategically, retain these cultural markers. For example, the retention of explicit kinship metaphors—such as "mother-element/phase qi" (02-092) and "child-element/phase qi" (02-093) —preserves the deeply ingrained familial logic of organ generation. In Western biomedicine, organ interactions are largely defined by mechanical causality and biochemical pathways. However, by introducing the concepts of "mother" and "child" into the standardized English medical lexicon, TCM projects a worldview where human physiology operates as an interconnected, mutually nurturing lineage. This translation choice forces the international medical community to engage with a fundamentally different ontological premise: one governed by ethics and relationality rather than mere biology.

Furthermore, what is particularly striking is the translation of pathological relationships and administrative metaphors. The WFCMS standard conceptualizes the human body not as a biological machine, but as a highly structured sociopolitical

entity—a microcosmic empire. This is evident in the translation of the large intestine as an "officer in charge of transportation" (传道之官, 03-151). By embedding this distinct bureaucratic metaphor into an official standard, the text attributes social duty and administrative agency to a physical organ. Similarly, pathological states in the Five Elements theory are described through the lens of social rebellion and hierarchical inversion, translated as "counter-restriction among five elements/phases" (五行相侮, 02-063) and "wood counter-restricting metal" (木侮金, 02-064). The choice to translate "侮" as "counter-restricting"—rather than a purely medicalized term for organ failure—preserves the socio-ethical narrative of the original text, where disease is understood as a violation of systemic order and authority.

Finally, the WFCMS standard extends this anthropomorphic approach to characterize the inherent nature of the organs themselves. Describing the lung as a "delicate zang-organ" (肺为娇脏, 03-055) and the liver as a "firm-characterized zang organ" (肝为刚脏, 03-097) assigns distinct personalities and temperaments to human viscera. By refusing to strip away these socio-ethical, bureaucratic, and anthropomorphic narratives, the translation strategy achieves a vital cultural negotiation. It establishes an autonomous, culture-specific discourse that successfully asserts Chinese philosophical identity, ensuring that as TCM globalizes, it does so on its own theoretical terms rather than conforming entirely to Western scientific paradigms.

5. Conclusion: Translation as a Discourse Strategy for TCM International Standardization

The cross-cultural transmission of Traditional Chinese Medicine is, at its core, a complex process of philosophical and epistemological negotiation rather than a mere linguistic conversion of anatomical terms6. By systematically analyzing the English translations of Zang-xiang terminology within the WFCMS standard, this study demonstrates that the official nomenclature deliberately resists the reductionist tendencies of Western biomedicine. Instead, it employs specific translational strategies to preserve the holistic epistemology and socio-ethical metaphors inherent in ancient Chinese philosophy.

The empirical evidence derived from the WFCMS texts reveals a conscious effort to maintain the cultural authenticity of TCM7. Whether it is the retention of Yin-Yang dualism (e.g., yin within yin), the spatial-temporal correlation between human physiology and nature (e.g., five zang-organs corresponding to four seasons), or the application of bureaucratic and kinship metaphors in the Five Elements theory (e.g., officer in charge of transportation; mother-element qi), these translation choices transcend literal meaning. They serve as a vital mechanism to communicate an alternative ontological paradigm to the international medical community—one where the human body operates as a highly interconnected, sociopolitical, and

ecological system.

Ultimately, this study argues that preserving culture-loaded concepts in TCM translation is a profound discourse strategy for international standardization. If TCM were to entirely strip away its philosophical markers to seamlessly fit into the pre-existing mold of Western medical English, it would risk being marginalized as a mere supplementary branch of Western pharmacology, thereby losing its unique clinical identity. The discourse strategy embedded in the WFCMS guidelines proves that a traditional medical system can globalize on its own theoretical terms. By cultivating a standardized lexicon that remains steadfastly faithful to its philosophical roots, TCM actively constructs an autonomous, culture-specific discourse, ensuring that its rich theoretical framework is globally recognized, respected, and accurately integrated into the future of international healthcare.

6. Summary

This study set out to investigate the profound intersection of linguistics and ancient Chinese philosophy within the English translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Specifically, it focused on the Zang-xiang (visceral manifestation) terminology standardized by the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS). Rather than treating these medical terms as purely anatomical labels, the research adopted a cultural analysis framework to explore how foundational Chinese epistemologies—namely Yin-Yang, the Five Elements (Wu Xing), and the concept of holism—are negotiated and represented in cross-cultural communication.

The empirical findings drawn from the bilingual dataset demonstrate a clear translational preference for preserving cultural and philosophical markers. The analysis of specific terminology revealed that the WFCMS standard successfully transfers the macro-micro correspondence of TCM holism (e.g., correlating organs with seasons) and the non-binary, dynamic nature of Yin-Yang into the target language. Furthermore, the detailed examination of the Five Elements framework highlighted the deliberate retention of socio-ethical, kinship, and bureaucratic metaphors. By translating organs as "officers" and describing their interactions through "mother-child" dynamics or "counter-restricting" rebellions, the standard actively resists reducing TCM's physiological functions to the mechanical reductionism typical of Western biology.

Ultimately, this paper concludes that these specific translation choices constitute a vital international discourse strategy. By refusing to completely assimilate into the pre-existing paradigm of Western biomedicine, the WFCMS guidelines actively construct and defend an independent academic identity for TCM. This strategic approach ensures the accurate transmission of ancient Chinese medical wisdom while simultaneously enriching the global medical discourse, allowing TCM to globalize and integrate on its own unique epistemological terms.

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