

The Characteristics, Difficulties, and Countermeasures of Translating Tang Dynasty Cultural Relics into English

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Abstract: This article examines the characteristics, difficulties, and solutions for translating Tang Dynasty cultural relics into English. It highlights the unique translation process, the importance of communicative principles, the need for understanding cultural backgrounds, and challenges from complex craftsmanship and cultural differences. Suggestions for improving translation quality include collective efforts, multi-channel information retrieval, and enhancing translators' skills.

Keywords: Tang Dynasty Cultural Relics; Translation Difficulties; Communicative Translation

1. Characteristics of Translating Tang Dynasty Cultural Relics into English

Translating Tang Dynasty cultural relics into English involves translators, relics, and the audience. Characteristics vary due to the uniqueness of the relics. This article analyzes these characteristics from both macro and micro perspectives.

1.1 Essentially a form of international publicity translation

Museum culture is a microcosm of national culture, with relics carrying rich historical and cultural connotations. In globalization, cultural exchange enhances soft power. Translating relics into English is vital for cultural communication and building identity.

1.1.1 Mainly follows the principle of communicative translation

Translation should be close to the audience—primarily English speakers—and open in content. Translators adjust according to audience understanding. Adjustments are divided into two aspects: linguistically, translators convert paratactic, dynamic, end-weighted Chinese into hypotactic, static, front-weighted English to improve comprehension. For example, Chinese places background information at the end, while English requires it at the beginning to help foreigners adapt quickly and reduce comprehension difficulty. Culturally, translating relics tests the translator's grasp of cultural backgrounds, requiring supplementation and explanation of unfamiliar background knowledge, such as "Laozi" or "Guanzhong area," to provide a specific concept for the audience.

1.1.2 Distinct cultural representation

The translation of Tang Dynasty relics reflects cultural exchange. The Tang Dynasty, the most prosperous period of Chinese feudal society, is frequently depicted with its economic prosperity, political clarity, cultural richness, religious and ethnic integration, and the openness and exchange of the Silk Road.



Figure 1

Example 1: The Tri-colored San Hua Horse of the Tang Dynasty The Tri-colored San Hua Horse of the Tang Dynasty has a vivid appearance, with a small head, round hips, and long legs. It is a precious breed from the Western Regions called the Chiba horse. The horse's mane is trimmed into three lines of crenelated short hair, called "San Hua Horse." This decoration was popular in the Tang Dynasty's palace and among the aristocracy, symbolizing a good horse and social rank. The tradition may have originated from Iran, Central Asia, and Sogdian patterns. The Tang aristocracy was influenced by the Turks, whose horses were the main source for the Tang Dynasty. Only high-ranking officials could ride the San Hua Horse, the finest horse of its time. The translator uses extensive text to reflect the ceremonial characteristics and social customs of the Tang Dynasty, particularly interactions between the Tang Dynasty and the Turks. This highlights the open cultural characteristics of the Tang Dynasty, showcasing its distinctive culture, enhancing cultural confidence, building broad cultural identity, and spreading Tang culture and traditional Chinese culture.

1.2 Emphasize informativeness, supplemented by vivid imagery

To help foreign readers better understand Chinese culture, the translator adjusts the focus, emphasizing key information such as time, culture, and connotations, and supplementing with vivid imagery. Since the appearance of cultural relics is directly visible to visitors, the English translation often uses a reduction method, omitting detailed descriptions and evaluations. The more exquisite the relic, the richer the cultural information it contains, making translation more challenging. Tang cultural relics represent the pinnacle of traditional Chinese craftsmanship and decorative patterns, making the reduction method more typical.



Figure 2

Example 2: The Gold Bowl with Mandarin Ducks and Lotus Petals The gold bowl with mandarin ducks and lotus petals is hammered into shape with intricate carvings inside and out. The upper section features lotus petals with carvings of deer, rabbits, mandarin ducks, and wild geese, vividly lifelike. Between the petals are flying birds with wings spread. The lower section has scrolling grass and cloud patterns. At the bottom, a mandarin duck turns its head amidst scrolling grass patterns. The overall design is majestic and luxurious, making it the largest gold utensil from the Tang Dynasty discovered so far. The translator simplifies descriptive adjectives into straightforward English expressions, making key points prominent and easier to understand. Concise language helps the audience grasp the new culture.

1.3 Combination of intralingual and interlingual translation

Translating cultural relics into English involves converting information between Chinese and English and within Chinese. Differences between Classical and Modern Chinese require understanding Classical Chinese before translating into English. Professional terms need to be understood before finding corresponding English expressions. Thus, translating relics combines intralingual and interlingual translation.

2. Difficulties in Translating Tang Dynasty Cultural Relics

2.1 High requirements for the translator's comprehensive skills

Translation requires language proficiency and broad knowledge, making the translator a generalist. Tang cultural relics demand even higher skills due to their diversity and quantity, reflecting the Tang Dynasty's openness and prosperity. Translators need to understand politics, economy, religion, ethnicity, and social customs, performing intralingual understanding before interlingual translation. The translator's proficiency significantly affects quality. Native Chinese translators may overlook the importance of background knowledge, leading to "taken-for-granted" translation. For example, figures like Emperor Gaozong of Tang and Empress Wu Zetian, if not annotated, can be challenging for English users. Avoiding "taken-for-granted" translation is crucial.

2.2 The difficulty of content translation under the special background of Tang Dynasty

2.2.1 Complex patterns and intricate craftsmanship of Tang cultural relics

Tang handicrafts involved textiles, ceramics, papermaking, ironware, lacquerware, glass, etc., with numerous types. The Silk Road's

prosperity led to continuous innovation, resulting in intricate patterns and designs, creating many technical terms in translations. The loss of many crafts today increases the difficulty of understanding and translating these terms. The more exquisite the relic, the more challenging its translation.



Figure 3

Example 3: The Gold and Silver Mirror with Four Phoenixes Holding Ribbons The back of this mirror features four phoenixes holding ribbons, elegantly spreading their wings. The mirror button and periphery are adorned with gold filigree knots against a black lacquered base. This special copper mirror technique involves hammering gold and silver into thin sheets, cutting patterns, and attaching them to the lacquered back. After multiple rounds of polishing, the gold and silver sheets bond perfectly with the copper mirror. Decorations like phoenix patterns, floral patterns, gold filigree knots, and the mirror button have rich cultural meanings. Translators must understand that the phoenix is an auspicious bird in Eastern culture, ribbons symbolize longevity, and flowers represent vitality. The complex craftsmanship requires detailed explanation to convey traditional Chinese culture effectively, making the translation challenging.

2.2.2 The openness and inclusiveness of the Tang Dynasty, with rich cultural connotations, make translation difficult

The political and economic prosperity of the Tang Dynasty and the Silk Road facilitated exchanges between the interior and border regions. Tang culture is grand, majestic, and diverse, making it uniquely charming but difficult to translate. "Fusion" is a key feature of the Tang Dynasty, including ethnic, religious, and Sino-foreign cultural integration, adding to the complexity of translation.



Figure 4

Example 4: The Auspicious Animal and Grape Mirror The Auspicious Animal and Grape Mirror is notable among Tang Dynasty copper mirrors. Its high-relief decorations consist of auspicious animals and grape vines, symbolizing "fertility and prosperity." The grapes were introduced to Chang'an via the Silk Road, blending Chinese and Western cultures. Translation should focus on the cultural exchange imagery and connotations.

2.3 Cultural Differences Create Translation Gaps—Word Choice Challenges

Significant cultural differences between Chinese and English make it difficult to find corresponding expressions for Tang culture in English, leading to imagery gaps. Many artifact names, folktales, idioms, and historical references are hard to translate, requiring thorough expla-

nations of their cultural meanings, which is challenging.

2.4 Difficulty in Translating Tang Poetry

Tang poetry, with its balanced structure and profound meaning, poses a significant challenge. Translators must retain the main content without adhering strictly to form. For example, translating "屈膝衔杯赴节, 倾心献寿无疆" as "the horse bent its knees to go to the gala of celebration with a horn cup in mouth, I wish the emperor long life" demonstrates the translator's effort to convey the poem's meaning.

3. Countermeasures

3.1 Addressing Current Issues through Collective Effort

Enhance the importance of cultural relic translation and enrich reference materials.

3.2 Multi-channel Information Retrieval

Utilize digital networks for comprehensive information searches, ensuring authority and credibility.

3.3 Maintain High-Quality International Publicity, Adhering to Communicative Principles

Understand the Tang Dynasty background deeply to build broad cultural identity.

3.4 Improve Translator's Professional Skills

Acquire extensive knowledge of cultural relics, adopt a "generalist" mindset, think from the audience's perspective, and avoid rigid translations.

3.5 Flexible Use of Translation Techniques and Expression Methods

Consider Chinese and English differences, flexibly express the cultural connotations of relics, and use analogy to enhance understanding.

4. Conclusion

Translating Tang Dynasty cultural relics into English is challenging due to cultural and linguistic differences. To overcome these difficulties, translators should improve their skills, use comprehensive information sources, and adopt flexible translation techniques to accurately convey cultural connotations.

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