A Study on the Translation of Cultural Relic Texts from the Perspective of Skopos Theory— Taking the Cultural Relic Texts in the National Museum of China as Examples

SONG Yuwei[1] & LYU Liangqiu[2]

Abstract

With the increasingly close cultural exchanges between China and the west, more foreigners show their interest and enthusiasm to Chinese culture. As the exhibition and educational institutions with cultural exchange functions, museums become their preferred visiting sites when they travel in China. In the process of spreading Chinese culture to the world, the translation of cultural relic texts in museum is an important part. This study collects hundreds of cases from exhibition introduction and cultural relic texts in the National Museum of China. Skopos Theory emphasized that translation should be oriented by target readers and the means of translation should be determined by the translation purposes, which is suitable to be applied in analysis of cultural relic texts. Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, the author classifies and analyzes the typical cases and puts forward four methods in the translation of cultural relic texts, including transliteration plus explanation, amplification, free Translation, omission.

1. Introduction

With the continuous enhancement of Chinese cultural soft power and the deepening cultural exchanges between China and the West, more and more foreigners show their boundless interest and enthusiasm to Chinese culture. As the window of promoting Chinese culture, visiting the museums has become their preferred way when they travel in China. Appropriate translation of cultural relic texts can help foreign tourists to acquire more relevant knowledge and better visiting experience while appreciating cultural heritages. Therefore, the translation of cultural relic texts in museum is particularly important in introducing and spreading Chinese culture.

This study selects some cases from the National Museum of China, the most representative comprehensive museum in China. Detailing analyses will be carried out from the perspective of Skopos Theory to discuss different problems in the translation process and try to figure out the appropriate translation methods to eliminate communication barrier of foreign tourists and increase their interactions with museums.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory is an important part of German Functional Translation Theory. German Functional Translation Theory originated in the 1970s, which got rid of the traditional linguistic translation methods, but used functional and communicative method to do translation analysis. As the founder of Functional Translation Theory, Katharina Reiss put forward the text typology and classified the text functions into three types: informative function, expressive function and operative function. A text may have dual or multiple functions, which means that various translation methods should be combined to use. All these ideas laid a solid foundation for the formation of Spokos Theory.

On the basis of Reiss, Vermeer made further research. In 1978, he put forward "Spokos Theory" for the first time in his book *A Framework for a General Translation Theory*, which held that translation is not a mechanical language translation, but a specific form of human activity (Vermeer, 1983). Skopos theory emphasizes the interactive and pragmatic features of translation, and believes that the form of the target language should be determined first by the function—

---

[1] Candidate for a Master's degree, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.
[2] Professor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China. E-mail address: llq2803@163.com

That is, the purpose to be achieved in the context of the target language (Liu, 2006). According to Skopos Theory, three general principles should be followed in the process of translation. Skopos rule is the primary principle in translation, which emphasizes that "the end justifies the means" (Nord, 2001). There are three kinds of purpose summarized by Skopos Theory, including the purpose of the translator, the communicative purpose of the translation, and the purpose of using some special means. Coherence rule means that the translation should conform to the intra-textual coherence. The translation must consider the background knowledge of the target language reader and the cultural context of the target language country, and it should be meaningful in the communicative environment of the target language (Vermeer, 1983). Fidelity rule means that the translation should conform to the intertextual coherence. "The priority of the target-text purpose does not mean the source text is completely irrelevant, as is sometimes assumed" (Nord, 2001).

There were other representatives who drove the development of German Functional Translation Theory functional. Justa Holtz Manttari put forward Theory of Translation Action, claimed that translation is the process of information transmission with the purpose of communicative cooperation. The research result of her theory becomes one of the major principles in Spokos Theory. Christine Nord proposed the concept of "loyalty" and emphasized that "Loyalty commits the translator bilaterally to the source and target sides" (2001, p. 62).

2.2 Previous Study on the Translation of Cultural Relic Texts

Over the years, many scholars have studied translation of cultural relic texts from different perspectives. The researches mostly focused on several themes including the problems analysis, comparison of cultural differences and strategy exploration in translation. Li Kairong (2001) divided the cultural information reflecting the overall artistic conception of cultural relics into three levels: surface culture, middle culture and deep culture. Surface cultural information defines what cultural relics are, which is the first information to be transmitted directly by "headword" in translation. Middle cultural information involves cultural and artistic value of cultural relics, people's aesthetic awareness and deep cultural information refers to the psychological association generated by the traditional concepts and social customs of Chinese culture. He held that different methods should be used in order to reflect different levels of cultural information. Li Fang (2009) focused on the significant differences in mode of thinking between Chinese and Western in translation practice. She did the comparison research and put forward the cross-cultural translation strategies which can reflect the humanity and national pride.

Moreover, the theoretical basis of translation of cultural relic texts is also gradually enriched. Xia and Zhao (2013) believed that the method of annotation and supplement should be adopted under the guidance of Skopos theory to creatively make up for the lack of cultural connotation in the translation. Li Yuan and Li Yonglan (2020) claimed that the translation activities should be endowed with a strong sense of communication ethics from the perspective of cross-cultural communication and the true information appropriately without making assumptions about the non-native culture by the translator. Guided by the theory of reception aesthetics, Liu and Xu (2019) focused on the language habits and the horizon of expectations of English readers in the translation practice to meet the aesthetic taste and acceptable level of the western audiences. Due to the cognitive differences between the Chinese language community and the English language community, Huang Baorong (2007) put forward that the translator can take the cognitive requirement as the guiding principle and utilize the ambiguous and prototypical features of the cognitive category to seek the proper translation.

The special national cultural connotation of cultural relic texts determines that their translation is different from the general text translation. Skopos Theory emphasizes that translation should be oriented by target readers and the means of translation should be determined by the translation purposes. Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, this study tries to summarize some appropriate translation methods by analyzing some typical examples.

3. Analysis of Cultural Relic Texts in the National Museum of China from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

As an important way of cultural publicity, translated texts of cultural relic texts should oriented towards target readers. Some scholars believed that the purpose of translation is multi-level and multi-dimensional. "Generally speaking, every translation action has a basic level of translation purpose, and may also have the highest goal (final purpose). There are some middle levels between these two poles and various dimensions on these levels." (Fan&Liu, 2002) In the translation of cultural relic texts, the basic purpose is to convey the clear literal information to the foreigners. The middle purpose is to make them understand the background knowledge and cultural connotation from the cultural characteristics, such as theme patterns, inscriptions, texture and technology. The final purpose is to promote cultural exchanges between China and the West, and speed up Chinese culture going global.

This study collects hundreds of cases from exhibition introduction and cultural relic texts, including stone implement, pottery, bronze, jade ware, porcelain, gold and silver ware, painting and calligraphy in the National Museum of China. Through the analysis of these source texts and target texts, some inappropriate translations can be categorized, which helps to propose different methods in the translation of cultural relic texts under the guidance of Skopos Theory.

3.1 Transliteration plus Explanation

Transliteration means to convert words from the source language to the target language with a close approximation in phonetic sound, which fits the fidelity rule but causes difficulties for foreigners. At the same time, adding the necessary explanation can help the target audience understand the text, which fits the skopos rule. However, many names or patterns of cultural relics implies their own cultural connotation. Adequate explanation including appearances, functions and more detailed message should be added instead of the simple translation in some cases. It can be explained in detail in the following translation of bronze wares and traditional instruments.

Example 1

青铜爵	Bronze *Jue* (wine vessel)
青铜尊	Bronze *Zun* (wine vessel)
青铜觚	Bronze *Gu* (wine vessel)
青铜斝	Bronze *Jia* (wine vessel)
青铜瓿	Bronze *Bu* (wine vessel)
青铜觥	Bronze *Gong* (wine vessel)
青铜罍	Bronze *Lei* (wine vessel)
"栾书"青铜缶	"Luan Shu" Bronze *Fou* (wine vessel)
嵌松石青铜钫	Bronze *Fang* (wine vessel) Inlaid with Turquoise
"召"青铜卣	"Zhao" Bronze *You* (wine vessel)
"利"青铜簋	"Li" Bronze *Gui* (food container)
鸟形青铜匜	Bird-shaped Bronze *Yi* (food container)
青铜盏	Bronze *Zhan* (food container)
青铜盂	Bronze *Yu* (food container)

Example 2

二里头文化时期，乐器种类主要有埙、鼓、铃、磬，到了商代，出现了铙、编铙、编磬。西周时期，钲、编钟的应用，极大丰富了音乐的表现力。

Musical instruments in the Erlitou Culture included the *xun* (wind instrument), *gu* (drum), *ling* (bell), and *qing* (chime stone). In the Shang Dynasty, *nao* (inverted bell), *nao* sets, and *qing* sets appeared. With the use of *zheng* (inverted bell with a long handle) and *zhong* (chime bell) sets in the Western Zhou, the expressive quality of music was greatly enhanced.

Example 1 contains different kinds of wine vessels and food containers in ancient China. In each group here, the translator gave the transliteration and the same simple explanation to these bronze wares with various appearances and functions, which may confuse the foreign tourists and affect their visiting experiences. In order to help them figure out the differences of these objects, more necessary explanations should be added besides of the general names. For example, in the first group, "青铜爵" can be translated into "Bronze *Jue* (wine divider with three legs, spout and slender tail)". "青铜觚" can be translated into "Bronze *Gu* (wine vessel with trumpet-shaped mouth and slim waist)". "青铜觥" can be translated into Bronze *Gong* (animal-shaped wine vessel with handle). In the second group, "鸟形青铜匜" can be translated into "Bird-shaped Bronze *Yi* (food or water container, usually used as the ritual vessel)". "青铜盂" can be translated into "Bronze *Yu* (food or water container, usually used in daily life)".

In contrast to the example of bronze wares above, various Chinese traditional musical instruments in Example2 were translated into different explanation with transliteration instead of the general name "musical instrument".

The explanations in brackets help to understand the different appearance and functions of each instrument, and shows the diversity and wonder of ancient Chinese traditional musical instruments in different periods to the target audience.

3.2 Amplification

In the process of visiting the museums, the historical and cultural connotation of cultural relics is exactly what foreigners are most interested in. Eugene Nida once said, "For a real successful translation, knowing two cultures is more important than grasping two languages, because words become meaningful only in its effective cultural background" (1993, p. 81). Therefore, translators are required to accurately translate the literal information of the text, meanwhile, they should show the cultural connotation with the professional background of history and archaeology to the target audience by adding more information.

Example 3

银扣马蹄形漆盒
东汉（公元25年-220年）
山东莱西岱墅村出土
U-shaped Lacquer Box with Silver Mount
Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220AD)
Unearthed at Daishu, Laixi, Shandong Province
Example 4
唐长安城分宫城、皇城和外郭城三部分。

Chang'an during the Tang Dynasty consisted of the palace city (emperor's residence and court), the imperial city (government office district), and the outer city (residential and market areas).

In example 3, the information of shape of the cultural relic "马蹄形" was translated into "U-shaped". Though the shape of the horse hoof is similar to the English letter "U", cultural image of horse or horse hoof was ignored, which meant loyalty, vigorous, and success. In ancient China, many animals and plants have unique cultural images, by which people can express implied meanings and express feelings in various categories of cultural relics. Auspicious culture is an important part of Chinese culture. There are many other examples, including "bat"(means boundless happiness because of the same pronunciation of "蝠" and "福"), "butterfly"(means health and longevity because of the same pronunciation of "蝶" and "耋"), "pomegranate" (means harmony and prosperity because of abundant berries of the fruit), etc. In the translation of such words with cultural connotations, some background knowledge can be added to show our cultural characteristics by the method of amplification in order to explain why people choose such patterns in the design of the cultural relics.

In addition to these auspicious images, some other cultural information about historical events, customs and buildings may be unfamiliar to the foreign visitors by literal translation. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt the translation method of amplification in this kind of text to meet the basic and middle purpose of understanding the information and the connotation. In example 7, the ancient Chinese architecture and city layout have a strong appeal to foreigners. On the basis of skopos rule, the translator added some explanations in brackets so that the target audience can distinguish the functions of each area with details.

3.3 Free Translation

As we all know, cultural relic texts are not easy to understand by foreigners because of their unique historical characteristics and huge differences between Chinese and Western cultures. The method of free translation is widely used in the text that contains the same Chinese characters with different meanings, which fits skopos rule and coherence rule in the translation.

Example 5

兽耳青铜壶	Bronze *Hu* (wine vessel) with Animal-shaped Handles
漆耳杯	Winged Lacquer Cup
双鼻陶壶	Pottery Jar with Two Lugs

Example 6

青铜漏壶	Bronze Water Clock
交错三角纹彩陶壶	Painted Pottery Jar with Interlocking Triangle Design
原始瓷壶	Proto-porcelain Ewer

In Example 5, "耳" (ear) was translated into "handles" in "兽耳青铜壶" while "winged" in "漆耳杯". However, "鼻" (nose) was translated into "lugs" in "双鼻陶壶", means something like ears. Considering the appearance of cultural relics on exhibition, it is appropriate to translate "兽耳" into "animal-shaped handles" to describe the appearance and function of two "ears" on the vessel. "耳杯", also named "羽觞", was a kind of drinking vessel in ancient China. "羽" means the wings of birds. Therefore, the translated text "Winged Lacquer Cup" described the basic information with highlighting the cultural connotation of the historical name "羽觞".

It's worth noting that even though free translation is a relatively flexible translation method, unified standards should be paid attention to in the process of translation, which can avoid the lack of coherence. By comparing the groups of texts in Example 6, the translation of "壶" has three versions. It is proper to translate "漏壶" into "clock" as a kind of time-keeping tool invented by ancient people, usually in the shape of the pot with the hole. But the other two cultural relics are same kinds of wares with similar shapes, all of which are bottles of big mouth. The different translation "jar" and "ewer" may cause misunderstanding to target readers. Under the premise that the purpose of translation is the first principle, the word choices of free translation should be seriously considered.

3.4 Omission

Chinese emphasizes the literary grace of sentences and prefers list and repetition, especially in the description of cultural relics. However, target audiences focus more on the transmission of practical information. According to Skopos Theory, the relation between the translation text and the source text must be considered to satisfy the purpose of translation. The translator can omit some unnecessary information to make the translation more comprehensible to the target readers. However, cultural relic texts in museum display are generally composed of name, age, unearthed time, address, brief introduction, etc. It is not advisable to delete some significant information with deep meanings when Chinese translated to English, which requires careful consideration and identification by the translator.

Example 7

《灵枢·素问》
明刊本
《灵枢》和《素问》二书合起来托名《黄帝内经》，是中国历史上第一部系统的医学著作。该书总结了秦汉以前的医学经验，提出了肺腑经络学说和病因学说，奠定了中医学的理论基础。
Ling Shu and *Su Wen*
Block-printed edition, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

Example 8

书体逐渐由隶、章草向楷、行、今草演化，产生了钟繇、王羲之等著名书法家。
Calligraphy scripts and styles evolved and famous calligrapher like Zhong Yao and Wang Xizhi gained recognition.

Example 9
商代丝织品中，出现了菱形纹的回纹绮、大孔罗，表明当时已有了配备提花装置的织机。
Shang silks with lozenge designs indicate the use of looms capable of weaving decorative patterns.

In example 7, the importance of the books in the history of Traditional Chinese Medicine can be recognized from the Chinese texts under the name. Actually, the combined name "黄帝内经" (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor) in missing translation may be more familiar to some foreigners. The transliteration without the corresponding translation of the background knowledge may reduce the foreigners' interests. Lots of such examples in exhibition can be found. The translator only gave the English name of cultural relics with deleting detailed introduction because of insufficient space of signs. It may be a better way to choose part of important and helpful information instead of omitting all of them in translation practice. As can be seen in Example 8, the information of "由隶、章草向楷、行、今草" in Chinese text is not found in the English version. As the core meaning of this sentence, each font in the evolution of Chinese Calligraphy should not be deleted.

The common translation of each font has already existed. "隶书" "章草" "楷书" "行书" and "今草" can be translated into official script, early cursive script, regular script, running script and later cursive script respectively, which can be understood by foreigners. Besides, Zhong Yao was famous in the period during which Chinese characters evolved from official script to regular script, and Wang Xizhi was remembered and recognized for his running script in history. Without the specific translation of fonts, the following mention of two calligraphers makes no sense to foreigners.

However, "回纹绮" and "大孔罗" in Example 9 are two kinds of traditional weaving techniques with lozenge-shaped pattern in ancient China, which are rarely seen even in Chinese sources. For target readers, too many complex transliterated words will affect the reading efficiency, resulting in a lack of understanding of the text. Here the translator replaces "回纹绮" and "大孔罗" with "silks with lozenge designs", which makes the translation more fluent and fit the coherence rule. The method of omission can avoid repetition and maintain the integrity of the text without changing the main idea of the text.

4. Conclusion

Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, this study emphasized that the translation of cultural relic texts should be close to the target readers. The author analyzed some difficulties in translation through the typical cases and put forward four methods including transliteration plus explanation, amplification, free translation, omission. In the translation of cultural relic texts, the translator should try to choose the appropriate methods to convey the clear literal information to the foreigners and make them understand the background knowledge and cultural connotation.

References

Fan, X. T., & Liu, Q. F. (2002). The Purposiveness of Selections in Translation. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (06), 27-30.

Huang, B. R. (2007). *On English Translation of Antique Names from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics*. Changsha: Central South University.

Li, F. (2009). Translation Strategies of Chinese Museum Commentaries. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 30(03), 74-77.

Li, K. R. (2001). On the Processing of Cultural Connotations in C-E Translation of Names of Cultural Relics. *Chinese Science & Technology Translators Journal*, (04), 10-13.

Li, Y., & Li, Y. L. (2020). Translation of Names of Chinese Cultural Relics from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication—A Case Study of Subtitle Translation of Names of Cultural Relics in *National Treasure Archive*. *Identification and appreciation of cultural relics*, (04), 72-73.

Liu, H., & Xu, X. C. (2019). An Analysis of English Translation of Names of Historical Relics from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics—A Case study of Xi'an Museum. *Journal Editorial Department of Putian University*, 26(06), 56-60.

Liu, J. P. (2006). *A General History of Western Translation Theory*. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 377.

Nida, E. A. (1993). *Language, Culture and Translating*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 81.

Nord, C. (2001). *Translation as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 29,62, 125.

Vermeer, Hans J. (1983). *A Framework for a General Translation Theory*. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University, 54.

Xia, X. L., & Zhao, M. W. (2013). Research on The English Translation of the Names of Cultural Relics from the Perspective of Skopos theory. *Journal of Donghua University, Social Sciences*, 13(01), 34-38.