

Problems Happening When Translating Traditional Chinese Medicine into Foreign Language

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Abstract

Traditional Chinese Medicine has always been an effective way to treat diseases in China, yet it's less accepted and welcomed in western countries. Hence, to make it more acceptable is quite important and translation shall play an essential role in spreading it. However, its translation and interpreting are fairly difficult, and the paper aims to figure out what methodologies to be taken when translating or interpreting TCM words.

Keywords

TCM, Translation, Interpreting, Methodologies

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) serves importantly in Chinese medicine history. Many ancient specialists, such as Li Shizhen and Zhang Zhongjing, succeeded in organizing decoctions and concluding experience, and then left their wisdom of the TCM to the descendants, which were still studied and researched by present TCM researchers and scholars. During the COVID-19, when western medicine had limited effect, TCM worked well as soon as it was put into use. Academician Zhang Boli, also the Honorary President of Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, led his team to develop certain TCM decoctions to make Chinese herbs involved in the treatment of the COVID-19, which received an incredibly good result. However, translating TCM has always been a challenging task for both translators and professional TCM medics, but this is the main reason why TCM is less accepted by western world. After 2007, several TCM universities in China were somehow excluded from the World Directory of Medical Schools, and this arouses a more urgent mission that spreading TCM

has to be put on agenda.

2. Background

TCM has always been an indispensable part of Chinese medicine history, which is definitely irreplaceable. It has a clear feature that it treats and cures patients adhered to philosophies. Philosophies are more theoretical than practical, and this is why people outside China think it's witchery or black magic. Therefore, it's less valued in the world: though it enjoys its intelligent property, it takes up only 4% to 6% market share in the world (Huang, 2005). However, TCM has its irreplaceable position in China. It magically resolved medicare problems for 22% of total population of China in 1970s, which made the PHEIC system covered 85% of the medical cared people, arousing the attention from the WHO at that time (Huang, 2005). It's no doubt that TCM works well and in its own way, it helps to make people healthier.

What's more, during the COVID-19, it also functioned a lot. Zhang Boli, the academician of Chinese Academy of Engineering and president of Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, led his team to conquer the fierce virus when western treatment showed less effect. Xuanfei Baidu Tang, which aims to clean the so-called evil Qi inside lungs, worked very well and effectively reduced post-pandemic symptoms. Hence, TCM also needs promoting to the world in order to enhance the world level of disease prevention and cure.

Promotion of TCM does need translating while the work is confronting great difficulties. Translating TCM into foreign languages aims to achieve different goals: to spread TCM culture, to popularize TCM, to cooperate with western medicine to treat patients, etc. However, TCM is quite complex as it contains not only the knowledge of medicine but also something philosophical. To translate TCM language can hardly allow for the two functions. This is the reason why there are still few papers or materials covering the researches of TCM translation. The author hopes the paper would be a good reference to the future study.

3. Methodologies

3.1. Translation of TCM Needs Mutual Understanding in Culture

Translation has to be culturally consistent between original language and target language, in order to be understood more easily. Based on Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, translation shall be adhered to its original meaning and the cultural setting behind it. However, this is hard to reach in translating TCM into a foreign language. In TCM, medics see the whole body as a system, in which each organ is interconnected. TCM treats people instructed by the view of connection in Materialist Dialectics while western medicine does that by the view of contradiction. For example, as for a common cold, TCM doctor prescribes the patient with malfunction in stomach and spleen which seems less relevant to the symptoms of cold, while a western doctor offers medicine to relieve the patient's symptoms of coughing or fever that are much related. This happens

because TCM believes organs inside the body work together and malfunction of any one of them will lead to a certain symptom. These differences in diagnosing diseases can be hardly avoided because of differences of view of world. Chinese people always hold a proverb that there must something else behind the surface of a mountain (看山不是山), but western peoples would look into something more directly. Due to this, it's tougher to convey TCM theories to western people.

Under such cultural and theoretical Western medicines, aiming to curing a target symptom like coughing or pectoralgia, are always translated with certain structure. Drugs are usually described by three names in the US: 1) chemical, 2) established name (non-proprietary) 3) and brand (proprietary) (Del Seppia, 2010). Medicines are name in this way because western medicines are made of chemicals. However, this doesn't work when it comes to TCM. TCM is experience-oriented, so each TCM doctor prescribes differently based on their own experience, and each TCM prescription demonstrates the past experience and even education of that doctor. Consequently, it's more challenging to seek a common way to name them. For example, during the COVID-19, after which western medicines work less, a TCM prescription called Qingfei Baidu Tang, which literally means "lung cleaner", was put into use clinically. Yet, neither Qingfei Baidu Tang nor Lung Cleaner is able to fully suggest both the practical and cultural meaning of the medicine. This happens as philosophical metaphors of TCM are commonly found in various theories of this field, such as the Yin Yang Theory, the Five Elements Theory, the Essence Qi Theory, and the relationship between heaven and man (Xu & Liu, 2022). In the formation process of traditional Chinese medicine theory, a large amount of ancient Chinese philosophical ideas and theories have been absorbed. Therefore, TCM and philosophical theories are closely related, mutually influenced, and permeated.

3.2. Translation of TCM Needs to Clarify the Connotations of TCM Classics and Prescriptions

As TCM prescriptions include tens of Chinese herbs, and different combinations of various herbs serve differently as well, it's necessary to make it clear how those herbs work, so the translation of those prescriptions need to cover their functions. What's more, as is mentioned before, TCM classics are rich of philosophies, and were written mostly in ancient Chinese language, which makes the translation tougher and more challenging. Besides, inside those classics, authors would often use a lot of metaphors to organize the TCM theories to explain why they chose those herb combination as a decoction. For example, Li Zhaoguo, translated "心者, 君主之官, 神明出焉。肺者, 相傅之官, 治节出焉" into "The heart is the organ [similar to] a monarch and is responsible for Shenming (mental activity or thinking). The Lung is the organ [similar to] a prime minister and responsible for Zhijie (management)". In the translation, Li compared heart to monarch while he compared lung to prime minister. He made the translation because a heart works as a pump and core inside our body while a lung assist the

heart to finish the exchange of air and circulation of blood, which is similar to how a courtier assists his emperor. However, in the sentence, “神明出焉” is the core but the most challenging part to be translated. “神明” shall be literally translated as gods and goddesses, but in Chinese, it means the Yang Qi, or the power inside our body entitled by the sun. Consequently, Li’s translation obviously ignored the connotation behind the literal meaning of the sentence.

3.3. Flexible Translations of TCM Are Needed Respectively for Translating, Consecutive/Simultaneous Interpreting

Different translations are used differently as well. Translating, which is translated by written words, is able to be finished with adequate time, and translators have enough time to think over and meditate on how to reach a perfect translation which most complies with the original texts. Interpretation, on the other hand, has to be finished in a fairly limited time, with less time given to interpreters to react. Quan Jiaqing mentioned in his article in 2014 that translation and interpretation have different criteria when assessed their quality. For translation, faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance shall be considered while quickness, smoothness and accurateness are main factors mainly involved in interpretation (Quan, 2015). What’s more, they have different targets as well: translation needs to provide clear translation for readers to contemplate and study while interpretation amply offers general acknowledgement to its audience. For example, Hong Lou Meng, also named The Dream of Red Mansion, has been translated and opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics always needs simultaneous interpreting.

Similarly, to translate TCM classics and expressions, as the author argues, is also supposed to be done with various methods based on different situations. For translation, the author believes the translation shall be as clear and concrete as possible. In interpretation, interpreters should use short sentences to reach the full meaning of original texts.

Example:

Original Text: 阙庭脉色青白，推之久不还者，病在肺；推之即至者，病在大肠。

Translation: TCM doctor can diagnose lung-related diseases when a tumor is felt after pushing where lung lies and Queting, an acupoint in the middle of one’s forehead, shows indigo and white and the color keeps unfading when the acupoint is massaged; while if Queting shows indigo and white but the color fades just after being massaged, it means the patient’s intestine might be damaged.

Consecutive Translation: Lungs should be examined if Queting acupoint shows chronic indigo and white. However, the intestine has something wrong if there the color disappears very soon.

4. Conclusion

Translation and interpretation of Traditional Chinese Medicine still has a long way to go. In this paper, the author boosts that the cultural connotation/background, as

well as whether it's used in interpreting or translating, shall be put into consideration. What the author mentioned in the paper will play a part in the research of this field when the TCM is being more widely spread around the world.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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