

A Study on the Translation of Culturally Unique Chinese Terms Based on Corpora — Taking English Translations of *The Analects* as an Example

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Abstract

Culturally unique terms carry rich cultural connotations, and the uniqueness, diversity, and contemporaneity of these terms pose significant challenges for translation. The accuracy of translating culturally unique terms is closely related to the quality of the translation. Therefore, exploring appropriate translation strategies for translating culturally unique terms is a worthwhile topic of study. Based on a parallel corpus of Chinese and English translations of *The Analects*, this study utilizes adaptation theory to examine the translation strategies for the original concepts in Gu Hongming's version of *The Analects*. Wei Yucun categorizes the unique cultural concepts in *The Analects* into three types: material culture, institutional customs, and spiritual culture. The study finds that there are a total of 1,072 original concepts in *The Analects*, including 120 from material culture, 516 from institutional customs, and 436 from spiritual culture, which correspond to the surface, middle, and inner layers of culture. The translation strategies for different categories of original concepts vary; thus, translators should actively adapt to the different contexts of the target culture's surface, middle, and inner layers, employing corresponding translation strategies for each category of original concepts to further promote cultural integration between China and the West, construct a translation discourse system, and facilitate the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture abroad.

Keywords: corpus, *The Analects*, translation studies, culturally unique Chinese terms

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, constructing a discourse system that integrates both Chinese and foreign cultures is a significant issue facing Sino-Western cultural exchanges. *The Analects* embodies traditional Confucian philosophical thought and contains a wealth of cultural and philosophical terminology that reflects profound humanistic spirit and social values, having a substantial impact on both Chinese and global

civilization. Accurately interpreting and translating *The Analects* is crucial for effectively disseminating Chinese culture and civilization to the world. Currently, there are more than 60 English translations of *The Analects*, among which Gu Hongming's version is regarded as a classic work. He Yuanjian (2010) noted that for translators, conveying unique original concepts from the source culture to the target culture, so that the target readers can understand and

accept them, is a considerable challenge. The successful transmission of original concepts is pivotal for promoting Chinese culture, and it remains one of the significant challenges of translation. This paper employs a bilingual parallel corpus of *The Analects* to examine its representation in the target language and explores the translation of culturally unique and original terms, aiming to identify better translation strategies to promote the dissemination of excellent Chinese culture abroad.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews domestic studies on the translation of core cultural terms in *The Analects*. An Lezhe (2002) pointed out that translating “道” as “the Way (dao)” can better convey the essence of the original text to foreign readers. Yang Ping (2008) argued that using transliteration for “仁” can faithfully and comprehensively convey Confucian philosophy. Zhang Zheng and Hu Wenxiao (2015) cited the transliteration of “天” as “Tian” to illustrate translation strategies for core concepts in Chinese culture. Han Xing and Han Qiuyu (2016) believed that Li Yake’s translation of “the superior” better reflects the connotations of “君子” culture in Confucian thought. Fan Min (2015) suggested that An Lezhe’s translation of “天命” as “the propensities of tian (tianming)” better embodies the linguistic and cultural characteristics of China. Internationally, relevant research, such as that by Joel J. Kupperman, who compared the translations of core terms in *The Analects*, stated that My interest is not in comparing translations, but I feel that one can derive philosophical principles from Confucius. Kupperman (2002) discussed the interpretation and dissemination of core concepts in *The Analects* within the framework of Confucian culture. In summary, to convey original meanings more authentically and accurately, it is essential to integrate different cultural backgrounds and accurately grasp the meaning of the source language, thereby promoting the exchange and dissemination of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

3. Introduction to Adaptation Theory

Adaptation Theory was established by the renowned Belgian linguist Yves Verschueren in the 1980s. It posits that the use of language is essentially a continuous process of selecting language, whether this selection is conscious or

unconscious, and regardless of whether it is driven by internal or external factors. Meng Jian (2012) argues that language users are capable of making appropriate choices during language use because language possesses variability, negotiability, and adaptability. Variability enables the possibility of language selection and constrains choices within a certain range; negotiability provides flexibility in language use; and adaptability allows individuals to negotiate and choose language that ultimately achieves their communicative goals. Among these, variability and negotiability are conditions and foundations, whereas adaptability is the essence and purpose. The first two provide possibilities and methods for language selection, while adaptability ensures that, based on these frameworks, users can make choices that are appropriate for their communicative needs, thereby facilitating effective language communication. Adaptability is defined as the ability of language to enable its users to flexibly adjust and switch among available choices in order to meet contextual requirements.

Within the framework of Adaptation Theory, to successfully achieve language communication, translators should proactively adapt to specific translation purposes and contexts, making continuous choices and adjustments in light of both the internal and external linguistic environments. Translation is a dynamic process of adaptation between the original context and the language structure. Meng Jian et al. (2012) assert that the success of cross-cultural communication is assured only when translations adapt to all aspects of the communicative context.

4. Corpora and Research Methods

The Han-English parallel corpus of *The Analects* is a sub-corpus of a self-constructed bilingual corpus focusing on the translation strategies of source concepts in Han-English and English-Han texts. This corpus is developed to explore different translation strategies for source concepts across texts and to investigate the cognitive processes involved in the translation of these concepts. *The Analects* sub-corpus contains two main aspects:

First, the representativeness and authority of the selected corpus. The original text of *The Analects* is drawn from a classical poetry and literature website, comprising 20 pieces with a total of

15,922 Chinese characters. The English translation is based on the version by Gu Hongming from the late Qing Dynasty, which contains 39,838 characters. This translation has successfully shaped the cultural identity of China, promoted Confucian culture to the Western world, safeguarded the dignity of the Chinese nation, and achieved considerable success in communication. Therefore, Gu's translation possesses strong representativeness and authority, and in a certain sense, it provides significant insights for the contemporary endeavor of Chinese culture to reach global audiences.

Second, the construction of the corpus. Initially, this corpus utilizes Emeditor to clean the obtained raw materials, removing impurities and encoding the text. It then conducts parallel alignment of the corpus, taking into account the aphoristic and conversational styles predominant in *The Analects*, using Paraconc software to segment the text by "... said" as the paragraph unit and then by sentences to achieve sentence-level alignment. Following this, according to the cultural classification standards proposed by Professor Qi Yucun, the source concepts are categorized into three categories: material culture, institutional customs, and spiritual culture, and the concepts contained in the sentences are annotated and processed according to their categories and translation strategies. Finally, after aligning the corpus, the text is converted into XML format, with the Chinese and English versions stored separately.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The characteristic cultural concepts in *The Analects* can be categorized into three types: material culture, customs, and spiritual culture. Under the guidance of Adaptation Theory, this paper will explore the translation strategies for these characteristic terms in Gu Hongming's translation. By searching the corpus, it is found that there are a total of 1,072 cultural characteristic terms (excluding duplicates), including 120 terms from material culture, 516 from institutional customs, and 436 from spiritual culture. The translation conversion strategies include five approaches: free translation, literal translation, substitution, omission, and transliteration (including transliteration with annotations). Free translation refers to translating the symbolic meaning of the source concept (also known as "metonymy"); literal translation refers to

translating the explicit meaning (also known as "direct reference"), which can be with or without annotations; substitution means replacing Chinese allusions with English ones; omission means that a term does not appear in the translation. Transliteration, also known as "transcription," is the process or result of representing the characters of one writing system with the symbols of another. Transliteration with annotations involves first converting a term into pinyin and then expressing its unique cultural connotations either within the text or in footnotes to achieve the purpose of cultural information transmission.

5.1 Translation Strategies for Material Culture

The original concepts of material culture represent the most visual aspects of cultural categories and lie on the surface of traditional Chinese culture. For instance, the term "牖" (yǒu) in "自牖执其手" (zì yǒu zhí qí shǒu) refers to the window between rooms in ancient architecture. In ancient times, "窗" (chuāng) specifically referred to a skylight, whereas a wall window was called "牖" (yǒu). The term "乘" (chéng) in "千乘之国" (qiān chéng zhī guó) refers to an ancient war chariot pulled by four horses. For concepts shared between Chinese and Western cultures, Gu Hongming mostly adopted a literal translation method to conform to the expression habits of the target language. In cases of items that are overly Chinese in nature, he used free translation to reduce their specificity, thereby adapting to the surface cultural context of the target language, making them more acceptable to the readers or listeners of the target language.

Example 1: Confucius remarked, "In teaching men, I make no difference between the rich and the poor. I have taught men who could just afford to bring me the barest presentation gift in the same way I have taught others."

Analysis: The original text "束修" (shù xiū) refers to ten strips of dried meat. In ancient times, when students first met their teachers, they would present gifts as a sign of respect, called "束修," which later extended to mean the fee for apprenticeship and is peculiar to Chinese culture. Gu Hongming translated it as "the barest presentation gift," rendering the overly Chinese item in a more vernacular form to adapt to the cultural context of the target language, thus enhancing the acceptability for English

readers.

Corpus data shows that the overall tendency for translating material culture concepts is to favor literal translation over free translation. When translating material culture concepts, translators should pay attention to adapting to the surface cultural context, striving to find similar expressions in the target language for direct translation, while for concepts with special meanings, free translation can be employed.

5.2 Translation Strategies for Customs

The customs-related concepts in *The Analects* can generally be divided into two types: the first includes proper nouns such as names of people and places. Names are important linguistic markers of local customs and culture, with the naming process being central to cultural formation, reflecting the unique naming conventions of the Chinese people. For key figures in the original work, the translation expresses the same meaning by finding similar figures in Western culture. In this case, the principle of transliteration has minimal effect, as adapting to Western cultural norms takes precedence.

Example: Confucius remarked: “A man who has not the wit of that person (the Sydney Smith of the time) and the fine appearance of that noble lord (the Lord Chesterfield of the time) will never get on in society now.”

Analysis: The phrase “祝鮒” refers to a minister from the State of Wei. According to the “Zuo Zhuan,” Zhu Tuo was known for his eloquence and diplomatic skills, as well as his ability to engage in flattery, which earned him considerable favor from Duke Ling of Wei. On the other hand, “宋朝” (Sòng Cháo) denotes a noble from the State of Song, renowned for his beauty, and historical records in the “Zuo Zhuan” recount incidents of chaos attributed to his attractiveness.

For these two key figures in the original text, simply transliterating their names would fail to convey their character traits, thereby hindering the reader’s understanding of the original content. Conversely, directly explaining or annotating these figures would entail significant complications due to the intricate historical context and background, which could burden the reader with excessive information. Therefore, Gu Hongming adopts a strategy comparable to the previous example, substituting Zhu Tuo with Sydney Smith (a

notable English writer from the 19th century) and Lord Chesterfield (a famous British politician, diplomat, and man of letters known for his charm and exemplifying British etiquette) to convey the essence of the original text effectively and efficiently to the reader.

Another category involves the translation of Confucian conceptual terms. In *the Analects*, the term “天” (tiān, heaven) appears 18 times, reflecting the Confucian view of the Way of Heaven; “天下” (tiānxià, all under heaven) appears 23 times, expressing ideas of a unified world; “国” (guó, country) appears 8 times, while “邦” (bāng, states) appears 38 times, alluding to state governance. The term “仁” (rén, benevolence) appears an astonishing 109 times, while “义” (yì, righteousness) appears 23 times. These have become standards and values within the framework of traditional Chinese culture, encapsulating fundamental Confucian ideals such as the Way of Heaven, the concept of a unified world, and ethical principles reflected in Confucianism. Corpus data indicates that the translation of proper nouns, such as personal and place names, typically employs substitution methods in English translations. When translating culturally significant concepts related to institutional customs, translators should strive to minimize the target language readers’ sense of unfamiliarity with Chinese culture. It is advisable to utilize generalization techniques, actively conforming to the language and cultural norms of the target language to achieve the goal of cultural dissemination.

5.3 Translation Strategies for Spiritual Culture

Through cultural adaptation, attention is given to the dissemination of Chinese civilization. During the translation process, Western terminology is used to explain Confucian concepts, employing methods such as deletion and the addition of annotations to supplement and rewrite the original content, thus achieving the social function of translated works within the target culture.

Example: Yan Yuan asked about ren (仁), and Confucius said: “To overcome oneself and return to propriety is ren. If one can restrain oneself and return to propriety for just one day, all under heaven will return to ren...” (from “Yan Yuan, Chapter 1”). The reverence for the system of propriety and self-discipline is fundamentally about integrating the self into society, thereby unifying the individual with the

larger world. Here, “礼” (lǐ) refers to a set of social behavioral norms. Gu Hongming translated it as “Renounce yourself and conform to the ideal of decency and good manners,” which emphasizes the unity of both ideas and accurately captures the meaning of the original text. When translating concepts that are uniquely Chinese, translators must deeply understand the cultural context behind the Chinese language, grasping the true meaning conveyed, while also actively adapting to the cultural background of the target language readers and correctly selecting the meanings and expressions. To make it acceptable for Western readers, Gu Hongming adopted the method of free translation.

Corpus data shows that spiritual culture concepts are often translated using free translation methods. For the translation of core concepts situated within the inner layers of culture, adapting to the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic habits of the target language promotes smooth communication. In conclusion, the different categories of original concepts in Gu Hongming’s translations adopt varying strategies. Overall, the methods he employed for these concepts are commendable, successfully achieving the goal of disseminating Chinese culture.

6. Conclusion

The translation of culturally significant Chinese words is a process where the translator continually makes choices and adaptations to meet communicative needs. This process is influenced by social, cultural, and cognitive factors, making it one of ongoing selection under different awareness, a continuous process of optimizing word choices. A translation can only succeed in cross-cultural communication if it adapts to every aspect of the communicative context. This paper applies the theory of adaptation to the English translation of *The Analects*, exploring how cross-cultural translation can achieve the highest degree of equivalence under various cultural context influences. During the translation process, translators should make dynamic adaptations based on different contexts to overcome the impacts of varying cultural environments. This flexibility in addressing cultural differences and compensating for cultural gaps is essential to avoid barriers in information transmission, ensuring that the translated text reflects the intent and style of the original work.

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