Plural complementarism: a strategy for translating and introducing Taoist medical jargon

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多元互补: 道教医学用语译介策略探析

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关键词: 道教；医学；科学术语；翻译；多元论

Religious Taoism is a form of Chinese native religion with a history of more than 1800 years. The concept of Tao as is in Taoism is used by Laozi (580—500 B.C in Chunqiu Period) in his masterpiece Tao Te Ching to refer to the fountainhead that generates all existences. Religious Taoism is founded by Zhang Daolin (34—156) in East Han Period, who borrowed the concept of Tao and worshiped Laozi as hierarch, addressing him Supreme Lord (大上老君，Taishang Laojun). The school of Taoism represented by Laozi is hence referred to as Philosophical Taoism to be differentiated from the former. Religious Taoism is polytheistic, inheriting Chinese primitive reverence for the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the oceans as well as ancestor spirits. In the years that followed, it branches into several sects, such as Zhengyi Sect (正一教) and Quanzhen Sect (全真教), among many others.

Religious Taoism has a variety of arts, including hermitage, medicine, astrology, physiognomy, and divination. Among them, Taoist hermitage and medicine are represented by use of dietary therapy, tonics, medicated wine, prescription, acupuncture, Daoyin (导引) and meditation to improve somatic and psychic power. These arts are closely associated with traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Some prestigious TCM physicians, such as Ge Hong (葛洪，284—364), Tao Hongjing (陶弘景, 456—536), Sun Simiao (孙思邈, 541 or 581—682) etc. are also highly esteemed Taoist priests in Chinese history.

1 An overview of semantic loss posed by lack of cultural equivalent

Taoist medicine is transmitted by jargon unfamiliar to the Western world. As carrier of its subject field, Taoist medical jargon bears profound historical, cultural contents and strong ethnic folkways. The discrepancy between English and Chinese language makes the translation and introduction of such words subject to semantic loss. 炮制，服食，周天，内丹, to name a few, have no cultural equivalent in the English language. Semantic or cultural loss inevitably occurs if an indigeneous word is used to transfer the original. Notably, unicorn can barely represent the cultural image of 虚毛，nor is dragon equivalent to 龙. Translation strategies are extensively explored in order to provide the reader with a version as close
to its original as possible.

To date, plural complementarism has shed some light on the translation and introduction of Taoist medical jargon.

2 Plural complementarism of translation approaches

It is generally agreed that each translation criterion presents to the reader limited but peculiar perspective of a subject. Input based on any single perspective may lead to biased opinion about it. To tackle such one-sided limit, Professor Gu Zhengkun proposes “plural complementarism of translation criteria”, which underlines the complementary property of different translation criteria. Since various translation criteria are distinct but complementary in property, Professor Gu holds that it is justifiable for them to coexist as complements to each other[11]. Such collective or selective use of translation criteria depending on the circumstances is referred to by him as “synchronic existence of translation criteria”[11].

The strategy “plural complementarism of translation approaches” is a solid implementation of “plural complementarism of translation criteria”. It bears significant value for the translation and introduction of Taoist medical jargon. At the present stage when no consensus rendering has been reached for the majority of these words, under-translation or even confusion caused by unitary approach occurs from time to time. Plural complementarism, however, embraces the idea of “synchronic application of translation approaches”. It is based on the recognition that each approach displays particular aspects of the original, leaving the unstated domain for the others to cover. Fitting all the facets together, it is possible to exhibit a text of the source language to a fuller extent.

In practical translation and introduction, plural complementarism of translation approaches takes the form of couplet, triplet and quadruplet.

3 The form plural complementarism of translation approaches takes

Couplet, triplet and quadruplet consist of two, three or four translations made at one time for a single word. They are “separate attempts to cover the meaning of a word”[12]. In introducing Taoist medical jargon, such cluster of translations may fall into two parts: one is partial or total transliteration, the other is selective or collective application of literal, free, or semantic translation. The former, transliteration, serves as a standardizing approach to associate the original with its diverse translations for diverse context. New to the reader, a transliterated word is less likely to give rise to misconception compared to an indigenous non-equivalent. The latter, whether it’s being literal, free, or/and semantic translation, is applied to convey the intended message, both implicit and explicit, to the readership.

3.1 Couplet The jargon 丹田 provides an example of translation couplet. By plural complementarism of translation approaches, it may well be rendered as Dan Tian (semantically “elixir field”). As a total transliteration, the first part Dan Tian maintains the sound of the original. Though a bit awkward, it is new to the reader and therefore won’t cause him/her to jump at any unjustified assumptions. The latter, enclosed in parentheses and identified by “semantically”, is a compensating approach for the unintelligibility of transliteration. As Peter Newmark defines, semantic translation is “an attempt to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the target language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original”[21]. It follows that this form of translation lays stress on the aesthetic value of the original as well as fidelity of the rendering, though more weight being given to the former. Used skillfully, it has the strong points of both literal and free translation. The version “elixir field” is a typical semantic one as it not only reserves the linguistic form of the original but transfers its literal meaning as well.

Similarly, 吐納 may be rendered as Tu Na (literally “exhaling and inhaling”), in which Tu Na is compensated by a literal translation “exhaling and inhaling”.

3.2 Triplet In some cases, translation couplet is not enough to convey the intended message of the original. The jargon 娘女 is a good case in point. If it is translated as Cha-nu and compensated by a literal translation “the Fair Lady” singly, the readership unfamiliar to the source culture is uninformed of its associative meanings. If it is compensated by a free translation “a symbol representing the lung, heart yin and azoth etc. in Chinese alchemy” alone, the cultural image of “the Fair Lady” will be lost. On occasions as such, triplet can be applied to communicate the connotation. 娘女, therefore, may be rendered as Cha Nu (literally “the Fair Lady”, a symbol representing the lung, heart yin and azoth etc. in Chinese alchemy).

“A symbol representing the lung, heart yin and azoth etc. in Chinese alchemy” is a free translation. As is usually the case, free translation takes the form of paraphrase and aims to inform the reader, present the intended message, and clarify the notion. It focuses upon the idea of the origi-
nal, attaching less importance to the cultural discrepancy between target language and source language. In contrast to semantic or literal translation, it is applied as a domesticating approach, for which the idiomatic use of the target language may be adopted. For instance, may be rendered as Chi Bai Rou Ji (literally “red-white crossing line”, namely “dorso-ventral boundary of the hand or foot”). In this case, a culturally neutral term “dorso-ventral boundary of the hand or foot” is used to transform the contextual meaning regardless of its cultural elements. The linguistic feature of the original is compensated by the literal translation “red-white crossing line”.

Accordingly, 导引 may well be translated in triplet as Dao Yin (literally “guiding and pulling”, an ancient cultivation involving body movement in time with controlled breathing and specific mind), and 综丝动 as Chansi force (literally “silk reeling force”, denoting the “unbroken force”).

3.3 Quadruplet The impartation of Taoist arts is presented as divine revelation and is usually conducted secretly to specially prepared candidates. The use of usual words to designate unusual meanings gives rise to the esoteric nature of Taoist medical jargon. When necessary, transliteration, literal, semantic and free translation can be applied collectively in order to present the syntactic structure, referential meaning as well as cultural connotation to the readership.

An instance of quadruplet is provided by 泥丸官, which may be rendered as Niwan Gong (literally “mud-pill palace”), semantically “upper elixir field”, a location in the brain, three finger widths behind the point between the eyebrows). Deprived of the rhetoric, the free translation in this case “a location in the brain, three finger widths behind the point between the eyebrows” focuses plainly on the referential meaning of the original. The reader may refer to it for information regarding relevant manipulating technique as free translation is immediately comprehensible. The relation of 泥丸官 to Taoist perspective of the body parts is conveyed by the semantic translation “upper Elixir Field”.

Accordingly, 金乌 may be rendered as Jin Wu (literally “the Golden Crow”, semantically “the sun”, connoting essence of the heart fire), 玉兔 as Yu Tu (literally “the Jade Rabbit”, semantically “the moon”, connoting essence of the kidney); and 婴儿 as Ying Er, (literally “baby”, semantically “the Young Fellow”, connoting the liver, kidney yang and lead etc.). A word in antonymous relation to “the Young Fellow” is “the Fair Lady” (幼女) discussed in the previous paragraph.

4 Possible defects and relevant solutions

In dealing with the vocabulary of an unfamiliar subject field such as Taoist medicine, disputes over the consensus rendering for a majority of the jargon can hardly be settled in the near future. Such situation gives rise to reflection and determination on the translation and introduction strategy. Different from unitary approach, plural complementarism involves several translated version for a single jargon. To avoid confusion, some rules need be followed in conducting “plural complementarism of translation approaches”. When one jargon makes debut in a text, render the message by plural complementarism. Different approach presents to the reader different aspects of the original, each covering a domain left unstated by the others. Collective or selective application of the coordinates — transliteration, literal, semantic and free translation, presents to the reader a fuller picture of the original landscape.

When the jargon is used again in the same text, presenting every translated version would render the passage too redundant. At this point, it is practical to adopt one of them and apply it consistently within and between texts. On occasions when the adopted version does not fit into a particular context, another that fits better can be used as alternative. A footnote, of course, need be added to notify the reader of the optional relationship between or among the coordinates. If necessary, direct the reader to the book index for detailed information concerning the jargon. Maneuver on a text in this manner could well be taken as “consistency in a broad sense”. Reversely, rigidly adhering to the principle of consistency (one in the narrow sense) may tamper with the contextual meaning and smoothness of the text.

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