

# Study on Translating Culture-specific Elements in Chinese Tourism Texts

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**Abstract**—This paper discusses C-E translation of the Chinese culture-loaded elements in Chinese tourism texts. It includes three parts: the first part presents a brief overview of relevant concepts; the second part discusses theoretical issues; the last part is a discussion of application of the translation techniques to improve translation quality, making it accessible to the target readers, publicizing the Chinese culture and retaining the diversity of world culture.

**Keywords**—tourism text; translation strategies; culture-specific elements

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, tourist industry becomes a pillar industry in world economy. "Culture" has become popular tourism sales pitches. More and more tourists from foreign countries have been attracted to China in recent years by its long history, booming economy, rich tangible and intangible cultural heritages and unique customs. They come not only for sightseeing, but for experiencing the Chinese culture. Due to differences in natural conditions, historical status, lifestyle and social structure, the nation's traditional culture, way of thinking and aesthetic habits etc., culture-specific elements which may throttle the tourists' understanding of the tourism texts generate. Tourism translation plays a peerless role in promoting China's tourism because the translation of tourism texts can bridge the gap of various differences.

As we all know, translation is closely related to culture, and tourism translation is considered as an important way to publicize culture because translation promotes the communication and spread of different cultures. For some tourists, culture seemed a profoundly mixed blessing. [1] Because of different culture and social environments, and "the lack of an equal sign, the reality of what's missed and distorted in the very act of understanding, appreciating, describing." [2] it is not easy for foreign tourists to understand some culture-loaded items. Therefore, the translators should give the first priority to the understanding of CSIs which may pose difficulties when translating. To translate culture-specific expressions effectively and accurately is conducive to foreign visitors to understand Chinese culture. The reader effect is the goal of tourism translation and the requirements of the function of tourism style and its communication purpose. This paper first

introduces some relevant concepts and then examines different translation strategies applied in the translation of tourism texts with a special focus on culture-specific items.

## II. SOME RELEVANT CONCEPTS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars once gave many definitions of culture, two typical ones are as follows: culture was defined as "That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." [3] Larson [4] defines culture as "a complex of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules which a group of people share".

Some concepts and items are bound to a specific culture and country and do not exist in any other. [5] Culture Specific Items (CSIs) are those that do not exist in the target text or have a different inter-textual status. [6] Newmark [7] (1988) classifies cultural words as follows:

- ecology: flora, fauna, hills, winds, plains;
- material culture: food, clothes, houses and towns, transport;
- social culture: work and leisure;
- concepts: organizations, customs, activities, procedures, political and administrative, religious, artistic;
- gestures and habits.

Generally speaking, culture-loaded words are classified into five categories: ecological culture-loaded words, material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words, linguistic culture-loaded words.

The function of tourism texts: for one thing, they are informative, which convey essential information and give the general introduction to the destinations to provide convenience for the tourists. For another, tourism texts are operative, which attract the target readers' attention and invite patronage. Moreover, Chinese tourism texts often rely on some distinctly expressive elements (pun, analogy, allusion etc.) in the materials for the aforementioned effects. In other words, the interplay of informative function, operative function and expressive function attends to the

needs of publicizing the tourism. The characteristics of tourism texts: tourism texts are culture bound. Tourism is an activity which involves the direct contact between cultures and all that this includes (folklore, customs, gastronomy, etc.) and therefore, tourism language is considered here as a joint element between tourists and the place they are visiting and their cultures. [8]

In recent years, the research on culture specific items locked on the following aspects:

- The domain of Tourism. Enikő Terestyényi [5] (2011) first gave a brief overview of the concept of culture-specific items and the techniques that were applied when translating them in tourism brochures. Isabel et al.[9] (2014) analyzed the promotion materials from the administrative website and some Spanish famous tourist companies and then discussed the translating procedures and the role of translators.
- The domain of language teaching. Montasser Mohamed Abdelwahab Mahmoud [10] (2013) designed and applied a specific course to help students to deal systematically and effectively with culture-specific items in both English and Arabic, which was based on sixteen strategies adopted from what Newmark (1988), Hariyanto (1997), and Harvey (2003) suggested. Chen Guan, Yanan Zhao (2016) suggested the ways of teaching and learning culturally-loaded words among non-English Chinese majors. [11]
- The domain of Translation. Janina Buitkieniė [12] (2013) treated culture-specific items not only related to ecology, material culture, social culture, organizations etc., but also forms of address, proper names and nicknames. He analyzed the problems which the translator encountered while rendering culture-specific items from Lithuanian into English and put forward some of the translation strategies employed while translating certain items into English. Askarzadeh [13] (2015) discussed how to use the domestication and foreignization Strategies to deal with culture-specific-items in the translations of literature. SM Anari, A Sanjarani [14] (2016) did the research to find which translation strategies and what frequencies have been adopted by different translators with different ideological backgrounds in dealing with Qur'an-specific cultural items. From the above literature review, researches on CSIs in Chinese tourism texts should be enhanced to better serve the increasing number of foreign tourists.

### III. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Lefevere and Bassnett (1990: 1) first termed "the cultural turn". Some other scholars like James S. Holmes (1972/2000, 1975), Itamar Even-Zohar (1979, 1981/1990), Gideon Toury (1980, 1995), Theo Hermans (1985), Susan Bassnett (1991), André Lefevere (1992), Dirk Delabastita and Lieven d'Hulst (1993), Mary Snell-Hornby (1995) explored the cultural systems including the norms and the practices of actual

translation work. For example, "translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text." [17] Besides power, patronage, ideology and poetics, translation also needs to be studied in connection with text-type and register, and in connection with attempts to integrate different Universe of Discourse. [17] The concrete content of this theory includes (Andre Lefevere 2004): First, translation should be into groups of culture. There doesn't exist on an equal footing of word or article. Second, translation is a transcultural behavior, not the progress of reground coding. Third, translation should pay attention to transplant and delivery of the culture in the target text. Fourth, translation should let different stratum satisfy, as well as to cater the cultural need of target groups. The cultural translation was verified and applied in the translation practice. Therefore, from this perspective, the translators should take some factors into account when translating culture-specific elements to minimize the readers' interpretation efforts to get the meaning of these elements.

### IV. METHODS APPLIED IN TRANSLATING CULTURE-SPECIFIC ELEMENTS

The tourism texts in this paper, which distinguish from literature tourism ones, only refer to the texts in the website, tourist brochures and so on. The readers of this kind of tourism texts are from all walks of life, so the translation of culture-specific items in the tourism texts should not only take the readability and acceptability of the target readers into account, but also transfer Chinese culture. How to translate the original text directly to attain the realm of "faithfulness, expressiveness, elegance" and make sure that target audiences can understand the cultural factors in original text is the duty of translators. Translation, in terms of its external dimensions, is a language conversion activity, but in its essence, is a cross-cultural exchange activities. Under these circumstances, some translation methods should be adopted when translating culture-specific items in Chinese tourism texts.

#### A. Transliteration

Transliteration is the use of Chinese phonetic alphabet spelling which is one of the most common ways to translate cultural-loaded words.

北京市朝阳区红领巾公园 (Beijing shi chaoyang qu honglingjin gongyuan)

T1: The Red Scarf Park in Chaoyang District of Beijing

T2: Honglingjin Park in Chaoyang District of Beijing

红领巾(honglingjin), a Chinese culture-specific word, is a metonymy referring to Chinese children aged from 6 to 14 years old who participate in the Young Pioneers. If translated into "The Red Scarf Park", the target readers may misunderstand its meaning because of lexical gap and cultural lacuna. Moreover, "red", the color of blood, symbolizes blood, fire, life, love, etc.. Red, which is often derogatory or undesirability in English, projects a latent meaning of dangers, disaster, shame, impulse and violence, the most typical meaning is "fire and blood" (including anger and bloodshed), such as "red battle" (bloody). Therefore, the second version fits the context, it is better than the first one

because “红领巾” (honglingjin) here is just a name of the park.

#### B. Transliteration + Annotations or Transliteration + Free Translation

Foreign readers may be hard to understand or misunderstand some cultural-loaded words only by transliteration. An annotation or free translation is a must in some cases.

贵妃鸡 (Guifei ji)

T<sub>1</sub>: Imperial Concubine Chicken

T<sub>2</sub>:Guifei Chicken (chicken wings with brown sauce)

“贵妃鸡”(Guifei ji) is a Chinese dish name, if it is literally translated into “Imperial Concubine Chicken”, the target readers cannot get the real meaning of it or may cause the cultural conflict because “贵妃”(Guifei) was the title of the emperors’ concubines. It is better to transliterate “贵妃” into “Guifei” first, and then annotate its cooking methods, raw materials and condiments to meet the readers’ expectations of relevance. [18]

CNN (13 March, 2012) once introduced 31 China’s regional specialties. [19] Each dish starts with pinyin, and then explains or applies free translation followed by Chinese Characters. For example, Hongshao chou guiyu (red-braised fermented mandarin fish, “红烧臭鳊鱼”) is one of the specialties of Anhui Province. 臭(chou)was named after the Huizhou dialect of “腌鲜” (yanxian). If it was translated literally into ‘smelly’ which sounds disgusting. According to the definition given by *Collins English Dictionary*, “smelly” means something that has an unpleasant smell, so the word is unsuitable for the name of a dish. “臭鳊鱼” (chou guiyu) has another two names in Chinese tourism brochures: “Preserved Mandarin Fish” and “Pickled Fresh Mandarin Fish”. “Preserve” refers to the special treatment so that food can be preserved for a long time, which is not suitable for the production process of this dish, because it is pickled only a few days in salt water and still retain fresh. “Pickled Fresh Mandarin Fish” is not only associated with its production process, but also takes the acceptability of consumers and the accuracy of the language into consideration.

#### C. Free Translation or Free Translation + Annotation

Free translation is to translate the meaning of the original language, not word-to-word translation of original ones. For example, “中秋节” (zhongqiu jie) moon festival; “元宵节”(yuanxiao jie) lantern festival; “颐和园” (yiheyuan) the Summer Palace.

While some Chinese culture-loaded elements contain some implied meaning in Chinese culture,so annotation is a good way to explain the full meaning of these culture specific elements. There exists lexical gap of Chinese “twenty-four solar terms” between Chinese and English. When translating, we can free-translate them first to ensure the target readers readable, and then supplement the real meaning in Chinese to make them understand the real

meaning in Chinese Culture, such as 雨水 (yushui) Rain Water (the 2nd Solar Term), 清明(qingming) Pure Brightness (the 5th Solar Term).

“桔红糕” (Ju hong gao), one of the popular snacks in southeastern Fujian province, is mistranslated into “Orange Cake”. In fact,the ingredients of this dessert contains rice, kumquats and sugar. Therefore, “Kumquat Rice Cake” is a good name for it.

#### D. Transliteration+Literal Translation

Racing loong boats is an important and popular activity in China. The loong boat is shaped like the dragon. It is a multi-person collective competition which reflects the traditional long history and culture, as well as the spirit of people’s collectivism. In western countries, a dragon is an equivalent for a monster. As the description in *Bible* “an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his head. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the women who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born.” (Revelation 12:3) While in China, dragon is a mascot. Because the different cultural images of dragon in Chinese and western culture, China has prescribed Chinese “龙” (long) into “Longg”. ([http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2007-11/21/content\\_7118595.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2007-11/21/content_7118595.htm)) As stated above, Loong Boat is a good translation of “龙舟” to retain and transfer Chinese culture.

#### E. Borrowing

Some words or expressions can be borrowed from English, because they have the same or similar connotation or denotation.

“老弱病残孕幼席” (Lao ruo bing can yun you xi) is the seats on the buses for those who are old, weak, sick,handicapped, pregnant or young. If literally translated into “For those who are old, weak, sick, handicapped, pregnant or young”, it doesn’t comply with the Polite Principle in English, so “Courtesy Seats” in English is a good version.

“桂林山水甲天下” (Guilin shanshui jia tianxia) is a Chinese advertisement describing the beautiful scenery of Guilin. It was translated into “East and west, Guilin landscape is the best” which parodies English proverb “East or west, home is best.”

#### F. Rewriting

“青龙过海” (qinglong guo hai) is a Guangdong famous soup. If translated into “dragon cross the sea”, the foreigners may be confused by its name, in fact, it is nothing but a water spinach soup. As a foreign dish name, the ingredients and the cooking methods are the foreigners’ focus. Therefore, “Vegetable soup” is a good name in menu; In some other occasions, the interpreters can explain it “It’s a famous Guangdong dish known by local people as “Green dragons going across the sea”.

传说中的惠女风情天下殊，原汁原味的惠女服饰历来为人们所称颂，其奇特的服饰、古朴的民俗四海闻名。她们包着头巾，上身衣着短，露出肚脐，裤子长而宽松，仍保留着经典的扮饰，有“封建头、民主肚、节约衣、浪费裤”之说。(Chuanshuo zhong de hui nu fengqing tianxia shu, yuan zhi yuanwei de hui nu fushi lilai wei renmen suo chengsong, qi qite de fushi, gupu de minsu sihai wenming. Tamen baozhe toujin, shangshen yizhuo duan, luchu duqi, kuzi chang er kuansong, reng baoliuzhe jingdian de ban shi, you “fengjian tou, minzhu du, jieyue yi, langfei ku” zhi shuo.)

This above Chinese version describes Hui 'an (a Chinese county) women's apparel. In the tourism brochures, it can be rewritten in plain English as “Hui 'an women are known for their fancy dress and personal adornment: kerchiefed head, bare belly, short blouse and loose pants. With the help of illustration in tourism brochures, foreign visitors can easily know about the features of their clothing. However, in some Chinese tourism texts, the culture-loaded elements in this paragraph “封建头、民主肚、节约衣、浪费裤” (fengjian tou, minzhu du, jieyue yi, langfei ku) was translated literally into “open-mindedly-bellied, blouse-economized, trousers-wasting”, which may undermine its readability, let alone transmitting Chinese culture.

臭豆腐 (Chou doufu), a famous snack in Anhui, China, smells stinky while tastes delicious. If literally translated into “stinky tofu” or “smelly bean-curd”, the foreign tourists dare not taste this unique delicious snack. According to Collins English Dictionary, both “stinky” and “smelly” are “having an unpleasant smell”. “pleasantly pungent bean-curd/tofu” [21] can not only highlight the characteristics of its strong odor, but also will not cause misunderstanding.

夫妻肺片 (Fuqi fei pian), a famous dish in Chengdu, Sichuan, China. The main ingredients of this dish is beef and beef offal which are spiced and then sliced. We can find a great variety of its names.

T<sub>1</sub>: Couple's Lung Slice;

T<sub>2</sub>: Husband's and wife's Lung Slices;

T<sub>3</sub>: Cold and Dressed Beef and Chop Suey Made by a Couple;

T<sub>4</sub>: Fuqi Sliced Beef Offal;

T<sub>5</sub>: Well-stewed beef slices;

T<sub>6</sub>: Beef and Ox Tripes in Chili Sauce;

T<sub>7</sub>: Sliced Beef and Ox Tongue in Chili Sauce;

T<sub>8</sub>: Beef and Chop Suey in Chili Sauce;

T<sub>9</sub>: Mr and Mrs Smith.

Version one and two are translated literally, which may make people disgusting because of its ingredients. In Version 3 “made by a couple” is a redundancy, and the other versions are not good names because of omitting the main ingredients (beef or Chop Suey). Version eight is a good version because it accords with the foreign dish names,

moreover, chop suey (cantonese) which is accepted by the foreigners is replaced lungs to avoid cultural shock. This version takes the consumers' cognitive acceptance into consideration, thereby reducing the foreign consumers' misunderstanding of this dish and coordinates their interpretation efforts. Version 9- Mr and Mrs Smith is named after an American movie name *Mr and Mrs Smith*. (<http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2017-05-31/doc-ifyfqvmh9618765.shtml>). Recently, 夫妻肺片 (Fuqi fei pian) was selected as “Appetizer of the Year.” by an American magazine GQ and named this dish “Mr and Mrs Smith” which is a typical example of rewriting.

#### G. Amplication by notes

(桃花源)始建于晋，初兴于唐，鼎盛于宋，大毁于元，时兴时衰于明清，萧条于民国，渐复于新中国成立后，大规模修复开发于1990年。(Taohuayuan) shi jian yu jin, chu xing yu tang, dingsheng yu song, da hui yu yuan, shixing shi shuai yu ming qing, xiaotiao yu minguo, jian fu yu xin zhongguo chengli hou, da guimo xiufu kaifa yu 1990 nian.

Taohuayuan (the peach flower source) was first built in the Jin Dynasty (AD256-AD420), began to take shape in the Tang Dynasty (AD618-AD907), flourished in the Song Dynasty (AD960- AD1279), and went to ruin in the Yuan Dynasty (AD1271- AD1368). With ups and downs through the Ming and Qing Dynasties (AD1368-AD1911), it was almost abandoned in the times of the Republic of China (AD1912- AD1949). Its restoration was made from the year 1949 and a large-scale expansion and development began in 1990. [22]

The words in brackets in the above translation version supplement the information which may help the readers to understand the original.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Although many translation methods can be employed when translating culture-loaded words, translators are trafficking between cultures, because one-to-one equivalence is impossible. When translating the culture-specific elements in tourism texts, we should center on the layout, the target readers and the purpose of tourism promotion.

“Translation involves far more than finding target-language equivalents for source-language words and phrases”. [23] “What the translators can do is to bring the translation closer to the reader and bring the reader closer to the culture. Therefore, many factors such as the translators' comprehensive competence, the instruction from the target-language publishers, authors, immediate context, discourse context and the accessibility of readers and authors etc. should be taken into consideration to improve the adequacy and acceptability of the translation. The more aware the translator can become of these complexities, including power differentials between cultures and genders, the better a translator/he will be”. [23]

As we all know, tourism translation, a practical style of translation, has its own commercial intention which is to cater to the taste of the readers, to arouse their interests and



to attract them to travel. As we can see from the aforementioned translation versions, to achieve the above-mentioned purposes, translating culture-loaded elements in Chinese tourism texts is one of the most challenging kinds of translation. The translator should bridge the gaps between the source language and the target language and endeavor to alleviate the understanding difficulties of culture-loaded elements from the perspective of cultural differences. "Act global, be local" can be a criterion to translate the CSIs, which may require the translators to come up with an interesting or a striking or an effective word or image or phrase that may well deviate sharply from the original to better promote the Chinese tourism and retain the cultural diversities in the world.

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