English translation of cultural aspects of the titles of traditional Chinese medicine classics based on the skopos theory

Ji Chen, Qin Pan, Li-shuang Ye, Jia-ling Huang
Foreign Language School, Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Chengdu 610075, Sichuan Province, China

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Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) classics, cultivated by the enduring and rich Chinese culture, are considered a priceless treasure to the Chinese nation. With Huangdi’s Canon of Medicine (《黄帝内经》) and Compendium of Materia Medica (《本草纲目》) successfully appearing in the Memory of the World List of Asia-Pacific Region, scholars at home and abroad attach mounting significance to the translation of TCM classics. However, the publication and spread of numerous translated TCM classics remain cloudy.

A title to a book is like a door to a house. Since TCM classics are an integration of medical science and culture, cultural aspects and words appearing in the titles of TCM classics serve as a key to the door, leading readers to the authentic world of TCM. Thus, this article details the skopos-oriented translation of cultural words in the titles of TCM classics.

1 A brief introduction to the skopos theory

The skopos theory, initially written as Skopostheorie in German, is a representative translation approach of the German Functionalist School. It maintains that the goal justifies the means and guides the development of this article. “Skopos” is a Greek word for “purpose”[1]. Three vital rules are involved in the theory: the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule: the skopos rule governs the other two subordinate rules. The skopos theory also fundamentally changes the status of source texts, target texts and their relationship. The source text is only viewed as an offer of information instead of the superior translation criterion, while the target text serves as the core. Therefore, it is the purpose of the target text to determine what information of the source text that a translator should adopt.
2 A brief introduction to the cultural words in the titles of TCM classics

For clarity, cultural aspects or words in the titles of TCM classics refer to words or expressions associated with unique Chinese traditions or cultural backgrounds, which require the authentic translation of words related to the cultural backgrounds.

2.1 Features of the cultural words in the titles of TCM classics Words in the titles of TCM classics, commonly concise in form but rich in meaning, possess abundant cultural features. In order to devise an appropriate translation, the following cultural features should be given due consideration.

2.1.1 Use of names Proper nouns, notably names of ancient sages or eminent physicians, are frequently encountered in the titles of TCM classics.

A case in point is the bible of TCM, Huangdi’s Canon of Medicine[1], named after a respectable leader in ancient China. For one thing, its author intended to generate an authoritative sensation in the readers’ minds by naming it after Huangdi, the symbol of power. For another, due to absence of definite information about the author and the date of its publication, people in later generations believed only extraordinary ancient saints like Huangdi could compile such a noble and intelligent work. More examples are listed as follows: Huangdi’s Canon of Eighty-one Difficult Issues for 《黄帝难经》, Shen Nong’s Herbal[2] for 《神农本草经》.

Additionally, as for names of eminent physicians, Lei’s Treatise on Preparation of Drugs[2] for 《雷公炮炙论》 and Jingyue’s Complete Works[3] for 《景岳全书》 are typical cases. Here, Lei and Jingyue indicate that valuable medical experience of the two renowned physicians is available exclusively in the two classics.

2.1.2 Use of allusions Mostly, allusions are often used in the titles of TCM classics to reveal the embedded cultural features and convey rich cultural meanings.

For instance, in 《折肱漫录》, the phrase “折肱” originated from a household story. Its author named Huang Cheng-hao born with a weak constitution, was susceptible to diseases. He learnt medical knowledge by himself by analyzing and summarizing his own experience of struggling against diseases. Zuo Zhan (《左传》), an ancient Chinese historical record, wrote that a person who suffered from a forearm fracture for three times would naturally become a good doctor. Thus, “折肱” refers to long-time practice or rich experience rather than its original meaning — the forearm fractured[1]. Therefore, the title 《折肱漫录》 is translated as Records of Long-time Medical Experience.

Another striking example is An Anthology of Medical Works for 《医宗粹要》. The phrase “医宗” historically refers to a bag used for carrying medical books of ancient physicians, but subsequently, with the passage of time, has been interpreted as medical works.

2.1.3 Use of religious words In China, religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism are deeply rooted in the collective culture. Meanwhile, titles of TCM classics frequently encompass religion-related words and concepts as well.

Concerning the book 《御门事亲》 published in the Ming Dynasty, the two characters “御门” refer to Confucianism, implying the far-reaching impact of the Confucian teachings on this classic. Guided by Confucian values, one should bear in mind his duties of supporting his parents and serving his emperor, especially when encountering illness. Thus, in accordance with the cultural background, the title is interpreted as Confucian’s Duties to Their Parents[2].

Similarly, the title 《龙树眼论》 gives insights...
into the influence of Buddhism. The pronoun “龙树”, known as Nagarjuna Bodhisattva and adept in treating eye diseases, is a world-famed master of Buddhism. Nagarjuna here indicates the book is an authoritative monograph on ophthalmology. Accordingly, its English title is Nagarjuna’s Treatise on Ophthalmology, a Renowned Buddhist Master.

2.1.4 Use of words arousing a sense of preciousness

Sometimes, titles of TCM classics aim to create a sense of preciousness by associating poetic or evocative images with cultural words. Ancient scholars have mainly proposed two ways of beautifying titles.

Firstly, names of priceless treasures are used in titles to indirectly add radiance to the text being described, such as “金匱” (the golden chamber) in the Synopsis of the Golden Chamber[12] and “珍珠” (pearl) in the Nature of Drugs of the Pearl Bag in Songs[1] and “玉” (jade) in the A Jade Key to the Secluded Chamber, on Laryngology[13].

Secondly, words with the meaning of preciousness are directly used like “精要” (essentials) in the Collected Essentials of Species of Materia Medica[14] and “秘” (secret) in the Secret Records on Syphilis[15] and “正” (orthodox) in the Orthodox Medical Records. The informative, cultural and aesthetic functions can be found in cultural words in the titles of TCM classics.

2.2 Functions of cultural words in the titles of TCM classics

It is essential to specify the function of cultural words in the titles of TCM classics, for the basic principle of functionalism in translation is the orientation towards the prospective function of the target text[16]. The informative, cultural and aesthetic functions can be found in cultural words in the titles of TCM classics.

2.2.1 The informative function

It is the basic function of cultural words to imply some information about the works to meet the readers’ curiosity and enable readers to have a rough idea of the content. Moreover, the content, style and background of the classics are sometimes disclosed in cultural words. For instance, embedded in the books Compendium of Materia Medica and Herbal Formulas for the Relief from Famine, Chinese characters like “本草” (materia medica), “纲目” (compendium) and “救荒” (relief of famines) separately give readers a glimpse of certain information.

2.2.2 The cultural function

It is indisputable to say that cultural words in classical TCM titles possess a cultural transmission function. Readers can meet Chinese ancient saints like Huangdi or physicians like JINGYUE, gain a rough idea of Confucian values in Confucian’s Duties to Their Parents and know about some historical stories from allusions. In summary, these cultural words embody the Chinese culture and promote the intercultural communication.

2.2.3 The aesthetic function

Aesthetics refers to a sense of beauty that catches the eye of the reader. Cultural words in classical TCM title also bear the aesthetic function and satisfy readers’ aesthetic mind. Especially, the names of priceless treasures attract attractive images with written characters. For instance, the first sight of “兰” (orchid) can bring an image of a flower with a lavender-like color. The title A Secret Book of the Orchid Chamber draws a picture of a fragrant and beautiful house storing a mysterious book. In this way, cultural words inspire an appreciation of Chinese characters and stimulate readers’ imagination.

3 Application of the skopos theory to the translation of common cultural words in the titles of TCM classics

As to the art of translation of cultural words in the titles of TCM classics, the skopos theory breaks free from conventional theories, makes landmark progress and functions as a compass guiding translators in the process of translation. Based on the skopos rule, the quality of a translation is ultimately decided by whether it fulfills its skopos or purpose, which is also the yardstick with which to choose matching translation methods.

3.1 The analysis of skopos

On the basis of the skopos theory, the intended skopos or purpose of the target text is the paramount element determining the choice of translation approach. Firstly, its general purpose is to offer the translator a way of achieving fame and fortune by translating. Most importantly, as the final goal, the communicative purpose is to arouse the readers’ interest, express cultural backgrounds and inspire an appreciation of Chinese characters. Lastly, the purpose of using a particular translation strategy is to achieve such three functions of cultural words mentioned above as the informative, cultural and aesthetic functions.

If a translation fulfills the primary purpose adequately, it can be viewed as a superb one.

3.2 Translation methods for cultural words in the titles of TCM classics

To attain the skopos (the three functions included) of translated cultural words in the titles of TCM classics, translators
can choose one of the following four translation strategies in accordance with various cultural features.

3.2.1 Transliteration When the names of persons or places are involved in the titles of TCM classics, transliteration is the optimal choice. For one thing, it maintains cultural connotations by seeking phonetic correspondence. For another, it ensures informational completeness by equipping the transcribed title with an attribute of back translation, the property of successfully restoring the translated version into its original one. Translated titles allowing back translation can correctly deliver the exact meaning of the source and decrease the degree of adding or omitting information, despite comparatively huge cultural differences between the West and China[31].

As for names of places, there are Materia Medica of South Yunnan[31] for 《滇南本草》, Empirical Recipes from Ruizhu Hall for 《瑞竹堂经验方》, Effective Recipes from Renzhai House for 《仁斋直指方》, and Wan Mizhai’s Complete Medical Books for 《万密斋医学全书》. Among them, “滇南” means a Chinese province named Yunnan, and phrases like “瑞竹堂”, “仁斋” and “万密斋” indicate medical service departments or shops.

Furthermore, concerning names of persons, there are Liu Juan-zhi’s Remedies Bequeathed by Ghosts for 《刘涓子鬼遗方》, Danxi’s Experiential Therapy[3] for 《丹溪心法》 and Xu Ling-tai’s Complete Medical Book for 《徐灵胎医学全书》. Among them, “刘涓子”, “丹溪” and “徐灵胎” are all names of ancient TCM physicians.

3.2.2 Literal translation Literal translation indicates literally translating the original text in order to maintain its content and form. It satisfies the requirement of the skopos theory that the target text serves the same communicative function as the source text.

As long as the two texts share similar literal as well as implied meanings and achieve the same function, the priority naturally goes to the literal translation. Firstly, it is applicable to the direct use of words with the meaning of preciousness, such as, “金” (gold), “金匮” (golden chamber), “金镜” (golden mirror), “珠” (pearl), “宝” (treasure), and “精” (essentials), because they all arouse a sense of preciousness in both languages.

Secondly, words revealing the main content of the classic and involving medical science can be literally translated. A summary of striking examples is as follows: “本草” (materia medica), “方” (prescriptions or formulas), “论” (treatise), “医案” (case records), “知要” (essentials or synopsis), “经” (classics or canons), “纲目” (compendium), “拾遗” (supplements); “医宗” (medical sect)[31], “医林” (medical community)[31] and “医门” (medical field)[31].

3.2.3 Literal translation with annotations Literal translation with annotations is to add some information in the form of notes or comments embodying a cultural core to the literally translated version.

Firstly, it is the most appropriate choice in the case of names of priceless treasure indirectly inspiring a sense of preciousness. For example, “玉” (jade) is an image of great value and beauty in Chinese culture while it does not have an equivalent meaning with “jade” in the Western culture. Therefore, 《天玉丸》 should be translated into Four Pillars of Destiny in Jade Volume, a Valuable Book[31]. In the same way, concerning “兰” (orchid), 《兰台轨范》 should be the Medical Standards of the Orchid Chamber, the Royal Library[31].

Secondly, words related to religious beliefs should be explained with annotations. The phrase “银海” (silvery sea) renders a typical example. In Daoism, eyes are regarded as silvery seas. Thus, the title 《银海精微》 can be the Essence of the Silvery Sea. Eyes in Daoism.

3.2.4 Adaption When some allusions and terms of medical divisions with various ways of expressing are used in the titles of TCM classics, translators have to change the content and the form of an original text. For instance, the titles of TCM classics like Posthumous Manuscripts in Han Dan City: Theories and Practice of Gynecology and Obstetrics[32] for 《邯郸遗稿》 and New Records on Pediatrics[34] for 《过秦新录》 both contain allusions. The two titles have derived from the Biography of Bian Que, a renowned ancient physician. As what was recorded in it, when Bian Que visited the Han Dan city, he worked as a gynecologist on hearing how the citizens there respected women and cared for their health. Then, in Xian Yang city where children were the apple of the citizens’ eye, he turned into a pediatrician. “邯郸” and “过秦” indicate the domain of the two monographs. The former is a treatise on gynecology and obstetrics and the latter is on pediatrics[31].

In addition, terms of medical divisions with numerous expressions are included in this case. They should be unified in the process of translation to smooth cultural exchanges. Here is a list of examples. Concerning A Book on Pediatrics for
4 Conclusion

From what has been mentioned above, it is reasonable to conclude that translators have the option to adopt the skopos-oriented theory in the process of translating common cultural words in the titles of TCM classics. Through this way can they broaden the horizon of translation and avoid floundering in troubled waters when encountering cultural connotations and choosing translation strategies.

5 Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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基于“目的论”的中医典籍书目文化词汇之英译

陈霞，潘琴，叶立霜，黄蕾

成都中医药大学外语学院，四川 成都 610075

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