

Research on Translation of Traditional Chinese Medicine Classics Oriented to International Communication:A Thick Translation Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This study focuses on the causes of comprehension barriers for foreign readers arising from the absence of cultural context, and aims to explore adaptive translation and communication paths for the cross-cultural transmission of TCM culture.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Adopting Thick Translation as the theoretical foundation, this study combines historical literature review and typical case analysis: it first systematically reviews the existing researches in TCM classics' translation, then conducts in-depth analysis of the application mechanisms of Thick Translation strategies through representative translations, and finally put forward a new international communication paradigm for TCM classics based on Thick Translation.

Findings – This study shows that the Thick Translation paradigm shifts focus from linguistic conversion to cultural contextual interpretation. Adopting strategies including paratext supplementation, layered terminology interpretation and multimodal cooperation, it effectively resolves comprehension barriers from cultural gaps and facilitates the localization and integration of TCM culture overseas.

Research Implications – This study not only provides an operable framework for TCM classics translating practice, but also offers new pathways for constructing cultural identity in the international communication of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Medicine Classics; Thick Translation; International Communication; Cultural Identity

JEL Classifications: Z11,Z13

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I. Introduction

As an essential component of Chinese culture, the international communication of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) classics is not only the transmission of medical knowledge, but also the dissemination of Chinese culture and oriental philosophical wisdom.

Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Promoting the Inheritance, Innovation and Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine issued in 2019 has been serving as a programmatic document guiding TCM work in the new era. Implementation Plan for the Traditional Chinese Medicine Culture Promotion Project during the 14th Five-Year Plan Period in 2023 was the first special plan for TCM culture development jointly issued by 8 national ministries and commissions. In 2024, President Xi Jinping further clarifies the core direction of TCM international communication at the highest level, emphasizes that TCM should contribute to building a Global Community of Health for All, and puts forward urgent requirements for accelerating the cross-cultural dissemination of TCM culture and enhancing global cultural identity.

Over the past three decades, 29 or so linguistic and translation theories have been introduced into TCM translation research. Nevertheless, a unified mainstream theoretical system has not yet taken shape. Approximately 80% of academic papers lack solid theoretical support, resulting in insufficient standardization of relevant studies.

Based on the three major rules of Skopos Theory, Zhang J. (2019) has maintained that the translation of TCM classics should be target-audience-oriented, aiming to achieve specific goals for the overseas dissemination of TCM culture. In response to Zhang's viewpoint, Wang Jin et al. (2026) has explored the translation strategy from the perspective of communicative terminology TCM classics in Shandong. They have emphasized in accordance with the principles of systematicness, contextualization and effectiveness so as to realize the accurate translation of TCM terms. Furthermore, Wang and Wang (2024) have claimed that the lack of appropriate methods in translating practice has led to the misinterpretation of certain TCM terms. Li and Liu(2025) have undertaken a comprehensive research on the key issues of TCM culture translation and dissemination, and come to a conclusion that the international communication of TCM is, in essence, inter-civilizational dialogues transcending time and space. Hence, it is urgent to establish a translation methodology system to promote the standardization of TCM term translation.

Guided by thick translation theory, the author tends to explore the feasible ways to conduct translating traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) Classics so as to communicate TCM knowledge and oriental wisdom conforming to international standards.

II. Thick Translation Theory and Its Adaptability in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Classics Translation

Researches on the translation of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) classics have centered on sporadic commentary and analysis in the early stage, later displaying a diversified academic system including theoretical construction, strategic exploration, terminology standardization and paratextual analysis. These researches focus mainly on how to deal with the interrelationship between “inheritance of essence” of TCM culture and the “innovation” of cross-cultural communication, with the purpose of establishing the dominant position of traditional Chinese medicine in the international academic discourse system through standardized conversion in language and in-depth cognitive reconstruction. (Jiang & Liu, 2016).

1. Thick Translation Theory

Thick translation, put forward by Kwame Anthony Appiah(1993), an American philosopher, originated from an anthropological term, “thick description”. It is defined as putting original text back into its original cultural context by adding some ancillary materials like annotations, prefaces, endnotes etc. Since there are large quantity of culture-loaded words and terms in TCM classics, it is of great importance to translate them from the perspective of thick translation theory.

2. Textual Features of TCM Classics

After thousands of years of clinical practice, Traditional Chinese medicine has formed a unique system of basic theories and medicinal property theories, which have summarized common properties and major principles. What’s more, Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) classics are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture due to its long history, and they integrate three textual features including classical literature, traditional philosophy and ancient medicine, which are fundamentally different from modern medical documents of Western medicine. (Li & Li 2019)Their major textual features can be summarized as the following four points.

Firstly, TCM classics teem with traditional philosophies which contain countless of cultural loadings. Most medical terms in TCM classics integrate philosophical connotations with clinical practices. (Zhu Y. & Li H. 2023)Marked with distinctive Chinese cultural features, there are no equivalent expressions in English language for the culture-loaded terms.

Secondly, the language is highly generalized and abstract. Such terms as meridians, Triple Energizer and visceral manifestations are used to describe the holistic functional system of human Qi-blood circulation and visceral coordination, which differs considerably from Western medical documents.

Finally, since written in concise and implicit classical Chinese,TCM classics teem with extensive medical metaphors, forming a sharp contrast between plain literal meaning and profound underlying medical connotations.

To summarize, these textual features make it difficult for readers from English-speaking countries to understand the profound connotations only by the semantic meaning. Hence, thick translation is a feasible way to communicate connotations behind the surface meaning.

3. Adaptability of Thick Translation Theory in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Classics Translation

In view of the connotations of thick translation theory, the textual features of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) classics, and their translation challenges, thick translation is inherently compatible with the international dissemination of TCM classics, which is reflected in the following dimensions.

Firstly, by using thick translation, the translators manage to compensate for cultural defaults and narrow semantic gaps in translating TCM-specific cultural items. TCM classics are replete with philosophical and medical concepts with no equivalents in Western contexts, causing great obstacles in international communication. Secondly, under thick translation, conflicts between Chinese and Western medical discourse systems have been on the decrease and therefore, cognitive barriers have been eliminated to some degree. Furthermore, a balance between textual fidelity and readability has been stricken, thus balancing fidelity to the source culture with readability for readers from English-speaking countries. Finally, multi-tiered readers' needs can be met and diversified international dissemination scenarios are to be created by thick translation strategy. TCM classics mainly serve two distinct groups, and they are researchers and general overseas readers. And by using thick translation, translators can diagnose the depth and format of annotations in their translating process, thus enhancing the effectiveness of TCM classics cross-cultural communication.

III. Application of Thick Translation Theory in Translating Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Classics

1. Constructing Cultural Context Framework Under Paratext Strategies

In translating traditional Chinese medicine classics, paratexts are used to refer to auxiliary texts and symbols promoting cross-cultural understanding and serving as a vital translation strategy. (Hermans, 2003; Chesterman, 2016) Paratexts are usually classified into six types, among which prefaces and introductions establish macroscopic cognition, chapters guide set reading expectations, footnotes and endnotes supplement micro cultural backgrounds of the original works, appendices provide practical indexes, charts and illustrations elucidate abstract concepts and terminology, and postscripts, translator's notes interpret the translating logic. Among these strategies, footnotes and endnotes, charts and illustrations have been typically used in translating Qianjin Yifang.

Footnotes and endnotes have been employed to supplement the cultural connotations of philosophical

terms. For instance, “太一”, an important term in traditional Chinese philosophy, is defined “the origin of the Universe”, or “Supreme Truth” in Qianjin Yifang. In order to retain the cultural connotations, and at the mean time, to communicate precisely and understandably, footnote has been used to provide to deconstruct the original meaning from different perspectives, and then reconstruct a cultural context for target readers.

Charts and illustrations are also utilized to visualize the cultural metaphors in Qianjin Yifang since there are large quantities of cultural metaphors in this classic. The concepts including “君臣佐使”, a principle of formula composition, “五劳七伤”, a core concept of TCM etiology and pathogenesis, as well as “三部九候”, an important way of TCM pulse diagnosis are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture which have no equivalents in the west. Therefore, it is advisable to concretize them by using cultural images in politics and body parts and human organs to make them more friendly for target readers.

2. Translating Terminology in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Classics by Hierarchical Approaches

Since traditional translation methods meet the dilemma —“loss of meaning by literal translation”, and “loss of image only by free translation”, hierarchical approaches can be adopted in translating terminology in TCM classics aiming to form a progressive cognitive guidance system. The hierarchy of terminology interpretation can be illustrated as table 1.

Table 1. Hierarchical Interpretation of Terminology

Level	Methods	Core Connotation and Practice
Level1	Transliteration	Chinese Pinyin is used to preserve unique TCM cultural symbols.
Level2	Literal / Free Translation	Basic understanding is formed by literal translation or semantic conversion.
Level3	Cultural Annotation	Philosophical connotations and cultural context behind terminology are provided.
Level4	Correlative Interpretation	TCM concepts are incorporated with modern medical theories or daily life experience.

Source: Compiled by the author

As is shown in table 1, by using hierarchical interpretation, the translators can not only retain the uniqueness of traditional Chinese culture, but also eliminate barriers to cross-cultural understanding, striking a balance between accuracy and acceptability in the transmission of TCM terminology.

3. In-depth Engagement of Visual Culture Based on Multimodal Strategies

Multimodal strategies have broken the communication limitations of a single textual mode and achieved the three-dimensional construction of cultural context through the in-depth involvement of visual culture in translating traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) classics. (Xu&Zhang, 2025) Among these translating practices, translations related to Huangdi Neijing are quite noticeable, in which the profound philosophical connotations and abstract theories may cause inherent challenges for target language audiences.

By employing illustrations and diagrams, translators can provide an effective solution to the above problem by conversing abstract TCM theories and concepts into visual language, making it possible for target-language readers. Some English versions include visualized adapted versions of Neijing Tu (Internal Classic Diagram), which describe the circulation routes of meridians vividly and mark the positions of zang-fu organs precisely. Such difficulties consist of those of core theories in traditional Chinese medicine including “三焦”, “卫气”, “藏象”, diagnostic and therapeutic statements, as well as pulse diagnosis texts. By thick translation, readers from English-speaking countries can grasp the core framework of the meridian system without relying on complex textual explanations. For the TCM formula compatibility principle of “monarch-minister-assistant-courier”, translators have adopted graphical forms such as flowcharts and structural diagrams so as to present the hierarchical relationships and compatibility logic clearly. For philosophical concepts including “Qi” and “Yin-Yang” run through the entire book, the translators have employed natural metaphors to help readers in understanding profound connotations in the original works.

By integrating calligraphic elements into translation process, it is possible for translators to produce translated versions with cultural expression at an aesthetic level. Some incorporate Chinese calligraphy alongside chapter titles and core terms, which not only helps to preserve the formal beauty of Chinese characters but also strengthens the uniqueness of TCM culture through visual symbols. Thus readers from English-speaking countries can experience the artistic charm of traditional Chinese culture while reading the text, achieving the goal of semantic transmission and aesthetic experience.

Multimodal practices have further shown a digital extension trend. Cutting-edge versions such as Paul U. Unschuld’s English translation of Huangdi Neijing innovatively include QR codes, standing as a model in this field. (Xu&Zhang, 2025) By scanning these codes, readers can get access to large quantity of video resources, making the abstract diagnostic and therapeutic methods as well as health-preserving concepts more easily to be understood. In essence, these multimodal strategies can be seen as an extension of thick translation. Visual and textual modes are not mere additions but form a synergistic and complementary communication force. The textual mode makes it possible for translators to ensure the academic accuracy and in-depth transmission of the cultural connotations, while the visual mode decreases cognitive barriers considerably for cross-cultural understanding. In complement, they help to construct a complete TCM cultural context, enabling the cross-cultural communication to maintain academic depth while achieving greater readability and appeal.

IV. Constructing a New Thick Translation-Oriented International Communication Paradigm for TCM Classics

With the development of cross-cultural communication of traditional Chinese medicine, translating and transmitting TCM classics have ushered in a new era, and the linguistic-oriented translation model is far from sufficient to convey cultural connotations and gaining public acceptance. Because of the focus on multidimensional context construction, hierarchical interpretation and multimodal collaboration, thick translation is to tackle the dilemma of separation between academic rigor and popular accessibility. On this basis, the author is tentatively committed to constructing a new paradigm of international communication guided by thick translation, with the purpose of exploring a balanced path between cultural authenticity and communication effectiveness, and shedding some light on the global dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine culture.

1. Cultural Turn in TCM Classics Translation

In the development of translating traditional Chinese medicine classics, translators’ guiding principles have undergone a profound transformation, which have shifted from semantic conversion centered on linguistic equivalence to cultural interpretation aimed at context restoration and connotation transmission. They differ considerably in both translation philosophy, translator’s role, textual form, reader orientation and communication pursuit, clearly reflecting the innovation of communication concepts guided by thick translation. The differences can be seen in table 2:

Table 2. Traditional Paradigm vs.Thick Translation Paradigm

Dimension	Traditional Paradigm	Thick Translation Paradigm
Translation Philosophy	A tool for linguistic conversion	A practice of cultural interpretation
Translator’s Role	Language converter	Cultural mediator
Text Presentation	Single text	Multi-voiced composite text
Reader Orientation	Information recipient	Cultural participant

Source: Compiled by the author

As can be seen from table 2, the traditional paradigm regards translation as mere linguistic replacement, where translators only act as language converters to deliver information to readers. By contrast, from thick translation perspective, translation is considered as an act of cultural interpretation. Translators’ role has been transformed to cultural intermediaries, who have been constructing composite texts through paratextual and multimodal means. This transforms readers from passive recipients into active participants, ultimately enabling

the authentic localization and dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine culture worldwide.

2. Building a Three-Dimensional Thick Translation Texts Based on Content Production Paradigm

The content production paradigm of three-dimensional thick translation texts achieves an in-depth leap from textual transmission to cultural interpretation through the collaborative construction of the framework layer, main body layer and extension layer.

The framework layer has laid a cognitive foundation through extended introductions and chapter guides, among which extended introduction focuses on the core contextual background of classics. For instance, the introduction in Sabine Wilms' *Prescriptions Worth a Thousand in Gold for Every Emergency Vol. II-IV* expounds the philosophical origin of Yin–Yang and Five Elements, the medical development background of the Qin–Han period, and the core concepts such as Qi and meridians, by which the translator has established a macroscopic knowledge framework for target readers. What's more, chapter guides precisely focus on the key points and logical clues of each chapter. Taking *Venerating the Root Part 1–Volume 5: Pediatrics (I)* as an example, in this part the translator has clarified the central interconnection between yang Qi and life activities, sorted out the reading path of “operation rules of yang Qi—harms of imbalance—maintenance methods”, and by doing so, he has removed barriers for readers from English-speaking countries to understand the abstract medical theories.

In the main body layer, the core structure of translated text plus hierarchical annotations have been adopted to interpret accurately through diversified annotation types and layered presentation. In this field, annotations are chiefly composed of conceptual interpretation such as the physiological functions of Sanjiao, (an important concept of anatomical locations), allusion interpretation on the cultural origin of dialogues between Qi Bo and Huangdi, textual version annotation on textual differences among ancient manuscripts, and comparative interpretation distinguishing TCM five zang-organs from modern medical visceral organs. Annotations are usually classified into three types: one is a basic layer, providing essential definitions in footnotes, such as the basic meaning of Daoyin; the other is an extended layer, supplementing academic findings, such as discussions on the essence of meridians by physicians of past dynasties. Furthermore, in-text implicit notes are also adopted for complex terms to balance reading fluency and academic depth.

The extension layer is usually composed of a knowledge expansion system consisting of appendixes, terminology compilations and references, among which appendixes collect historical documents such as summaries of annotated editions of *Huangdi Neijing* across dynasties and research reviews such as international studies on meridian theories, providing clues for in-depth academic exploration. Terminology compilations merge pronunciation, form and meaning as a whole. For example, the entry of Yin–Yang marks its Chinese Pinyin and English translation, elucidates its evolutionary context from philosophical connotation to medical application, and builds a complete conceptual network by labeling correlations between Yin–Yang, cold-heat, and deficiency-excess, which facilitate the readers in shaping systematic cognition. The three-layer structure

enables translators to go beyond simple semantic transfer and evolve into a cultural communication carrier with both readability and academic value in their translating practice.

3. Multi-Channel In-Depth Reach Based on Communication Channel Paradigm

In the communication channel paradigm, researchers mainly focus on how to construct a multi-path outreach system, with the purpose of achieving full-coverage dissemination of TCM classic translations. The academic communication pathway focuses on shaping professional influence by collaborating with internationally renowned university presses to publish professional translated versions, by doing so, they guarantee academic rigor and communication credibility. Meanwhile, it promotes the integration of translated works into the curriculum systems of East Asian Studies and Medical History departments in overseas universities, serving as core textbooks for cross-cultural medical research. Furthermore, by publishing academic book reviews and thematic research papers in top international journals, scholars have started heated discussions and sustained academic dissemination momentum—exemplified by Paul U. Unschuld's English translation of Huangdi Neijing and Sabine Wilms' *Prescriptions Worth a Thousand in Gold for Every Emergency Vol. II–IV*, which has been adopted as a designated reference book by a large number of higher education institutions over the world.

In broadening the public communication pathway, great emphasis has been attached to lowering access barriers for the general readers to meet their cognitive needs. Popular editions have been developed, adding more core annotations while simplifying textual research and academic controversies to enhance public accessibility of TCM culture, which also realizes synergistic dissemination by integrating audio-visual products such as documentaries and short videos; for instance, *Herbal China*, an overseas broadcast of the documentary, has been accompanied by the simultaneous release of supporting translations. Additionally, it takes the advantage of social media platforms to establish reader communities, facilitating reading exchanges and interactive discussions through topic-based interactions and online Q&A sessions, thereby strengthening audience engagement.

It can not be denied that technology has upgraded TCM classics translation and dissemination via three pathways in complement, among which digital platforms with hyperlinks provides easy access by integrating translations, annotations with academic resources for easy access. AR/VR creates immersive diagnosis/treatment experiences, facilitating audience's intuitive understanding of TCM practices. Big data is employed to cater for their needs and optimize annotation design by analyzing readers' behaviors. All the three pathways intend to balance academic depth and public reach in supplementation, therefore enhancing efficiency and experience to build a comprehensive 3D communication framework.

V. Challenges and Implications

1. Challenges in Translating TCM Classics in Digital Era

In digital era, there are five prominent problems in the international communication of traditional Chinese medicine culture proposed by researchers.(Zhang et al.,2025)

Firstly, cultural backgrounds, values and medical systems are noticeably different between China and the English-speaking countries. Therefore, the potential cross-cultural barriers in the discourse system make it quite difficult for Western audiences to deeply understanding its cultural connotations. Secondly, new communication carriers such as new media and artificial intelligence are far from fully utilized, with the shortage of platform supervision and development. Thirdly, the coordination mechanism among communicators also needs to be improved, with the government taking the lead while civil forces act separately. Finally, the shortage of interdisciplinary international talents has become a major bottleneck in this field of research.

Therefore, immediate actions should be taken: firstly, in translating TCM classics, translators should not

Merely as language converters, but as cultural intermediaries; secondly, more new media should be utilized to create new paths for cultural communication. What's more, talents training should be strengthened to break the ice.

2. Implications

In translating TCM classics, the translator's role has considerably changed, not merely as a language converter, but as a cultural mediator, which requires translators to possess interdisciplinary literacy encompassing linguistics, medical history, and philosophy. What's more, individual translators can hardly meet such complex demands; hence, a collaborative team model integrating translators, TCM specialists, historians, and communication scholars is urgently needed.(Zhang and Jia, 2025) Fundamentally, this transformation relies on constructing an interdisciplinary training pathway to cultivate compound translation talents who have an excellent mastery of multidisciplinary knowledge and cross-cultural communication competence.

Through thick translation, scholars can construct a comprehensive cultural context for traditional Chinese medicine classics, yet it remains uncertain whether readers can voluntarily accept and engage with such a context. This is mainly constrained by three factors, including the reading conventions of target-language readers, their tolerance for foreign cultures, and the overall cognitive foundation of TCM overseas. In response, it is essential to foster a favorable reception sphere and context. By means of media communication, educational integration and immersive cultural experiences, we can lay a consolid foundation of cultural dissemination and gradually so as to enhance overseas audiences' willingness to embrace the cultural context of traditional Chinese medicine.

VI. Conclusion

The international communication of TCM classics reflects expectations for Chinese culture's global outreach, yet quite a number of translation products fail to live up to stronger cultural recognition among readers from English-speaking countries—linguistic conversion without cultural context transmission fails to resonate with foreign readers. Framing translation as cultural interpretation and communication as meaning co-construction, thick translation theory offers a new solution for this problem. The paradigm evolution of TCM classics' foreign translation, from missionary-era domestication to scholarly philological research and today's communication-focused turn, centers on balancing TCM's heterogeneity with cross-cultural understanding.

The Thick Translation-oriented paradigm has constructed comprehensive cultural contexts via paratexts, hierarchical terminology interpretation, and multimodal collaboration, facilitating readers' understanding and interpretation of TCM terms and abstract concepts beyond semantic decoding. This represents a great transformation and innovation of translation strategy and communication concept, shifting from "sending" to "receiving" and "textual arrival" to "meaning rooting." Amid globalization and digitalization, only by providing rich, accessible cultural contexts can we communicate and disseminate TCM wisdom and oriental healthy philosophy worldwide.

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