



Translation Principles and Strategies for Bronze Wares: A Case Study of *Siyang Fangzun*

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Abstract

As an important heritage of ancient Chinese culture, the translation of bronze ware names involves not only the accuracy of linguistic conversion but also the transmission and understanding of cultural information. Taking the *Siyang Fangzun* as a single case study, this paper, based on an analysis of its historical background, formal features, technical features and cultural connotations, proposes four principles for translating bronze ware names: accuracy, cultural transmission, intelligibility, and aesthetic quality. Through a comparative analysis of ten English versions from different sources, the strengths and weaknesses of these translations in terms of cultural conveyance and linguistic expression are revealed. Furthermore, the paper distinguishes two levels of translation—the formal name of the artifact and the explanatory museum text—and advocates the integrated use of cultural equivalence, functional equivalence and integration of foreignization and domestication strategies. The paper shows that a stratified translation approach helps improve the international communication of bronze ware names and provides a methodological reference for the translation of similar cultural heritage items.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Bronze Ware, *Siyang Fangzun*, Translation Principles, Translation Strategies

1. Introduction

Chinese bronze ware boasts a long history, distinguished by its exquisite crafts-

manship, solemn forms, and unique decorative patterns, embodying thousands of years of Chinese wisdom and civilization. As an integral part of China's ancient cultural heritage, bronze ware is not only a treasure of material culture but also a symbol of spiritual culture. Among them, *Siyang Fangzun* is the largest square zun of its period discovered to date. Recognized as a masterpiece of bronze art, it ranks among China's ten most treasured national relics.

Against the backdrop of increasingly frequent cultural exchanges, accurate translation of cultural heritage artifacts is of critical importance. Translation serves as a bridge for cross-cultural communication, not merely a simple linguistic transformation but a process of cultural transformation that reflects social characteristics and conveys profound cultural connotations [1]. Inadequate translation may distort cultural information and cause misunderstandings.

This paper attempts to answer the following research questions. Under the four principles of accuracy, cultural transmission, intelligibility, and aesthetic quality, which of the existing English translations of *Siyang Fangzun* is better? And how should translation strategies be combined to optimize the English name? It should be noted that this paper takes *Siyang Fangzun* as a single case for in-depth analysis, aiming to construct an assessment and decision-making framework for translating the name of an individual bronze vessel, rather than proposing universally applicable norms for all bronze ware names.

2. Characteristics and Cultural Connotations of *Siyang Fangzun*

2.1. Historical Background

Excavated in Ningxiang, Hunan Province, and dating to the late Shang Dynasty, this vessel is the largest square zun among existing bronze wares of the Shang Dynasty in China. And it is hailed as a perfect epitome of bronze craftsmanship at its finest [2]. Its historical importance suggests that archaeological designation and cultural identity should be prioritized in translation.

2.2. Formal Features

The vessel is square-shaped, with a ram sculpted at each corner. The rams have raised heads, coiled horns, and robust bodies seamlessly integrated with the vessel body. The surface features cloud-and-thunder patterns and taotie patterns [3]. Translation must clearly reflect both the "square zun" form and the "four rams" decorative element.

2.3. Technical Features

Cast using two-step separate casting techniques, the ram's horns and dragon heads were cast separately, then placed into the respective molds, and finally the whole vessel was cast in a single pour. The vessel was cast using mould casting, showcasing exceptional Shang craftsmanship [2]. Technical terms should balance professional accuracy with comprehensibility.

2.4. Cultural Connotations

In ancient Chinese culture, the ram symbolizes good fortune and auspiciousness. In the Shang dynasty, rams were among the main sacrificial animals. The combination of rams and zun into a bronze ritual vessel reflects the ancient people's prayer for a better life. These cultural connotations require that translation should not stay only at the level of form but should convey symbolic meanings as much as possible [3].

3. Translation Principles for *Siyang Fangzun*

The translation of bronze ware names is not a simple linguistic conversion but a complex process involving archaeological designation, transmission of cultural connotations, audience acceptance, and other dimensions. Based on the artifact characteristics and cultural connotations of *Siyang Fangzun*, this paper proposes the following four translation principles.

3.1. Accuracy

Accuracy is a fundamental requirement in translation and takes priority in rendering bronze ware names. Such names often contain rich historical and cultural information, which must be conveyed faithfully to avoid ambiguity or misunderstanding. Additionally, the original information carried by the name should be preserved as much as possible, as it provides direct or indirect descriptions of the artifact [4].

Both "four rams" and "square zun" carry specific meanings. The former refers to the four rams adorning the vessel, while the latter denotes a square-shaped bronze wine vessel. These two elements should be accurately reflected in the translation.

3.2. Cultural Transmission

As treasures of ancient cultural heritage, the names of bronze ware often carry profound cultural significance. Translation should not be limited to formal description; it should endeavor to convey the cultural meanings embedded in the artifact, enabling international audiences to appreciate its historical depth and cultural allure. Omitting key cultural information risks obscuring deeper layers of meaning [5].

About *Siyang Fangzun*, the ram carries important symbolic meanings in Chinese culture, including auspiciousness and benevolence. Its central role in the vessel's decoration reflects ancient hopes for a favorable life. These cultural dimensions should not be overlooked in translation. Translators may add annotations or explanatory text to facilitate the dual function of information transfer and cultural dissemination.

3.3. Intelligibility

Bronze ware names often embed specific historical and cultural contexts that may

be unfamiliar to international readers. Museum text translations should strive for conciseness, fluency, directness, and clarity, minimizing comprehension difficulties for the target audience. On this basis, translators should prioritize simple and clear vocabulary and expressions that facilitate quick understanding, provided accuracy is maintained [6].

3.4. Aesthetic Quality

As ancient works of art, bronze wares often have names with intrinsic aesthetic value. Translation should, while ensuring accuracy, preserve aesthetic qualities to the extent possible, resulting in a version that is both precise and aesthetically pleasing, in keeping with the conventions of the target language. Within the framework of accurate information transfer, attention to linguistic elegance can enhance target audience receptivity.

4. Analysis and Comparison of Existing Translations of *Siyang Fangzun*

4.1. Overview of Existing Translations and Source Attribution

Due to the absence of official standards for translating cultural relic names in China, many artifacts have multiple variant translations, and *Siyang Fangzun* is no exception [7]. To fully understand the current state of English translations for *Siyang Fangzun*, this paper collected ten representative translations from museum, authoritative media, and public websites, and annotates their sources to ensure transparency (See **Table 1**).

Table 1. English versions of *Siyang Fangzun* from different sources.

NO.	Translation Version	Source
1	Bronze Zun (wine vessel) with Four Rams	National Museum of China
2	Bronze Square Zun Decorated with Four Rams	Encyclopedia of China (3rd ed., online)
3	Shang Siyang Bronze Square Zun	Baidu Baike
4	<i>Siyang Fangzun</i>	China Science and Technology Network
5	Four Sheep Square Zun	China Daily
6	The Four-Ram Square Zun	SpringerLink
7	Square Vessel with Four Rams	CCTV (China Central Television)
8	Four-Goat Square Zun	Shanghai Government Services Website
9	The Four-Goat Square Bronze Zun	China Travel Overseas Promotion Website
10	The Square Zun with Four Goats	China Online Museum

Source notes: Nos. 1, 2, and 7 come from national-level authoritative institutions, with the highest authority; No. 6 comes from an academic publisher, representing scholarly naming conventions; Nos. 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10 come from public websites or media—although somewhat less authoritative, they reflect translation tendencies in different contexts and have comparative value; No. 3 comes from Baidu Baike, representing common expressions on a popular knowledge platform.

4.2. Operational Definitions of Evaluation Criteria

Accuracy: Whether the three core elements—“vessel type” “quantity” and “decorative subject”—are conveyed simultaneously. Three elements present = high; one missing = medium; two or more missing = low.

Cultural Transmission: Whether the auspicious or sacrificial meaning of sheep/goat/ram in Chinese culture is directly or indirectly reflected. If reflected through vocabulary or additional notes = high; if only the animal name is literally translated = medium; if the animal image is completely lost = low. (Since a name alone usually cannot convey deep cultural meanings, most versions are rated medium and rely on notes.)

Intelligibility: Whether the target reader can quickly understand the basic features of the artifact. Word order conforming to English habits, high-frequency and unambiguous words = high; slightly more complex but still comprehensible = medium; inverted or confusing modifiers = low.

Aesthetic Quality: Whether the translation is concise, smooth, and conforms to English naming aesthetics. Natural, fluent and no redundancy = high; acceptable but somewhat stiff = medium; long and awkward = low.

4.3. Multi-Dimensional Comparison and Analysis

Based on the above criteria, each of the ten versions is evaluated as shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Multi-dimensional comparison of English versions of *Siyang Fangzun*.

NO.	Translation Version	Accuracy	Cultural Transmission	Intelligibility	Aesthetic Quality	Main Characteristics
1	Bronze Zun (wine vessel) with Four Rams	High	Medium	High	High	Official NMC translation; parentheses add function; “Ram” conforms to archaeological usage.
2	Bronze Square Zun Decorated with Four Rams	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Complete information, but “Decorated with” slightly wordy.
3	Shang Siyang Bronze Square Zun	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	Dynasty + transliteration + material + vessel type; word order not English-like; information overload.
4	<i>Siyang Fangzun</i>	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Retains original sound but no semantic information; needs notes to be understood. Suitable for pinyin labeling.
5	Four Sheep Square Zun	High	Medium	High	Medium	“Sheep” is unprofessional and may cause misunderstanding; not recommended.
6	The Four-Ram Square Zun	High	Medium	High	High	Concise; “Ram” conforms to archaeological usage.
7	Square Vessel with Four Rams	Medium	Medium	High	High	“Vessel” instead of “Zun” reduces archaeological accuracy but is easier to understand.

Continued

8	Four-Goat Square Zun	High	Medium	High	Medium	Concise but noun stacking slightly awkward; uses “Goat” instead of “Ram”.
9	The Four-Goat Square Bronze Zun	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Adding “Bronze” makes it more specific but longer.
10	The Square Zun with Four Goats	High	Medium	High	High	Natural structure, retains “Zun”, uses “Goats”. Good aesthetic quality.

Additional notes: On “ram” vs. “goat”: The bronze scholarship community prefers “ram” because the horns of the animal on the vessel are coiled, matching the features of a ram, whereas “goat” usually refers to a different horn shape. Thus, Nos. 1, 2, 6, and 7 are slightly better in terminological accuracy than Nos. 8, 9, and 10, but this difference has limited impact on popular communication. On “sheep” (No. 5): Using “sheep” is unprofessional and likely to cause misunderstanding; it is not recommended. First, authoritative institutions such as the National Museum of China and the Encyclopedia of China use “Ram” as the standard translation. Second, the British Museum uses “Bronze Double-Ram Zun” for similar bronzes. Third, the horns of the Square Zun with Four Rams are thick and coiled, so “sheep” cannot convey this formal feature. Moreover, “sheep” in English often carries metaphorical meanings (e.g., “follow like sheep”), which may lead to unintended associations [8]. On transliteration (Nos. 3 and 4): Pure transliteration *Siyang Fangzun* (No. 4) and mixed form “Shang Siyang Bronze Square Zun” (No. 3) cannot fully convey semantic information but are often used in domestic museums as pinyin labels. Their advantage is preserving the original sound and cultural uniqueness; their disadvantage is being unfriendly to international audiences. This paper considers them unsuitable as independent main translations. On No. 1 (NMC translation): “Bronze Zun (wine vessel) with Four Rams” is an authoritative official translation that achieves a good balance between accuracy and intelligibility, especially by adding “wine vessel” in parentheses to explain the function of zun. It is highly recommended.

4.4. Comprehensive Evaluation and Recommendation

Based on the four dimensions, source authority, scholarly standardization, and international communication effectiveness, this paper draws the following conclusions.

At the academic and formal name level: “The Four-Ram Square Zun” (No. 6) performs best. This translation comes from Springer academic publications, is concise and elegant, uses “Ram” in accordance with archaeological terminology for ram-shaped decoration, and scores high in accuracy, intelligibility, and aesthetic quality. It is suitable for academic papers, museum catalogues, and other formal contexts.

At the popular communication and exhibit label level: The National Museum of China’s official translation “Bronze Zun (wine vessel) with Four Rams” (No. 1) also performs excellently. It achieves a very good balance between accuracy and accessibility, explaining the function of zun via parentheses, and is suitable for museum labels, guide brochures, and similar contexts.

At the international publicity and general communication level: “The Square Zun with Four Goats” (No. 10), although less precise in terminology than “ram”, has a natural structure and smooth phrasing, enjoys high acceptability in overseas popular communication, and is suitable for tourism promotion and mass media.

At the same time, some translations are not recommended. Pure transliteration *Siyang Fangzun* (No. 4) and the confused word order of “Shang Siyang Bronze Square Zun” (No. 3) cannot effectively convey semantic information and do not conform to English expression habits, so they should not be used as independent

main translations. “Four Sheep Square Zun” (No. 5) should be avoided due to unprofessional terminology and potential negative cultural associations.

A special note on cultural transmission: no single artifact name translation can fully convey the deep cultural meaning of “sheep symbolizing good fortune”. This is not a flaw of the translations themselves but a limitation of the name as a genre; such meanings must be supplemented in exhibit labels, guide texts, or notes. Therefore, it is reasonable that all versions are rated “medium” or “low” on the cultural transmission dimension, and this should not be used as a reason to reject any version. Therefore, this paper distinguishes between the formal name of the artifact and the explanatory museum text. For the formal name, “The Four-Ram Square Zun” is recommended; for exhibit labels, the NMC translation with an additional note about the auspicious meaning of the ram can be used.

5. Translation Strategies for *Siyang Fangzun*

Based on the four translation principles established in Chapter 3 and the comparative analysis of existing translations in Chapter 4, this chapter further discusses translation strategies for *Siyang Fangzun*. It should be noted that artifact translation in practice can be divided into two levels: translation of the formal name of the artifact and translation of explanatory museum texts. The former requires conciseness, standardization, and reusability and the latter allows appropriate supplementary explanation to convey cultural connotations. The following sections discuss the application of cultural equivalence, functional equivalence, and integration of foreignization and domestication strategies at these two levels.

5.1. Cultural Equivalence

The core of the cultural equivalence strategy is to find expressions in the target language that correspond to the cultural connotations of the source language, or to convey cultural information through supplementary explanations.

At the level of the artifact’s formal name: Because the name itself must be concise, cultural annotations should not be directly embedded. Therefore, the preferred translations derived from Chapter 4 are recommended: “The Four-Ram Square Zun” or “Bronze Zun (wine vessel) with Four Rams.” “Ram” does not carry auspicious connotations in English, but this is acceptable because the cultural connotations of the artifact need not be fully compressed into the name. As noted in Chapter 4, all translations score only “medium” on cultural transmission when relying on the name alone; this is not a failure of translation but a limitation of the name genre.

At the level of explanatory museum text: The cultural equivalence strategy can be fully applied. For example, in a label or guide text, a note can be added after the first mention of the name: “The Four-Ram Square Zun (rams symbolize good fortune and happiness in traditional Chinese culture).”

Additionally, if seeking a corresponding image in Western culture for explanatory texts, one may cautiously mention that “lamb” symbolizes purity and sacrifice

in Christian culture [9]. However, simple image substitution should be avoided to prevent cultural dislocation or mismatch of emotional coloring [10].

5.2. Functional Equivalence

The functional equivalence strategy focuses on whether the translation achieves the same communicative function in the target context as the source text. For *Si-yang Fangzun*, its name in the Chinese context has the dual function of “archaeological designation + cultural symbol,” whereas in the English context priority should be given to “accurate reference + intelligibility.”

At the level of the artifact’s formal name: Functional equivalence means the translation should enable international scholars or visitors to accurately identify the artifact. Therefore, it is necessary to retain the archaeological designation “Zun” (rather than generalizing it as “vessel” or “container”). The highly rated translation in Chapter 4 (e.g., No. 1, the NMC translation “Bronze Zun (wine vessel) with Four Rams”) achieves a balance between academic accuracy and popular intelligibility by supplementing “wine vessel” in parentheses to explain the function of zun.

At the level of explanatory museum text: The functional equivalence strategy requires the translator to flexibly handle technical terms according to the target audience’s knowledge level. For example, “饕餮纹”, a simple transliteration “Taotie pattern” may be supplemented as “Taotie pattern, a decorative design featuring a mythical animal face, commonly found on Shang bronze vessels.” Such explanatory translations are not suitable for the artifact name itself but are very appropriate for descriptive texts in labels or guide brochures.

5.3. Integration of Foreignization and Domestication

Foreignization preserves source-cultural features, while domestication adapts the translation to target-language habits. The two are not opposed but can be flexibly combined according to the translation level.

At the level of the artifact’s formal name: A primarily foreignizing strategy with domestication as a supplement is adopted. “Zun” is retained rather than translated as “wine vessel” because “Zun” has become a common term in international bronze studies. At the same time, the overall word order follows English habits: “The Four-Ram Square Zun,” avoiding a literal Chinese word order.

At the level of explanatory museum text: Core cultural concepts can be presented in foreignized form (e.g., retaining the pinyin or original terms “Taotie,” “Zun”) while using domesticated sentence structures and analogies to aid understanding. For example: “The Four-Ram Square Zun was used as a ritual wine vessel in the Shang dynasty, holding a status similar to that of precious ceremonial vessels in Western religious traditions.”

This Integration of foreignized concepts and domesticated explanation not only accurately conveys the original information but also reduces comprehension difficulty through “explicitation” for the reader, truly achieving the function of cross-

cultural communication [11].

6. Conclusions

Siyang Fangzun, as an outstanding representative of ancient Chinese bronze art, holds profound significance for cultural heritage and international exchange. Based on an analysis of its artifact characteristics and cultural connotations, this paper established four translation principles: accuracy, cultural transmission, intelligibility, and aesthetic quality. Through a multi-dimensional comparative analysis of ten English translations from real sources, it was found that authoritative institutions generally use “Ram” rather than “Goat” or “Sheep,” and that “The Four-Ram Square Zun” or “Bronze Zun (wine vessel) with Four Rams” perform excellently in accuracy, intelligibility, and aesthetic quality. On this basis, the paper distinguished between two levels of translation—the formal artifact name and explanatory museum text—and discussed the application of cultural equivalence, functional equivalence, and a combined foreignization/domestication approach.

This paper has three limitations: First, it is based solely on the single case of *Siyang Fangzun*, so the conclusions need to be verified for other bronzes in light of their specific characteristics. Second, the evaluation of translations is based on theoretical analysis and lacks empirical data from overseas audiences. Third, the artifact name itself cannot carry deep cultural connotations such as “ram symbolizing good fortune”. And cultural transmission still relies on annotations and other compensatory means. Future research could use questionnaires, intelligibility tests, and other methods to examine the actual communication effects of different translations.

Despite these limitations, the framework adopted in this paper—“principle definition + multi-version comparison + stratified strategy application”—has strong transferability. When translating the names of other bronze artifacts, one can follow this model: extract key parameters such as shape, decoration, and cultural symbolism, evaluate existing translations based on the four principles, and distinguish between the artifact name and explanatory text levels, flexibly combining transliteration, literal translation, annotation, and other strategies. This framework can also provide methodological reference for translating the names of other cultural heritage items, such as jades and porcelains.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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