

C-E Translation of Suzhou Embroidery as ICH from the Perspective of Relevance Translation Theory

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Abstract

As vehicles for cultural dissemination, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) practices convey to the world China's values and its civilizational vision of harmony in diversity and vitality through continuity. As a prominent form of Chinese ICH, Suzhou Embroidery presents significant challenges for English translation, given its profound cultural connotations, distinctive aesthetic expressions, and specialized craft knowledge. Drawing on Relevance Translation Theory, this paper first identifies the primary cognitive barriers involved in translating Suzhou Embroidery. It then examines how translators can optimize readers' cognitive processing through strategic choices, including lexical clarification, information restructuring, sensory-oriented elaboration, and the use of paratexts. These strategies aim to strike a dynamic balance between preserving source-cultural essence and ensuring target-reader comprehension, thereby facilitating the effective cross-cultural dissemination of Suzhou Embroidery as ICH.

Keywords

Suzhou Embroidery, Relevance Translation Theory, C-E Translation Strategies, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

1. Research Background and Significance

Under the ongoing deepening of China's "going global" strategy for culture, the translation and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage have become a significant practice in enhancing cultural soft power and promoting mutual learning among civilizations. The translation and communication of intangible cultural heritage represent encounters and collisions between different cultural systems under

the principle of shared values, a process that necessitates effective cross-cultural translation strategies, thereby advancing interdisciplinary research beyond linguistic translation (Li & Xie, 2025). In recent years, research on intangible cultural heritage translation has yielded certain achievements. At the theoretical level, studies have predominantly drawn on traditional frameworks such as cultural translation theory, Skopos theory, and Newmark's text typology, with a general focus on linguistic-level conversion. However, systematic approaches to effectively conveying the deep-seated cultural genes embedded in techniques, processes, and rituals to international audiences remain underdeveloped.

Taking Suzhou Embroidery as an example, as a representative intangible cultural heritage project embodying the aesthetics of the Jiangnan region and the craftsmanship wisdom of China, its international dissemination faces dual challenges: a complex terminology system and dense cultural imagery. Research into publicly available online resources reveals a scarcity of authoritative English translation materials, with existing translations often fragmented. For core elements such as key technical concepts, aesthetic standards, and historical allusions, a cross-linguistic expression system that can both accurately convey technical substance and evoke cultural associations has yet to be established. This gap hinders the effective transmission of the philosophical and spiritual essence behind Suzhou Embroidery to overseas audiences. Consequently, this study seeks to introduce the perspective of Relevance Translation Theory to explore how to construct effective pathways for the translation and interpretation of Suzhou Embroidery at the level of cognitive context.

2. Theoretical Analysis

Relevance Theory was developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986, building upon H. P. Grice's pragmatic Principle of Relevance. It was first systematically presented in their co-authored work *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* in 1986 (Lin, 1994). Subsequently, their student Ernst-August Gutt published *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* in 1991, applying relevance theory to the field of translation studies and proposing Relevance Translation Theory. This theory posits that the essence of translation lies in conveying the cognitive context of the source text, with the translator's core objective being to achieve optimal relevance in the target text, enabling target readers to obtain contextual effects consistent with the original intent with appropriate cognitive effort, thereby facilitating effective cross-cultural communication. In recent years, Relevance Translation Theory has been widely applied and validated across multiple specialized translation domains. For instance, in the study of English translations of culturally loaded terms in Xu Chajing, the theory assisted translators in balancing the accuracy of tea-related terminology with the acceptability of cultural connotations (Tang & Feng, 2025). In the English translation practice of *Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine*, the theory facilitated cross-cultural transmission of traditional Chinese medical philosophy by establishing cognitive connections between Chinese and

Western medical concepts (Ye & Shen, 2025). Additionally, in research on the translation of Xiang Opera and the dissemination of dialect culture, the theory guided translators in flexibly handling localized expressions, effectively preserving the vivid characteristics of regional culture. These practices demonstrate that Relevance Translation Theory can provide a systematic framework for addressing cognitive and cultural gaps underlying linguistic differences, offering practical guidance for the international translation and dissemination of complex texts such as intangible cultural heritage, classical texts, and regional culture.

Suzhou Embroidery, originating in the Wuxian region of Suzhou, boasts a history of over two thousand years and is recognized as one of the Four Great Embroideries of China. It was among the first batch of representative items inscribed on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Renowned for its highly specialized and intricate technical system, Suzhou Embroidery serves as a significant medium for conveying traditional Chinese aesthetic sensibilities. Through meticulous arrangement of silk threads, subtle color gradations, and interwoven directional strokes, embroiderers create artistic effects on two-dimensional fabric that exhibit an interplay of light, shadow, and three-dimensional texture, realizing a visual transformation akin to using needles as brushes and threads as ink. Culturally, Suzhou Embroidery is deeply rooted in the literati aesthetic traditions of the Jiangnan region, integrating the artistic conception of traditional Chinese painting, the rhythmic elegance of calligraphy, and the philosophical interplay of void and substance. It vividly embodies the ingenuity and refined spirit of Eastern aesthetics, reflecting the unique creativity and cultural character of Chinese civilization.

Relevance Translation Theory offers crucial methodological advantages for the translation of Suzhou Embroidery into foreign languages. This theory emphasizes that the core of translation lies in conveying the cognitive context of the source text, a principle particularly vital for intangible cultural heritage items like Suzhou Embroidery, which intertwine craftsmanship, aesthetics, and philosophy. The challenge in translating Suzhou Embroidery extends beyond terminology equivalence to enabling international audiences to grasp its embedded artistic conception and cultural spirit. Guided by Relevance Translation Theory, translators can proactively establish cognitive connections between the source content and target readers. Through necessary cultural explanations, they strive to achieve an optimal balance between cultural fidelity and reader comprehension, thereby facilitating the deeper global dissemination of Suzhou Embroidery.

3. Analysis of Cognitive Barriers in Translating Suzhou Embroidery Texts

The cognitive barriers in translating Suzhou Embroidery are multi-layered and primarily manifest across three interconnected dimensions.

Initially, the specialization and complexity of its technical system form a fundamental barrier to comprehension. The craft system of Suzhou Embroidery itself presents an initial threshold for understanding. Suzhou Embroidery techniques

extend far beyond the general notion of embroidery; they constitute a precise system encompassing dozens of specialized stitching methods, rigorous procedures, and evaluative standards. From the extreme fineness of silk-thread splitting to the precise control of light and shadow effects through needlework arrangement, and further to unique techniques such as *shui lu* (water-path stitch, a technique for creating fluid, connected outlines) and *liu bai* (reserved blank space, an intentional use of negative space), these highly specialized practices and terminologies represent a cognitive void for audiences lacking relevant technical background, making it difficult for them to fully appreciate the craft's value. Furthermore, there is currently no authoritative translation established for the specialized vocabulary of Suzhou Embroidery. Different translators approach these terms from varying perspectives, leading to multiple translations for the same term and a lack of terminological consistency. This inconsistency can cause visual confusion among readers from different countries or regions, hindering the dissemination and communication of Suzhou Embroidery (Jia & Yu, 2022).

At the interpretative level, the culturally embedded connotations rooted in regional traditions amplify the difficulty of translation. The implicit knowledge systems carried by Suzhou Embroidery works introduce significant interpretive complexity. Each classic piece often weaves together historical allusions, literary imagery, folk beliefs, and aesthetic principles derived from literati painting and calligraphy. For instance, a single embroidery may simultaneously embody auspicious symbolism, philosophical concepts, and aesthetic preferences specific to a historical period. A deep understanding of Suzhou Embroidery, through both the interpretation of its works and the study of its cultural translation, can enable international audiences to fully appreciate its cultural resonance and help communicate the values and spiritual pursuits of traditional Chinese culture if translation fails to penetrate beyond visual symbols and uncover these layered cultural codes and semantic networks, rich cultural expressions risk being reduced to mere descriptions of visual form.

On the aesthetic dimension, the distinctively Eastern aesthetic sensibility inherent in Suzhou Embroidery poses a challenge to cross-cultural resonance. A fundamental divergence between Eastern and Western aesthetic paradigms creates a deeper barrier to appreciation. Suzhou Embroidery emphasizes the conveyance of lifelike vitality and profound artistic conception, prioritizing subjective experience and inner spiritual resonance. This stands in contrast to the long-standing Western artistic tradition, which often focuses on objective representation, formal analysis, and rational interpretation. Translators thus face the essential task of employing language to guide audiences accustomed to analytical aesthetics toward sensing and comprehending the nuanced subtlety and spiritual depth characteristic of Eastern aesthetics, a crucial step for facilitating deeper aesthetic empathy through translation.

4. Translation Strategies for Suzhou Embroidery

Guided by Relevance Translation Theory, the translation and cross-cultural presen-

tation of Suzhou Embroidery is not merely a matter of linguistic conversion, but rather a systematic project of cognitive construction. At its core, the strategy involves flexibly employing methods such as lexical clarification, information restructuring, sensory-oriented elaboration, and the use of paratexts. These methods are tailored to the specific characteristics of the content at the technical, cultural, and aesthetic levels, as well as the cognitive background of the target audience, with the aim of proactively establishing optimal relevance within the translated text.

4.1. Translation Strategies for the Technical System of Suzhou Embroidery

The technique of Suzhou Embroidery constitutes a sophisticated system centered on the seamless integration of stitching methods and embroidery approaches. Stitching methods refer to needle manipulation and line organization forms, while embroidery approaches encompass broader elements such as outlining, silk texture management, interplay between solid and void lines, and color blending, all working collectively to shape the texture and form of depicted subjects (Li, 1965). From the perspective of Relevance Translation Theory, the translation of Suzhou Embroidery techniques must prioritize the construction of cross-cultural cognitive associations as its central objective.

For unique concepts within this intricate system, a lexical clarification strategy should be adopted in translation. For terms corresponding to specific operational techniques, such as *santao zhen* and *shi zhen* (two distinctive stitching methods in Suzhou Embroidery), a core sense translation supplemented with functional annotation may be employed. For example, *shi zhen* can be rendered as graduated density stitch (for soft textures like animal fur). This approach builds upon Western readers' existing understanding of stitch while explaining its technical characteristic of transitioning from sparse to dense and its artistic function. Regarding comprehensive artistic principles encompassed by embroidery methods, such as *sili* (silk texture management), while Western embroidery lacks an entirely equivalent concept, it does involve considerations of stitch direction. In translation, this foundational concept can be borrowed initially, followed by explanatory elaboration to convey its uniqueness, for instance, translating it as silk grain (the directional flow of stitches that follows the natural growth patterns of subjects). This establishes an initial cognitive link while highlighting Suzhou Embroidery's aesthetic pursuit of emulating nature. For distinctive techniques based on visual layering, such as *shuilu* and *yaban*, translations like reserved blank space (a thin, unembroidered gap left to separate overlapping patterns) and overlapping stitches (without gap, to create seamless layering) can be used. Functional descriptions within parentheses help target readers comprehend the technical considerations and aesthetic intentions behind these methods.

The translation of Suzhou Embroidery techniques requires a flexible integration of functional explanation and cultural analogy, accurately conveying tech-

nical substance while guiding readers to understand the underlying systematic artistic philosophy. Research into the English translation of Suzhou Embroidery techniques essentially constitutes a practice of deep cognitive optimization within the framework of Relevance Translation Theory. It aims to reconstruct the craft's logical structure and aesthetic system effectively in the target language culture through lexical clarification strategy, thereby facilitating meaningful cross-cultural appreciation.

4.2. Strategies for Translating the Cultural Connotations of Suzhou Embroidery

Intangible Cultural Heritage embodies the historical memories, values, social practices, and cultural identities of specific communities, constituting a vital component of a nation's fine traditional culture (Lan, 2025). Suzhou Embroidery is not merely an exquisite handicraft, but a dynamic carrier of traditional Chinese culture and social ethics. Its motifs and themes are deeply rooted in the spiritual world of traditional society: patterns like lotuses and auspicious clouds convey a sense of quasi-religious devotion and transcendence, while designs such as the dragon and phoenix in harmony (*lóng fēng chéng xiáng*) and the qilin bringing a son (*qí lín sòng zǐ*) embody profound aspirations for power, reverence, and family continuity. These works transcend mere ornamentation, becoming silent texts that record collective memory, transmit values, and sustain social identity. Significant differences exist between Eastern and Western cultures in their symbolic systems and social functions, making the translation of Suzhou Embroidery far more than a simple linguistic transfer. Therefore, the core task lies in profound cultural interpretation, recreating, within the target audience's cognitive framework, the meanings and emotions these motifs rely upon. This is achieved through precise contextual supplementation, logical reconstruction, and the transformation of imagery. Only through such an approach can Suzhou Embroidery truly serve as an envoy for cultural dialogue, allowing the world to understand the millennia-spanning spiritual landscape woven into its very stitches.

From the perspective of Relevance Translation Theory, translation strategies such as information restructuring and sensory-oriented elaboration can significantly enhance the cross-cultural transmission of the cultural connotations embedded in Suzhou Embroidery. For instance, when translating patterns like "A Pomegranate Bursting into a Hundred Seeds" (*liú kāi bǎi zǐ*), which contain homophonic puns, a literal translation such as pomegranate opening to reveal hundreds of seeds only conveys the surface meaning. Due to cultural default, Western readers would likely miss the profound symbolic meaning behind the phrase. Therefore, when translating such content, it is necessary to restructure the information into a form such as a split pomegranate revealing numerous seeds (a visual pun symbolizing fertility and abundant offspring, as the Chinese word for "seed" sounds like that for "son"). This approach accurately presents the visual elements, through supplementary explanation of the homophonic logic, and clearly conveys

the auspicious meaning of abundant offspring and blessings. Similarly, when translating “Magpie on plum branch” (xǐ shàng méi shāo), a sensory-oriented elaboration can be constructed as “Magpie Alighting on Plum Blossoms: An Auspicious Scene of Joy Announced in Birdsong and Bloom.” This engages the reader’s auditory and visual imagination, allowing them to almost feel the joyful atmosphere of the scene as if present within it.

These strategies work in synergy, constituting a process in which the translator actively builds optimal cognitive relevance for the target readers. By clarifying cultural logic and recreating sensory experiences in ways that are understandable and perceptible to the reader, the translator vividly reconstructs within the target language context the blessing intentions and emotional depth carried by Suzhou Embroidery patterns. This effectively bridges cultural barriers and achieves a sublimation in translation, a shift from mere information transfer to genuine resonance of meaning.

4.3. Translation Strategies for the Aesthetic Connotations of Suzhou Embroidery

From the perspective of Relevance Translation Theory, paratexts play a central role in the English translation of Suzhou Embroidery by activating Western readers’ cognition and conveying the deeper aesthetic essence of the art form. They serve as a crucial pathway to achieving optimal cognitive relevance. Taking the representative work “White Peacock” (see **Figure 1**) as an example, visual paratexts, such as high-quality exhibition images, directly showcase the lush plumage rendered through various needlework techniques like santao (dispersed-layering) and xiechan (oblique winding). They also capture the vivid, sparkling gaze achieved with the xuanzhen (rotational needle) technique. These visuals require no complex verbal decoding; they immediately activate the reader’s existing knowledge of peacocks, enabling them, with minimal cognitive effort, to form a direct link to the key aesthetic qualities of Suzhou Embroidery: its realism and lifelike expressiveness.



Figure 1. White peacock (Embroidered by Ye Wenting, et al.).

In the process of translation, the translator must act as a bridge connecting the

original author and the reader, achieving contextual resonance to ensure the translation is accurately understood by the reader (Li & Gao, 2025). Cultural paratexts, on the other hand, guide readers to achieve cognitive enhancement by supplementing specific background information. For example, adding the work's status as a national gift: "Presented as a national gift at the 9th United Nations Conference on Trade and Development held in Chile" highlights its international influence and cultural value. Similarly, elucidating the aesthetic connotations of the work: "The imagery of the white peacock standing proudly towards the sun, with black bamboo behind it, symbolizes the aspiration for light and the elegant oriental character" reveals its deeper cultural significance.

These cultural paratexts guide readers to deeply associate the meticulous craftsmanship with the cultural value of the work, enabling them to understand Suzhou Embroidery's philosophy of creation that emphasizes material beauty and refined technique, as well as its aesthetic pursuit of shaping forms through threads and conveying spirit through forms. This facilitates a cognitive upgrade from perceiving it as a technical spectacle to experiencing it as an expression of Eastern aesthetics. This paratextual strategy of combining visual immediacy with cultural supplementation effectively reduces cross-cultural cognitive barriers, allowing Western readers to deeply resonate with the aesthetic essence of Suzhou Embroidery and ultimately achieve the optimal cognitive relevance effect pursued by Relevance Translation Theory.

5. Conclusion

This study adopts the perspective of Relevance Translation Theory to explore the cognitive optimization pathways and strategic choices in the external translation of Suzhou Embroidery, an intangible cultural heritage. The study confirms that Relevance Translation Theory can establish effective cognitive pathways for the external translation of Suzhou Embroidery, with its core mechanism being the active construction of cognitive relevance to reduce the cost of cross-cultural understanding. The findings not only provide practical methods for translating Suzhou Embroidery but also offer insights for the external translation of other intangible cultural heritage projects. This contributes to breaking down barriers in cross-cultural communication for intangible cultural heritage and promotes the international dissemination of China's outstanding traditional culture as well as mutual learning among civilizations.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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