Footnote: a compensating approach for translating and introducing Taoist medical jargon

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Keywords: Taoist medicine; culture; footnote; translation

Taoist medicine in recent years aroused the interest of Western readers groping for alternative ways to wellbeing and longevity. Encyclopedia of China defines Taoist medicine as such, “in pursuit of long life and immortality, Taoism not only absorbed the achievement of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), but also attained a great deal of medical knowledge and technology through its long history of cultivation. Medicine taking, internal elixir method, external elixir method, Dao-yin, as well as immortality pill, Taoist magic figures and spell used by witch doctors and so forth are closely associated with TCM. To date, its medicine and pharmacology have become an integral part of TCM.”

Owing to such close relationship, many Taoist medical jargon words are also characterized by the use of euphemism, polysemy, metaphor and other figure of speech. Some involve a great deal of cultural background knowledge. Increasing efforts are being made in the transference of these implicit expressions in order to secure a smooth cultural exchange. Footnote is recognized as a plausible means of compensation for translating and introducing jargon rich in connotation and absent in cultural equivalents. Placed at the bottom of a page, footnotes can provide additional information distracting to the reader if included in the main text.

1 Jargon polysemous in meaning

Though many Taoist medical jargon words have multiple and related meanings, only one or two of which is emphasized in a particular context. The others either stay latent or form part of the background knowledge. The intrinsic link among these meanings can hardly be covered by a brief paraphrase. In such a case, a two-step approach can be taken to secure an effective communication; 1) making a semantic analysis to determine the predominant meaning for translation; and 2) clarifying the notion with footnotes.

子午周天 provides such an example. Stemming from Taoist medicine, 子午周天 is a practicing form to move the internal-qì in a circular motion along the conception and governor vessels. The
word "circulation", therefore, could be adopted to communicate the message of 周天. 子午 (Zi-wu), however, is a term with many layers of meaning. It is considered "center of the cosmos, signifying the moon and the sun in heaven, the kidney and the heart of a man, from 11 pm to 1 am and 11 am to 1 pm during a day, Kan (坎) and Li (离) from the Eight Diagrams, and the north and the south in terms of direction[2]"). It can be seen that 子午 denotes five seemingly independent aspects, which in the conception of Taoist medicine, are related to each other.

As 子午周天 basically involves moving the internal-qi along the conception and governor vessels at the front and back of the body. The layer of meaning regarding the route of qi circulation is predominant over the others. The front and the back are defined by ancient Chinese practitioners as the south and north of the body. 子午周天 may whereupon be translated as "Zi-wu Circulation (roughly 'Meridional Circulation')" for smooth communication. A footnote can then be added to elaborate on its associations with the midnight and the noon, the kidney and the heart, the moon and the sun, etc.

2 Jargon characterized by euphemism

Ancient Chinese physicians are very idiosyncratic about their word choice in discussing organs related to sex or excretion. Euphemisms are sometimes applied in such cases to avoid embarrassing the reader. The words 赤龙 and 白虎 in 斩赤龙 (literally, to kill the red dragon; semantically, to withhold menstruation) and 斫白虎 (literally, to beat the white tiger; semantically, to restrain ejaculation), for instance, are euphemisms for menstruation and ejaculation respectively. Another case is the term 提肛缩肾 (literally, to lift the anus and contract the kidney; semantically, to contract the anus and testicular). The "kidney", in Chinese medical sense, has urethra, anus, ears and hair as its external parts. These parts are believed not only associated with the kidney somehow, but reflect its condition as well. Thus, when the testicular and anus are contracted rhythmically, the function of kidney can also be improved.

In either of the two cases, if the original text is rendered according to its connotative sense only, the implicative nature of the source text fails to be presented. But if both the literal and connotative senses are presented, the explanatory notes might be too digressive for the main text. Under such conditions, one may provide the additional information at the bottom of a page as footnote.

3 Jargon with metaphoric meanings

It is not uncommon to see a word that ordinarly designates one thing is used in Taoist medical text to designate another. 水 (water) and 火 (fire) in 水火既济 (literally, coordinated state of water and fire) is a case in point. So far as the relation between water and fire is concerned, there are three situations: 1) the fire is put out by the water; 2) a small amount of water contributes to the burning and is eventually dried out by the fire; 3) the proportion of water and fire is just right for the fire to warm the water and for the water to keep the fire from releasing too much heat. These ideas are reflected in the well-known five-element (五行) theory, one of the fundamentals in TCM, but is understood with deep wisdom. When a person’s kidney (pertaining to water) and heart (pertaining to fire) are out of balance, it manifests in either over-restriction of the water on the fire as is in the first situation or counter-restriction of the fire on the water as is in the second situation. The coordinated state of water and fire is the condition of water and fire being in proper proportion and communicating mutually as is in the third and desired situation. Therefore, at least two points need to be offered to clarify the metaphoric meaning. Water and fire are two of the five-elements, standing for the kidney and the heart respectively; and given the condition that the heart locates higher than the kidney and that fire flames upward and water flows downward, the coordinated state cannot be obtained without mutual communication between them. Curious reader can then refer to the footnote for detailed information about the jargon.

4 Jargon associated with cultural background knowledge

The connotative and associative meanings obvious to reader of the source language community may seem alien and irrelevant to that of the target language. A case is provided by 蹈鶴桥. If it is translated as to form Que Qiao, literally to form a magpie bridge, semantically to press tongue against the palate, the cultural background knowledge with regard to Magpie Bridge and its relation to tongue against palate are unclear.
Well known to the source culture, the magpie bridge is traditionally understood as a location for the annual tryst between the weaving fairy and the cowherd. Probing deeper, one may take in the important notion that the legendary couple are personification of yin and yang and that the magpie bridge is temporarily and purposefully built for their annual tryst. Less known to the layman, the conception and governor vessels, pertaining also to yin and yang, will join in a circle when one presses tongue against the palate. This technique and the legend are whereupon associated in at least three aspects: 1) the internal merging of qi round the conception and governor vessels in relation to the romantic tryst; 2) the lifted tongue in relation to the magpie bridge; 3) and the conception and governor vessels in relation to the weaving fairy and cowherd, as both pairs consist of two members pertaining to yin and yang respectively. Without a footnote, the literal translation “to form a magpie bridge” may seem only obscurely related to the technique “tongue against the palate”. Hardly would a reader stop to ponder over the subtle analogy, in which case, the implications will be missed.

REFERENCES


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