

Research on Chinese University Motto Culture and Its Translation

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Abstract

School motto is the concentration of the university spirits. This paper intended to summarize the culture and translation skills of Chinese university motto in Chinese and English versions, from verbal forms, verbal contents of Chinese motto, and the methods and skills used when translating them into English. It aims to enhance the status and influence of China's university mottos, and provide references and guidance for further translation and cultivate a deeper understanding of the concept of talent cultivation.

Keywords

School Motto, Culture, English Translation, Communication

1. Introduction

With the development of Sino-western cooperation and exchanges and Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese universities are getting more involved in international activities and academic exchanges. Under this circumstance, it's urgent and crucial for Chinese universities to show its competitiveness and unique school culture to outer world, which would help to raise its fame and build its reputation. As we all known, the school motto represents the spirit of the university and highlights the school's educational philosophy and educational goals. The definition of school motto in the Xinhua Dictionary is: "The words prescribed by the schools that have guiding significance for students." The definition in the *Ci Hai* is: "For the convenience of teaching and management, the schools selected a number of famous words and guiding words to make a plaque and put it on school buildings, which gradually develops into Xiaoxun. The English name of the Xiaoxun is school motto, but the Chinese Xiaoxun was introduced from Japan in modern times (Jiang, 2018). Later, the school motto in China has gradually developed and has continued to develop as a slogan and business card for

colleges and universities. In 2014, CCTV launched a series of “What is the school motto”, profoundly excavating the story behind the school motto and the guiding significance of the school motto in time and historical changes.

About the reason to study on school motto culture and its English translation, on the one hand, college students mostly lack knowledge and understanding of their school mottos; on the other hand, in external publicity and exchanges, colleges and universities are in urgent need of promoting their own school motto spirits and enhancing their international reputation and influence, which makes English translation of the school motto even more important. In 2010, the Ministry of Education of China issued the “Study Programs for Studying in China”, which stated: “In order to strengthen Sino-foreign cooperation and exchanges and improve the level of international education in China, by 2020, China should become the largest destination country for studying abroad in Asia.” Statistics show that in 2017, the number of foreign students studying in China exceeded 300,000. (Students from 204 countries and regions are studying at 935 colleges and universities in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government)

Recently, it coincided with the 60th anniversary of Shaanxi University of Science & Technology. The school urgently needed to translate a large number of documents such as school mottos and school slogans. With participation and discussion of the translation company, English professors and students of the translation majors, a relatively sound and complete version was finally obtained. Therefore, the author believes that this research is very necessary and important.

Last but not least, this paper aims to give a brief illustration and analysis on the formation and meaning of Chinese school mottos and the way how they are translated into English. And by summarizing advantages and disadvantages of these translations, the author wish this could help as suggestions and examples for further study and research.

2. Characteristics of China University School Motto

There are more than 2000 colleges and universities in China. In order to make this research more reliable and persuadable, the author chose university mottos with standard official translation versions, which comes from Wikipedia “List of university and college mottos”. Hence, the paper mainly researched on mottos of 50 universities and colleges of China in the Wikipedia “List of university and college mottos” (Wikipedia, 2019). Among 50 universities, 10 of them have no corresponding English translation versions and 1 has no school motto. Thus, the study scope is 49 Chinese mottos and corresponding 39 English mottos. These school mottos are sufficient and representative enough to be researched in the paper and they are featured in the following two aspects.

2.1. Verbal Forms

The motto of Chinese universities is basically expressed in the form of verbal short sentences, four-character idioms, traditional proverbs, etc. (Wang & Zhang,

2013). The language has distinct characteristics. The paper classified the number of words and the number of phrases, shown as **Table 1**.

It was found that most of the 49 universities used two-character and four-character idioms, which were more concise, symmetrical, catchy, and easy to remember. For example, the school motto of Sichuan Normal University is: “重德，博学，务实，尚美。” It is composed of four sets of two characters. Another example is the school motto of Chongqing University: “耐劳苦、尚俭朴、勤学业、爱国家。” It consists entirely of four sets of three characters. It is relatively rare in school mottos. The school mottos consisting of two sets of four-character words are the most frequent and the most common expression. For example, the school motto of Nanjing University is: “诚朴雄伟 励学敦行。” It is natural, smooth, and meaningful.

2.2. Speech Contents

In order to more clearly show the main content of the school motto, the author summarizes the main content of the motto by extracting high-frequency vocabulary, as shown in **Table 2**.

It can be found that the main content of the Chinese university motto is to encourage students to study hard and pursue knowledge; to be independent in spirits and get self-improvement; to be good at thinking and to improve morality in life. In addition, the school motto encourages students to be broad-minded and adept at accepting, putting the national and collective honors first and keeping the dedication to mind. For example, the motto of China Ocean University is: “海纳百川，取则行远。” For example, the school motto of Shanghai Jiaotong University is: “饮水思源，爱国荣校。”

In addition to the high-frequency vocabularies, we can also see mottos from a holistic perspective. On the whole, mottos of Chinese universities mainly show demands and hopes for people in several aspects such as morality, quality, learning attitude and philosophy of dealing with things (Lin et al., 2005). This is inseparable from the traditional Chinese Confucianism education. For example, the school motto of Fudan University: “博学而笃志，切问而近思。” It is a sentence from “The Analects of Confucius”, emphasizing the uprightness of learning attitude, perseverance, and diligent at thinking (Wang, 2006). The motto of Shanghai University: “自强不息；先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐。” is also from an ancient text, which “自强不息” comes from the book “周易”：“天行健，君子以自强不息”. The latter part of the sentence comes from Fan Zhongyan’s “Yueyang Lou Tower”, which teaches people it’s important not only to improve their own ability, but also to put the country and people first. Virtue and knowledge are the main goals pursued by Chinese universities.

3. English Versions of Chinese University Mottos

3.1. Verbal Forms

Through the analysis and summary of the English version school mottos, as is shown in **Table 3**, the author found that English school mottos maintain a short

and refined language form, which words are simple and easy to understand. Based on different structures, it can be roughly divided into several categories in the above table: multi-purpose nouns, verbs, noun phrases, verb phrases and adjectives, etc. Only a few use long sentences. It can be seen that when translating the language of such slogans, it is necessary to pay attention to the simplicity, fluency and meaningfulness of the language. For example, the motto of Huazhong University of Science & Technology is “明德厚学，求是创新”，which was translated as: Virtue, Knowledge, Truth, Originality. The original eight-character words were translated into English into four noun forms juxtaposed, which showed the essence, highlighted key points and leaving deep impression on people. Another example is the school motto of Chongqing University, “耐劳苦、尚俭朴、勤学业、爱国家” was translated as: Endure Toil, Cherish Thrift, Work Hard and Love the Country. The original four-character verb phrase, when translated into English, keeps the form of the verb phrase unchanged, not only emphasizes the execution of the action, but also more like a kind of warning, which showed sincere feelings and touched people a lot.

Table 1. Speech forms in school mottos.

	two characters	three characters	four characters	sentences	Total
A set	0	0	7	0	7
Two sets	1	0	26	2	29
Three sets	1	0	1	1	3
Four sets	7	1	1	0	9
Five sets	1	0	0	0	1
Total	10	1	35	3	49

Table 2. High-frequency vocabularies in school mottos.

High-frequency Vocabulary	求是	博学	创新	自强	笃行	慎思	笃志	力行
Frequency	11	9	6	5	3	2	2	2

Table 3. Speech forms of english versions of school mottos.

Verbal Forms	numbers	Examples
N. + N.	9	Virtue, Knowledge, Truth, Originality
Adj. + N.	3	Great Virtue, Profound Knowledge, Total Commitment, Harmonious Cooperation
V + N.	15	Endure Toil, Cherish Thrift, Work Hard and Love the Country
Sentences	4	The movement of heaven is full of power.
Be + Adj.	3	Be trustworthy, be down-to-earth, be fond of learning, and practice earnestly
Adj. + prop + N.	1	Noble in Spirit; Boundless in Knowledge
Be + V./Adj.	2	Be erudite, practical and virtuous
Others	2	Objective and innovative, determination and persistence.

3.2. Translation Method

The English translation of the school motto includes a variety of methods, in addition to choosing the appropriate words, the translation method is also very important. By summarizing, it can be divided into the following categories:

3.2.1. Literal Translation

The method of literal translation is the simplest and the mostly used method (Zhao & Zhou, 2016). For example, the school motto of China Renmin University “实事求是” is itself an idiom, translated as “Seeking truth from facts”, and the words “忠信笃敬” translated into “Loyalty, Sincerity, Integrity and Respect”. The meaning is complete and clear, in line with the original school motto.

3.2.2. Omission

The translation method of omission is sometimes more concise and vivid when used correctly and appropriately. For example, in the Suzhou University School motto “养天地正气，法古今完人”，the two short sentences combined together can make sense and show its meaning. Yet it was translated into “Unto a full-grown man”, which means to grow into a perfect person. In this version it omitted the translation of the first half part of the sentence.

3.2.3. Interpretation

Sometimes, the words used in school mottos are from the ancient poems in ancient Chinese classics. However, after being placed into school mottos, the ancient poems cannot be translated according to the original meanings, or merely copy the existing standard English translations. For example, the second half part of Shanghai University school motto “自强不息；先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐” should not be translated as “Be concerned about the affairs of state before others, and enjoy comfort after others.” Instead, it should be combined together as a whole and translated as “The movement of heaven is full of power. Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring”

4. Enlightenment of Chinese University Mottos and Their Translation for Further Talent Cultivation

Based on the above analysis, this paper finds that there are two things people needs to rethink and make appropriate adjustments to improve university values and relocate university roles for themselves. It's shown as follows:

4.1. Change of Values and Goals

Looked through the school mottos of different universities, it's easy to find that the school mottos of Chinese universities are generally preferential towards the education of people's ideological and moral values and the pursuit of persistence and wisdom. In Chinese education system, it emphasizes that people should contribute values and influence the world by changing themselves. It pursues unification, common interests and harmony. It likes ambition and great will of

the people who work hard to be a complete and perfect person by thinking of, reflecting on, being harsh to themselves, and behave like words and deeds. However, these values do not reflect the expectations for students' hobbies, personality development, and independent courage. As one of the world's largest countries, China should pay more attention and conduct more discussions on personnel training and value concept renewal.

4.2. Belief in the Pursuit of Truth

When talking about the pursuit of truth in Chinese universities mottos, the top three high-frequency words are "seeking truth", "learning broad" and "innovation". Knowledge is important and yet truth is more worth exploring. The first step is to seek truth and discover the objective laws of things; the second step is to learn and to learn and absorb in a timely manner; the third step is to innovate and create new ones on the basis of existing knowledge. The same is true for talent cultivation, which is carried out step by step. Compared with the previous education, the university is not only the expansion of knowledge, but also the development of the way of thinking, discovery of interest, and realizing goals. This way of constantly striving towards goals is also the persistence of the truth in our hearts and the adherence to faith.

5. Summary

The connotation of Chinese university mottos is still worth learning and thinking. There are still many problems in the English translation of the mottos. As a translator and a postgraduate, the English translation of the school mottos still deserves our attention and be improved through practice. The content of the school mottos should keep pace with the times and reflect the spirits and philosophy of the university. Therefore, many of our repetitive and monotonous school mottos should be adjusted as appropriate. The translation of the mottos should also keep up with the pace and show the unique culture and education philosophy of Chinese universities to the world.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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