



Exploration of Translation Skills for Ceramic Culture under Skopos Theory

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of deepening globalization, the international dissemination of traditional Chinese culture has gained broader space. As a characteristic element of China, porcelain enjoys a great reputation at home and abroad, and it is a cultural treasure of China and even the world [1]. Chinese porcelain is not only a highly skilled handicraft but also a cultural carrier embodying historical memory, craftsmanship wisdom, and aesthetic philosophy. It has also attracted the research interest of some foreign scholars. For example, scholars like Kerr and Rose have elaborately introduced China's ceramic technology in their works [2]. In addition, some foreign scholars have systematically and comprehensively presented the development process of Chinese ceramics from the Paleolithic Age to the Qing Dynasty [3]. Guided by the Skopos Theory of the German functional school, this paper analyzes the lexical and cultural characteristics of ceramic terminology and explores translation skills in ceramic translation, such as cultural equivalence, characteristic description, literal translation with annotation, transliteration with annotation, material association concretization, and precise color characterization. It aims to realize how translation purposes guide the transmission path of cultural connotations, form a learnable theoretical framework and practical guidelines, and achieve effective cultural transmission and protection.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Skopos Theory, Chinese Ceramic Culture, Translation Skills

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the deepened advancement of the "Belt and Road" Initi-

ative, China, as the core hub of the ancient Silk Road, is building bridges for mutual learning among civilizations through cultural exchanges. Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, porcelain has been exported overseas via the Silk Road, serving as a “cultural envoy” connecting the East and the West. Currently, while the demand for cultural exchanges along the “Belt and Road” continues to grow, issues such as information loss and inconsistent translation methods still persist in the translation of porcelain culture. Taking Skopos Theory as the theoretical framework, this paper systematically analyzes the current status of English translation of Chinese porcelain culture, and explores how to leverage target-oriented translation strategies to help Chinese porcelain culture become a bridge for civilizational dialogue under the “Belt and Road” Initiative through accurate translation, thereby providing practical pathways for enhancing the international discourse power of Chinese culture.

2. Skopos Theory and the Translation of Ceramic Culture

The Skopos theory, a translation theory proposed and developed by German translator Hans Vermeer in the 1970s, holds that translation is a cross-lingual and cross-cultural act with a strong purpose. That is, translators process the source text based on certain purposes and intentions. Breaking away from the original translation goal of “equivalence” as the standard, the Skopos theory focuses on actual communicative functions, bringing new research perspectives to translation researchers [4].

Traditional translation theories focus on linguistic equivalence, while Skopos Theory promotes the transformation of ceramic translation toward “cultural-functional equivalence”. For example, the translation of “五行瓷” should not merely be “Five Elements Porcelain”, just through a literal conversion but must also explain the philosophical system of “金木水火土” (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth) behind it in context (e.g., representing the ancient Chinese concept of natural elements). To achieve the purpose of “disseminating the philosophy of the Five Elements”, cultural background information is supplemented to avoid loss of meaning, rather than rigidly adhering to linguistic forms. Additionally, the fidelity principle requires translators to establish a connection between the original author’s intent and the needs of the target readers. Take the translation of ceramic-related poetry as an example: In Mei Yaochen’s line “陶冶新平肇汉唐”, “新平” and “汉唐” can be translated as Jingdezhen’s ceramic craft began in the Han and Tang dynasties for general readers. Because, “新平” is an ancient name for Jingdezhen and “汉唐” refers to Han and Tang dynasties. This approach remains faithful to historical facts while converting the ancient regional name into “Jingdezhen”, a term with higher international recognition, thus enabling effective transmission of cultural information.

Skopos Theory requires that the ultimate goal of ceramic translation is to “enable target readers to understand the historical context and cultural value of ceramic craftsmanship”. It advocates the adoption of flexible translation skills to cir-

cumvent communication barriers caused by cultural defaults while ensuring that core historical information is not lost, ultimately achieving effective transmission of ceramic culture in cross-cultural contexts.

3. Translation Skills for Culture-Loaded Words in Chinese Ceramic Culture from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

3.1. Cultural Equivalence with Characteristic Description

When cultural concepts in the source language (such as Chinese ceramic craftsmanship) have similar or corresponding concepts in the target language, it is advisable to borrow these concepts to enable the target audience to quickly understand through their existing knowledge, thus avoiding a “cultural vacancy”. However, when there is no direct equivalent for a source-language cultural concept in the target language, its core features (such as craftsmanship, artistic style, or technical effects) should be disassembled and described to ensure the translation is both accurate and distinctive.

For example, “刻花” and “划花” are two traditional techniques in Chinese ceramic decoration. Although their names are similar in Chinese, their defining essence and cultural connotations differ significantly. Without cultural background knowledge, one might easily translate them literally as “sculpting” and “scratching” based on the surface meanings of “刻” and “划”. However, “sculpting” only captures the action of “carving”, while “刻花” actually refers to creating concave patterns with a certain depth on semi-dry ceramic bodies using a knife, resulting in thick, three-dimensional lines that derive their aesthetic from varying depths. Similarly, “划花” involves using a pointed tool (such as a bamboo skewer or bone needle) to incise fine, shallow lines on the ceramic surface, requiring precision and fluidity. The term “scratching” carries negative connotations of random abrasion or damage, failing to convey the delicacy of the technique.

According to the primary principle of Skopos Theory, the purpose of translation in cultural dissemination materials is to lower comprehension barriers and foster cultural associations among international audiences. Therefore, “刻花” can be translated as “relief carving”, as “relief” in Western art refers to a decorative technique that creates three-dimensional effects through contrasting heights, aligning closely with the technical outcome of “刻花”. This translation preserves the technique’s characteristics while leveraging a culturally resonant term for quick understanding. “划花” can be rendered as “delicate line-engraving”, which captures the uniqueness of the original term (fine, shallow lines distinct from “刻花”) and clarifies technical details. The use of “delicate” emphasizes the artistic style, while “line-engraving” specifies the craftsmanship, achieving the dual goals of accurately conveying technical information and retaining cultural specificity.

3.2. Literal Translation/Transliteration with Annotation

The purpose of translation is to enable the target audience to understand the cultural connotations behind names (rather than merely convey literal information).

When encountering culture-loaded terms such as proper nouns or historical allusions, a two-layer structure of “transliteration/literal translation with annotation” (rather than a single word or phrase) should be adopted to transform the context-dependent implicit information in Chinese into explicit expressions in the translation. This approach turns the translated text into a “cultural carrier” rather than a mere linguistic conversion, achieving effective international dissemination of Chinese ceramic culture.

In China, there are many precious porcelains, such as “祭红瓷” and “郎红瓷”. While literal translations like “Sacrificial Red Porcelain” and “Lang’s Red Porcelain” can convey basic color and partial contextual or personal information, they would lose much of the cultural connotations. From the perspective of Skopos Theory, the core goal of translation is to achieve the functional purpose of cultural dissemination, thus requiring better comprehension for the target audience. For “祭红瓷”, it is first essential to understand the meaning of “祭红”, also commonly written as “霁红” or “积红”. This term originates from its use in solemn rituals such as sacrifices to heaven, earth, and ancestors, reflecting the ancient Chinese reverence for deities and ancestors. To preserve this layer of meaning, a literal translation with annotation can be adopted: Pre-sacrificial Rite Red Porcelain, supplemented with a note explaining its use in ancient Chinese sacrificial ceremonies to highlight its solemn and sacred cultural significance.

For “郎红瓷”, the translation “Lang Tingji’s Red Porcelain” uses the transliterated name of the person associated with it, clarifying the connection to a specific historical figure rather than merely the surname “Lang”. Historical records show that “郎红” (Langhong) is actually linked to an official position: during the Kangxi reign of the Qing Dynasty, it was created under the supervision of Lang Tingji, the imperial commissioner for porcelain production. Adding a note to introduce Lang Tingji as the porcelain supervisor in the Kangxi era highlights the historical background and personal connection. Such translations enable target-language readers to grasp the cultural narratives behind the names and understand the close links between Chinese ceramic culture and history, rituals, and other dimensions.

In the firing process of ceramics, many complex techniques are involved. “斗彩” can be seen as an example. If literally translated as “Fighting Colors”, would it be misunderstood as a struggle between colors? The character “斗” means “to combine” or “to integrate”, not “to fight”, embodying the craft philosophy of yin-yang harmony and complementary glaze colors. Additionally, “斗彩” involves first painting underglaze blue patterns with cobalt on the ceramic body, applying transparent glaze and firing at high temperature, then filling in partial patterns with mineral pigments over the glaze and firing again at low temperature to create color contrast. Therefore, a transliteration with annotation can be used here: Doucai (A decorative technique where underglaze blue patterns are combined with overglaze polychrome enamels, fired in two stages). This preserves the exclusivity of Chinese ceramic terminology and is suitable for terms that are both technically

specialized and culturally unique. Just as the Doucai technique itself is a “collaboration” between underglaze and overglaze, transliteration with annotation serves as a way of “combining” cultural preservation and cross-cultural understanding.

3.3. Material Association Concretization with Precise Color Characterization

Associate abstract color concepts with “real objects (such as plants and natural elements)” familiar to target-language readers, conveying cultural connotations through concrete imagery to reduce comprehension costs. And handling Chinese “ambiguous color terms” (e.g., “青” encompassing shades of blue and green), precisely defines color systems in translation to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings.

The translation of “粉青釉瓷” and “梅子青釉瓷” is an example. Its core feature of “粉青” in the former is a soft hue, not the color pink. Thus, “粉” should not be simply translated as “pink”. In English, “powder” specifically describes a soft, misty texture in color (e.g., “淡粉” = “powder pink”). Additionally, Western ceramic scholars use the term “powder blue” to describe specific glaze colors of Chinese porcelain, such as Longquan powder blue glaze from the Song Dynasty and Jingdezhen powder blue glaze. Therefore, “粉青釉瓷” is translated as “Powder Blue Glazed Porcelain”, ensuring terminological accuracy and audience familiarity.

“梅子青” in the latter refers to the translucent hue of newly ripened green plums, a shade between blue and green. So using this word “plum” stirs up tangible imagery of targeted readers. In addition, “green” here clarifies the color family, eliminating ambiguity around “青”. It is vital to distinguish whether “青” expresses green or blue according to the context or ceramic background knowledge [5]. The structure “plum green” (object + color) precisely describes the unique blue-green tone of this porcelain. Therefore, it is finally translated as “Plum Green Glazed Porcelain”. Using the criterion of perceptibility of cultural imagery, tangible natural imagery (such as “plum” for “青梅”) is employed to activate sensory associations in the target audience, avoiding comprehension barriers caused by cultural gaps with abstract cultural symbols. Secondly, the criterion of clarity of color semantics and balance of cross-cultural understanding are adopted. These eliminate the polysemy of the Chinese character “青” (which can refer to green, blue, black, etc.) by specifying color attributes through compound words. Meanwhile, the approach avoids excessive domestication or foreignization by preserving the word “plum”—a term carrying Chinese aesthetic imagery—to convey the oriental aesthetics embedded in “青梅”.

4. Conclusions

An analysis of the English translation of culture-loaded words in ceramic culture reveals that the dissemination of Chinese ceramic culture abroad must be based on accurate translation. The realization of translation accuracy not only relies on

language conversion skills but also depends on the in-depth decoding of the cultural connotations of ceramics. With the increasingly extensive international communication of Chinese culture, the advancement of the “Belt and Road” initiative, and the deepening of global cultural exchanges, the international community’s interest in the historical craftsmanship and aesthetic philosophy embodied in Chinese ceramics is growing day by day. Therefore, the accurate English translation of culture-loaded words has become a key link in promoting the mutual appreciation of civilizations.

Translation is essentially the cross-lingual transmission of cultural information, and the translation of ceramic terminology requires going beyond the surface of language to reach its cultural depth. Translators should not simply adopt a certain translation strategy or skill for the so-called unity and regularity by taking the type, process, shape, decoration, glaze, tools, etc. of a ceramic as the standard. Instead, they should adhere to principles and flexibly handle translations according to translation theories and actual situations [6]. This process requires translators to transcend the operational level of language tools, serving as interpreters and converters of cultural contexts. They must grasp the cognitive habits of the target audience to avoid meaning loss or misinterpretation caused by cultural defaults.

When multiple translation versions exist for ceramic terms, the first step is to check whether there is a corresponding vocabulary in English. If there is, adopting the corresponding word can allow target readers to directly associate with a specific concept, making it easier to understand the meaning. If there is no corresponding vocabulary, the skills discussed in this paper can be considered. Since Chinese ceramic culture involves a great deal of abstract background knowledge rooted in Chinese culture—and the goal is to disseminate this culture while ensuring clear reception by target readers—skills such as transliteration, literal translation with annotations, or material association concretization can be employed. These methods help target readers deeply appreciate the charm behind the terms.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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