

Appreciation of Huangdi Neijing Translation Based on Thick Translation Theory

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Abstract: Due to the antiquity of Huangdi Neijing, its wording is highly obscure and challenging to comprehend. Some translators fail to fully convey the cultural connotations of certain terms during the translation process, resulting in ambiguous or incomplete renditions that hinder readers from grasping the profound meanings embedded in the text. Applying thick translation theory to the translation of Huangdi Neijing can assist overseas readers in understanding its content by integrating cultural context and linguistic nuances. Based on this theory, this study examines the strengths and shortcomings of selected translated passages, explores potential improvements, and analyzes viable translation strategies for classical Chinese medical texts.

Keywords: TCM Translation; Huangdi Neijing; Thick Translation; Unschuld

1. Introduction

Huangdi Neijing is the earliest medical classic in Chinese history and remains the most influential work of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) globally. It has long served as a vital medium for disseminating Chinese culture overseas, with numerous translations circulating in various languages. However, due to its antiquity, the text's archaic and esoteric language—imbued with profound cultural connotations—poses significant challenges for translators, often resulting in interpretations that fail to fully convey its depth.

The application of thick translation theory in translating Huangdi Neijing can bridge this gap, enabling international readers to comprehend the text within its cultural and linguistic context.

2. A Brief Introduction of Thick Translation Theory

The concept of “thick translation” was proposed by American scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah, inspired by Clifford Geertz's anthropological

theory of “thick description”, which is originally a cultural anthropology framework. “Thick description” posits that culture is a web of symbols implicitly mastered by its native participants. To study a culture, one must analyze its specific temporal, spatial, and contextual dimensions.

In his 1993 essay *Thick Translation*, Appiah argued that translation and interpretation are inseparable. Translators must situate the text within its rich cultural and linguistic milieu, unveiling meanings obscured by language barriers. The specific approach is to add a long preface to the translated text, or to add various notes and annotations in the margin of the translated text, carefully describe and introduce the cultural background and relevant social-cultural context of the source text, reconstruct and explain the historical and cultural context of the source text, so that the knowledge with cultural characteristics in the source language text can be carefully described and explained in the translated text. The translator would even try to reconstruct the historical atmosphere when the source text came into being, so that readers can better understand the source culture.

Given the text's archaic language, even native Chinese readers encounter unfamiliarity, let alone non-native audiences unaccustomed to Chinese cultural and linguistic nuances. Therefore, in the process of translating Huangdi Neijing, it is necessary to use the means of thick translation to carefully describe and introduce the cultural background and historical and cultural context in which the book is located, and to explain and convey the knowledge with cultural characteristics in detail to help the readers of the translated version better understand.

3. An Analysis of Two Versions of Translation

The English translations of Huangdi Neijing can be categorized into three types based on the

translators' backgrounds, the first one is native Chinese translators residing in mainland China (e.g., Li Zhaoguo). Their motivation is primarily promoting Chinese culture, and their translation style tends to emphasize fidelity to the original text, often employing literal translation techniques. The second one is native English-speaking translators (e.g., Paul U. Unschuld). Their motivation is primarily focused on scholarly research into TCM culture and exploring the text's practical applications, and their translation style is often tends to produce more comprehensive and annotated translations. The last type is overseas Chinese translators. They seek to disseminate TCM knowledge internationally, prioritizing practical usability in clinical or educational settings, and their translation style tends to balance cultural authenticity with readability for global audiences.

3.1 Comment on Li Zhaoguo's Translation of Huangdi Neijing

Li Zhaoguo's translation of Huangdi Neijing emphasizes conveying the essence of the original text. For terms with cultural and historical connotations, his predominant strategy is transliteration. The translation pays particular attention to preserving the original sentence structures, frequently employing word-for-word translation approaches.

A Li Zhaoguo's translation example is as follows:

“At the age of fourteen, Tiangui begins to appear, Renmai (Conception Vessel) Chongmai (Thoroughfare Vessel) are vigorous in function. Then she begins to have menstruation and is able to conceive a baby.

Tiangui refers to the substance for the promotion of genital function. Renmai refers to Conception Vessel. Chongmai refers to Thoroughfare Vessel.”

This sentence aims to explain the law of female development. When a woman is 14 years old, she has Tiangui. At this time, her Ren pulse is smooth and her Taichong pulse is vigorous. When her menstruation comes on time, she has the ability to bear children. Traditional Chinese medicine believes that there is a subtle substance in the kidney, called Tiangui, which can promote the growth and development of the body. Tiangui is an inborn essence, which has the function of transforming blood essence, so that men and women have reproductive capacity. Chong pulse is one of the eight miraculous

meridians of the human body. It has the function of regulating the qi and blood of the twelve meridians and is closely related to the reproductive function. Only when Chong pulse and Ren pulse are strong can menstruation be normal. When translating this sentence, the translator chooses to translate words with cultural connotation such as “Tiangui”, “Ren Mai” and “Chong Mai” by translating them according to Chinese pronunciation, and then adds additional notes to them in the following text, and explains the knowledge rich in cultural characteristics in detail in the translation. The translator translated “Tiangui” into “the distance for the promotion of genetic function” and “Chongmai” into “Thoroughfare Vessel”, which to some extent conveyed the meaning of the original text. Although there are still deviations and deficiencies, it is easier to understand and accept.

Another example in Li Zhaoguo's translation is as follows:

“That is why [it is believed that who] understand [how to cultivate health] enjoy good health [while those who] do not know [how to preserve health cannot escape from premature] aging.”

It can be seen that the translator's pursuit in the process of translation is to “translate the ancient language as ancient language”. On the premise of retaining the original flavor of the source text to the greatest extent, after word for word literal translation, the content omitted in the original text will be added in brackets, so as to supplement the readers and ensure that the readers can receive complete information.

Li Zhaoguo's version of Huangdi Neijing strives to retain the style of the original work, with literal translation as the main and free translation as the auxiliary. When dealing with the translation of words with profound cultural connotation, the translation strategy of transliteration as the main and interpretation as the auxiliary is adopted. This translation style may be related to the fact that the translator is mainly responsible for the English translation of TCM classics such as Huangdi Neijing in the “Great China Library” national project. It may be a better translation method if we can make more detailed notes on such words and even the related cultural context in the process of translation.

3.2 Comment on Unschuld's Translation of Huangdi Neijing

Paul U. Unschuld, born in a family of pharmacists, is himself a distinguished medical historian. In his translation of *Huangdi Neijing*, he applies his profound medical knowledge and dedication to the medical profession to the translation process. Compared to Li Zhaoguo's version, Unschuld's translation features significantly more extensive annotations. These annotations systematically synthesize commentaries on *Huangdi Neijing* by medical scholars throughout Chinese history.

For example a translation in Unschuld's version is as follows:

"The physical body is completely exhausted.

Wang Bing: "The qi of the liver nourishes the sinews. [Now] the liver is weak, hence, the sinews can no longer move. The qi of the kidneys nourishes the bones. [Now] the kidneys are weak, hence, the body is extremely tired. The heaven gui is exhausted. Hence, only little essence is left."

It can be seen that after translating this sentence, Unschuld quoted Wang Bing's explanation of "all bodies are extremely", explained its mechanism and causes from the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, and explained to the readers the connotation of this sentence that is expected to be conveyed in traditional Chinese medicine culture.

And another example:

"With two times seven, the heaven gui arrives, the controlling vessel is passable and the great thoroughfare vessel abounds (with qi). The monthly affair moves down in due time and, hence, (a woman) may have children."

It can be seen that in Unschuld's translation, the translator translated the word "monthly affair" with cultural connotation into "monthly affair", instead of the "menstruation" seen in Li Zhaoguo's translation above, and added Wang Bing's note in the annotation that "therefore, it is called the monthly event, which is peaceful, and it is often seen at a glance", which not only conveys the origin of the name "monthly event" in the context of Chinese culture, but also does not cause a sense of discord.

Evidently, in his translation of *Huangdi Neijing*, Paul U. Unschuld strives to preserve both the original lexical meanings and expressive forms of the text, while extensively incorporating annotations that cite commentaries from medical scholars across different eras and cultures. These annotations appear on nearly every page, with some pages devoting as much as one-third or

even half of their space to explanatory notes. In these annotations, the translator meticulously references numerous ancient Chinese medical classics, interpreting the text through the dual lenses of traditional Chinese historico-cultural context and TCM theory, thereby reconstructing the original socio-cultural milieu to facilitate readers' comprehension of the source text's intended meanings.

This approach stands in marked contrast to certain other translations of Chinese medical classics that employ direct equivalence substitution-rendering TCM terminology into Western medical terms with ostensibly corresponding or similar meanings. Such methodology often fails to accurately and comprehensively convey the original text's conceptual depth, while frequently generating unnecessary confusion among readers.

4. A review of the Translation of *Huangdi Neijing* under the Thick Translation Theory

As an academic discipline, translation studies have evolved from focusing solely on linguistic transformation to delving into social and cultural dimensions. The field has progressed beyond mere textual translation to encompass cultural translation. In rendering classical texts, translators must not only convey the written words but also elucidate the implicit cultural connotations that the text itself does not explicitly articulate.

In translations employing thick translation methods, the translator can utilize forms familiar to the target audience to interpret foreign cultures. Through annotations of unfamiliar terms, the translator helps readers comprehend the other culture, reconstructs the historical and cultural context of the source text, and transports readers back to the era in which the text was produced, enabling them to understand the socio-cultural background of its creation. This approach facilitates better understanding and acceptance of the source culture.

When translating terms laden with profound cultural significance, thick translation is indispensable. For instance, the term "Yin and Yang" appears 274 times in *Huangdi Neijing*, underscoring its critical importance in the text. The concept of Yin and Yang carries deep cultural implications, and a translation lacking systematic annotation to explain it would be inadequate.

The theory of Yin and Yang is unique to

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). It posits that all phenomena arise from these two complementary states and achieve dynamic balance through their mutual transformation. In some translations of Huangdi Neijing, “Yin and Yang” is rendered literally. Without explanatory notes, readers unfamiliar with traditional Chinese philosophical discourse may find the term perplexing or even misinterpret it.

5. Conclusion

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) originated in ancient China, grounded in classical philosophical and naturalistic worldviews, and deeply rooted in Chinese culture. To achieve meaningful results in translating Huangdi Neijing, a translator must possess not only a profound understanding of ancient Chinese medical philosophy and culture but also a firm grasp of modern translation theories.

By employing thick translation methods—such as adding prefaces, annotations, and explanatory content—the translator can provide readers with appropriate cultural and historical context. This approach enables readers to comprehend the text

by integrating cultural background with linguistic context, making it an excellent strategy for translating Huangdi Neijing.

Beyond Huangdi Neijing, thick translation also proves to be an outstanding choice for rendering other TCM classics. Only by adopting this strategy can translators fully undertake the crucial task of interpreting the text's conceptual depth. The theory of thick translation holds immense significance for the translation of Huangdi Neijing and other foundational TCM texts.

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