

Research on the English Translation Strategy of Qigong Terminology based on Hermeneutics

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Abstract: Qigong is an important part of traditional Chinese health preservation culture, and the accurate translation of its terms is of great significance for international communication. Currently, there are many deficiencies in the translation of Qigong terms, such as a lack of systematicity and inconsistent translations. Based on hermeneutics theory, this study analyzes the factors influencing the acceptance of Qigong term translations, and constructs an evaluation model for translation acceptance, covering three dimensions: culture, language, and readers. Accordingly, translation strategies are proposed, including culturally adaptive translation, optimization of language structure, reader stratification strategies, horizon fusion, and the hermeneutic circle, etc. The aim is to balance the cultural connotations and readers' acceptance, and to promote the international communication of Qigong culture.

Keywords: Qigong terms; Translation strategies; Hermeneutics; Acceptance

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1. Introduction

As a vital component of traditional Chinese health-cultivation culture, Qigong encompasses profound philosophical ideas and practical methods. With its global dissemination, the accurate translation of Qigong terminology has become increasingly critical. However, research on Qigong cultural translation remains scarce. Over the past two decades, few relevant studies have been conducted, primarily focusing on: (1) principles and methods of Qigong translation ^[1-3]; (2) translation of the titles of Qigong forms ^[4-6]; and (3) translation of common Qigong terms ^[7,8]. A systematic framework for Qigong terminology translation research is yet to be established.

The significant cultural disparities between China and the West, combined with the specialized and unique nature of Qigong terminology, pose numerous challenges to accurate translation. Moreover, inconsistencies in translations of the same term across different dictionaries hinder the dissemination and exchange of Qigong knowledge, potentially leading to misunderstandings and misinterpretations among international audiences.

The rise of hermeneutics in translation studies offers a novel perspective and methodology for addressing these challenges.

Hermeneutics is a discipline dedicated to understanding and interpretation. In the 1970s, hermeneutic theory began to be applied to translation studies. Hans-Georg Gadamer proposed that understanding arises from the “fusion of horizons” between the interpreter and the text, asserting that translation is not merely an interlingual transfer but an interaction between two cultural horizons ^[9]. George Steiner challenged the traditional assumption of the “translator’s invisibility” and introduced a four-step translation process—trust, aggression, incorporation, and compensation—thereby emphasizing the translator’s subjectivity ^[10]. By the late 20th century, hermeneutic ideas were introduced to China, significantly advancing the application and development of hermeneutic approaches to translation within the Chinese academic community. In the early 21st century, scholars translating ancient traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) texts began adopting hermeneutic theories to guide Qigong translation practices and comparative studies ^[11-14]. Concepts such as translator subjectivity and the fusion of horizons have also been utilized to analyze how translators interpret original TCM classics ^[15-17]. Despite the attention hermeneutic approaches have garnered among TCM translation scholars, systematic applications of hermeneutic theory to Qigong terminology translation remain rare. This theoretical gap has left Qigong terminology translation studies without a robust philosophical and methodological foundation.

Exploring diverse Qigong terminology translations from a hermeneutical perspective, analyzing the translator’s subjectivity and the fusion of horizons between the translator and the original text, and dialectically understanding phenomena such as interpretive mistranslation can inject new vitality into Qigong terminology translation research. This approach aims to establish more comprehensive translation standards, effectively showcasing the essence of Chinese culture. By examining factors influencing the acceptability of Qigong terminology translations, constructing an evaluation model for translation acceptability, and proposing targeted hermeneutics-based translation strategies, this study seeks to balance cultural connotation transmission and reader receptivity, thereby promoting the global dissemination of Qigong culture.

2. Analysis of factors influencing translation acceptability

2.1. Cultural background differences

Significant disparities exist between Chinese and Western cultures in philosophy, religion, and modes of thinking, profoundly influencing the acceptability of Qigong terminology translation. In philosophy, traditional Chinese philosophy emphasizes concepts such as “harmony between man and nature,” “yin-yang balance,” and the “Doctrine of the Mean,” which pervade Qigong theories and practices. Qigong cultivation highlights the unity between the human body and nature, aspiring to achieve a state of fusion with the cosmos. By contrast, Western philosophy emphasizes the subject-object dichotomy, focusing on rational analysis of the objective world. For example, the term “*Dazhoutian*” (大 周 天 / Macrocosmic Qi Circulation, a Qigong practice involving the circulation of vital Qi through the entire body’s meridians) embodies the “harmony between man and nature” philosophy, drawing an analogy between the circulation of Qi and blood in the human meridians and celestial movements. Western readers, lacking an understanding of the Chinese philosophical relationship between “heaven” (nature) and “man,” struggle to grasp its profound connotations. In Western thought, the human body and nature are viewed as separate entities, creating a barrier to understanding the essence of “Great Circulation.”

In the realm of religion, Chinese Qigong culture is deeply intertwined with Taoism and Buddhism. Qigong terminology integrates core concepts from both Taoism and Buddhism. For instance, Taoist notions like “*Dao*” (道, the Way of nature) and “*Qi*” (气, vital energy) coexist with Buddhist practices such as “*Chanding*” (禅定, Dhyana meditation, a state of mental focus and tranquility central to Qigong and Buddhist cultivation) and “*Niepan*” (涅槃, ultimate liberation through extinction of suffering). In contrast, Western spiritual traditions, predominantly shaped by Christianity and Catholicism, diverge fundamentally in doctrines and practices. For example, translating “*Chanding*” poses challenges: Western readers may misinterpret its goal of transcending ego through focused awareness, as Christian meditation typically emphasizes communion with God rather than ego dissolution. Christian practices like meditation and prayer differ fundamentally from Buddhist “*Chanding*” in purpose, methodology, and spiritual attainment, often leading to misunderstandings among Western audiences.

In terms of cognitive patterns, Chinese thinking leans toward imagery and intuition, emphasizing holistic perception, while Western thinking is more logical and analytical. Qigong terminology frequently uses cultural metaphors to conceptualize abstract ideas. For instance, the term “*Haidi*” (海底, lit. “sea bottom”) serves as a symbolic designation for the perineum’s Qi hub in Chinese energetic anatomy, representing it as the foundational reservoir of primordial Qi in the human body. While this marine metaphor aligns with Chinese cognitive styles, it may confuse Western readers accustomed to logical analysis.

2.2. Linguistic expression habits

Differences in linguistic structure and vocabulary between Chinese and English also critically affect the acceptability of Qigong terminology translation. Structurally, Chinese is a paratactic language, relying on semantic and contextual logic with flexible grammar, whereas English is hypotactic, using vocabulary, grammar, and conjunctions to establish rigid logical frameworks. Translating Qigong terms often encounters difficulties due to this contrast. For instance, the term “*Xingqi*” (行气, Qi circulation) encompasses multiple actions: breathing exercises, guiding Qi, and internal Qi flow. A literal translation like “breathing and guiding Qi” fails to capture its full scope. A more precise rendering—“performing breathing exercises and guiding the circulation of internal Qi”—articulates the actions and logical sequence, reducing ambiguity for Western readers.

Lexically, Chinese terms are rich in cultural connotations and polysemy, especially in Qigong terminology, where meanings depend heavily on context. English vocabulary, in contrast, is relatively denotative and context-specific. For example, “*Xuanguan*” (玄关) in Qigong does not simply mean “entrance,” but refers to vital acupoints or critical Qi centers in the body. A direct translation like “entrance” loses its cultural specificity, leaving Western readers perplexed. Additionally, collocation habits differ sharply between the two languages. Unique Chinese phrases like “concentrate the mind on Dantian” (意守丹田) and “open meridians” (打通经络) sound awkward in literal translation. Optimized versions such as “focus one’s mind on the Dantian area” and “unblock meridians” align better with English conventions.

2.3. Reader cognitive levels

Readers’ varying levels of familiarity with Qigong terminology significantly impact translation acceptability. Those versed in Chinese culture and TCM can better grasp terminological nuances through their existing knowledge of philosophy, religion, and TCM theories. For example, terms like *Dazhoutian* (大周天, Macrocosmic Qi Circulation) and *Xiaozhoutian* (小周天, Microcosmic Qi Circulation) evoke concepts of meridians and Qi circulation tied to “harmony between man and nature,” allowing them to infer meaning even

from imperfect translations. Conversely, readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture and TCM face substantial barriers. Translating “*Dantian*” (丹田) as “Dantian” without explanation leaves Western readers unaware of its location, function, and role in Qigong practice. To enhance accessibility, annotations like “Dantian is a Qi center located below the navel, critical for Qi cultivation in Qigong” can bridge this gap.

Readers’ language proficiency and learning ability also play critical roles. Those with strong language skills can decode complex translations, while less proficient readers may struggle. Learners with proactive attitudes may seek supplementary resources, whereas passive readers may only gain a superficial understanding. Thus, Qigong terminology translation should adopt audience-tailored strategies—such as explanatory notes or simplified language—to accommodate diverse cognitive levels and enhance overall acceptability.

3. Hermeneutics-based model for assessing the acceptability of qigong terminology translation

To evaluate the acceptability of Qigong terminology translation more scientifically and comprehensively, this study proposes a hermeneutics-based assessment model. This model integrates cultural, linguistic, and reader-oriented dimensions, aiming to establish a systematic framework for assessing the quality of Qigong terminology translations.

3.1. Cultural dimension

As the core component of the assessment model, the cultural dimension evaluates whether translations accurately convey the cultural connotations embedded in Qigong terminology. For instance, the term “*Chanding*” (禅定) is translated as “Concentrated Meditation” (from the Dictionary of Commonly Used Terms in Chinese Medical Qigong ^[18]) and “dhyana stability” (from the Chinese-English Dictionary of Qigong Studies ^[19]), which differ significantly in cultural resonance. “Concentrated Meditation” draws on Western readers’ familiarity with meditation, emphasizing the behavioral aspect of focused concentration, aligning with Western cultural perceptions of mindfulness. This approach facilitates initial comprehension of the term’s basic meaning. In contrast, “dhyana stability” directly incorporates the Sanskrit word “dhyana,” preserving its Buddhist cultural specificity. However, this translation poses challenges for Western readers unfamiliar with Sanskrit or Buddhist traditions. To retain Qigong’s cultural essence, supplementary annotations may be necessary. When assessing translations through the cultural lens, factors such as accuracy, completeness of cultural transmission, and alignment with target-language cultural norms must be analyzed. Translations that preserve the original term’s cultural uniqueness while achieving a fusion of horizons (a key concept from hermeneutic theory) with the target culture—enabling Western readers to grasp its deeper cultural significance—score higher in this dimension.

3.2. Linguistic dimension

This dimension focuses on whether the translation adheres to the linguistic norms and grammatical rules of the target language. For example, the term “*Xingqi*” (行气) is translated as “Circulation of Qi” and “respiration” in different dictionaries. “Circulation of Qi” employs formal and precise language, where “circulation” explicitly conveys the cyclical movement of internal Qi, faithfully reflecting the core meaning of “*Xingqi*.” Conversely, “respiration” reduces the term to “breathing,” failing to capture the broader concepts of internal Qi flow and guided movement inherent in “*Xingqi*.” When evaluating translations linguistically, factors such as lexical appropriateness, grammatical correctness, and natural fluency are examined. Translations that align with the

target language's conventions, ensuring ease of comprehension and acceptance, receive higher ratings in this dimension.

3.3. Reader dimension

This critical dimension assesses the target audience's comprehension and acceptance of the translation. Different reader groups vary widely in their familiarity with Qigong terminology and cultural background, leading to divergent levels of acceptability. Readers well-versed in Chinese culture and traditional medicine may prefer translations that retain cultural specificity and technical terms, while Western audiences with limited exposure to Chinese traditions may favor simplified, culturally adapted translations. For example, the transliteration "Dantian" is easily understood by readers familiar with Chinese culture. However, for Western readers, an explanatory note is essential: "Dantian, usually referring to an area about three inches below the navel, which is considered a crucial site for storing vital Qi and is central to Qigong practice." When evaluating translations through the reader lens, the diverse needs and backgrounds of target audiences must be considered. Translations that balance clarity with cultural fidelity, catering to the majority's understanding and acceptance, perform better in this dimension.

4. Translation strategies for Qigong terminology

4.1. Culturally adaptive translation

For terms embedded with unique philosophical or religious connotations, such as "*Qi*" (气) or "*Chanding*" (禅定), it is necessary to prioritize transliteration or literal translation with annotations to preserve cultural distinctiveness. For example, "*Chanding*" could be translated as "Dhyana Meditation," supplemented by a footnote explaining its Buddhist cultural context to ensure readers grasp its deeper meaning.

For culturally unique terms with no direct Western equivalents, such as "*Dazhoutian*" (大周天), functional analogy or cultural imagery reconstruction is employed. For example, translating "*Dazhoutian*" as "Macrocosmic Qi Circulation" utilizes "macrocosmic" to evoke the Daoist cosmological principle of unity between the human body and the universe, while "Qi circulation" retains the term's cultural specificity yet resonates with Western readers' familiarity with Qi-based frameworks. This strategy negotiates cultural authenticity and cross-cultural intelligibility.

4.2. Linguistic structure optimization

Chinese paratactic structures are adapted (which prioritize meaning-based cohesion) into English hypotactic frameworks (reliant on grammatical cohesion). For example, translating "*Xingqi*" (行气) as "Guiding and Circulating Qi" employs conjunctions to explicate implicit causal or sequential relationships (e.g., "guiding in order to circulate"), thereby improving coherence for English readers.

A standardized Qigong terminology database has been developed to harmonize translations of core concepts. For instance, retaining the culturally rooted term *Qi* (气) rather than substituting it with generic terms like "energy," which risks diluting its philosophical specificity. Such standardization should reference authoritative glossaries to align with global scholarly conventions while acknowledging context-dependent flexibility for pedagogical or popular contexts.

4.3. Reader-tailored strategies

It is also important to differentiate between professional readers, such as researchers or TCM practitioners,

and general readers. For specialists, transliteration or “transliteration + annotation” can be used. For example, “*Dantian*” (丹田) can be translated as “Dantian, the Qi center below the navel.” For general readers, explanatory translations will be favored. For example, “*Shou dantian*” (守丹田) can be translated as “mindful focus on the body’s core Qi hub,” ensuring relevance and effectiveness for diverse audiences.

Multimodal supplements are leveraged to enhance comprehension. Beyond textual translation, integrate diagrams, videos, or illustrations (e.g., provide meridian charts for “*Jingluo*” 经络) to demystify abstract concepts, lower cognitive barriers, and facilitate cross-cultural acceptance of Qigong practices.

4.4. Fusion of horizons and translation strategy selection

4.4.1. Fusion with the author’s horizon

Accurate translation of Qigong terminology hinges on achieving a fusion of horizons between the translator and the original author. Taking “*Chanding*” (禅定) as an example: the author’s horizon is rooted in Buddhist culture and philosophy, where “*Chanding*” signifies not mere meditation but a spiritual practice of focused introspection aimed at enlightenment and liberation, deeply tied to Buddhist doctrines like those in the Heart Sutra or Diamond Sutra.

To align with the author’s horizon, translators must immerse themselves in Buddhist texts and practices to grasp the term’s cultural and spiritual weight. While “Concentrated Meditation” superficially mirrors the concept, it fails to convey the Buddhist-specific methods and aspirations. A more nuanced translation, such as “Dhyana Meditation,” paired with a footnote detailing its Buddhist origins and alignment with yogic traditions (e.g., “a state of mental focus and tranquility central to Qigong and Buddhist cultivation”), better preserves the original horizon while fostering cross-cultural resonance.

4.4.2. Fusion of horizons with target readers

During translation, translators must not only interpret the information conveyed in the source language but also consider the target readers’ cultural backgrounds, cognitive levels, and linguistic habits. Presenting source-language information in a manner accessible to target readers is crucial for effective communication. Taking the translation of “*Minggong*” (命功) as an example, the Chinese-English Dictionary of Qigong translates it as “life exercise,” a straightforward rendering that hints at physical training but fails to convey its deeper connotations of cultivating vital Qi and balancing life force through breath regulation. This may lead to cultural generalization, conflating Qigong with yoga or Pilates. In contrast, in the Dictionary of Commonly Used Terms in Qigong and Chinese Medicine, the term “*Minggong*” (命功) is translated as “Bodily Cultivation.” Here, “Bodily” directly corresponds to the dimension of “physical refinement,” while “Cultivation” implicitly conveys the ideas of long-term practice and the sublimation of energy. This translation aligns with the “active practices” (有为功夫) of internal alchemy (内丹术), thereby more accurately reflecting the essence of “*Minggong*” as a discipline rooted in tangible, embodied cultivation. For Western general readers unfamiliar with these concepts, supplementary functional descriptions like “Bodily Cultivation: A Taoist practice for strengthening foundational life energy” can bridge cultural gaps and foster a fusion of horizons.

4.5. The Hermeneutic Circle in translation

The Hermeneutic Circle refers to the translator’s iterative process of verifying “whole-part-whole” relationships to achieve dynamic balance between source-culture connotations and target-language expressions. In Qigong terminology translation, this manifests as the pre-understanding phase, local verification phase, and global

reconstruction phase.

Pre-understanding phase: Building initial interpretation based on cultural contexts such as Taoist internal alchemy and TCM meridian theory. For example, “*Haidi*” (海底) specifically denotes the perineum, a Qi hub where the Conception vessel and Governor Vessel intersect, rather than its literal meaning “bottom of the sea.”

Local verification phase: Deepening understanding through contextual analysis and terminological comparison. For instance, examining the functional links between “*Haidi*” (海底), “*Dantian*” (丹田), and “*Minggong*” (命功) reveals that a literal translation like “bottom of the sea” misses its significant meaning—“Core of Qi.”

Global reconstruction phase: Selecting translation strategies (e.g., transliteration + annotation or cultural analogy) while considering target readers’ interpretation of TCM Qi systems, and validating terminological consistency.

Taking “*Haidi*” (海底) translation as an example: Initially, a translator might render it as “bottom of the sea” based on surface-level understanding. However, after studying Qigong cultural systems (e.g., Huangdi Neijing and Baopuzi), they discovered their connection to the Dantian as a vital Qi convergence point. This prompts a revised translation: “Perineum (the lower Dantian).” This process—from partial literal understanding to holistic cultural study and back to precise terminological grasp—exemplifies the Hermeneutic Circle. For non-academic readers, further annotations like “Haidi: The foundational Qi reservoir in Taoist self-cultivation practices” can enhance comprehension. Through this iterative cycle, translators refine interpretations and promote accurate cultural transmission.

5. Conclusion

Adopting a hermeneutical perspective holds promise for unifying cultural depth and communicative effectiveness in Qigong terminology translation. Translation is not merely linguistic transfer but a process of regenerating and sharing cultural meaning. Future research could focus on advancing terminological standardization, multimodal dissemination, and interdisciplinary collaboration to facilitate “fusion of horizons” for Qigong culture in the global context, showcasing the unique wisdom of Chinese civilization.

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