

# Current Status, Characteristics, and Future Research Perspectives on the Translation and Dissemination of Chinese Calligraphy Culture

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**Abstract:** In response to the various “bottlenecks” faced in the research on the translation and introduction of Chinese calligraphy culture abroad, this paper briefly reviews the current research status of Chinese calligraphy culture “going global” from two aspects: overseas dissemination and development, and domestic inheritance and translation. It summarizes the basic characteristics of research on the translation and introduction of Chinese calligraphy culture. Furthermore, it looks forward to research on Chinese calligraphy translation from three perspectives: communication studies, cultural translation, and terminology translation. The paper aims to further open up new ideas for the smooth advancement of research on the translation and introduction of Chinese calligraphy culture abroad.

**Keywords:** Chinese calligraphy culture; C-E translation; Characteristics; Prospects from the research perspectives

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## 1. Introduction

In context of the “Belt and Road” initiative, it has already become an unavoidable contemporary mission for every Chinese translator to present China’s wisdom to the world in a comprehensive, accurate, and continuous manner, and to showcase a positive image of China. Therefore, as a fundamental element of the core competitiveness of Chinese culture going global, the international translation and dissemination of Chinese calligraphy (ITDCC) has been hindered for a long time, with potential “bottlenecks”<sup>[1]</sup> urgently needing resolution. Hence, it is necessary to understand the current situation, characteristics, and feasible research perspectives of the ITDCC.

## 2. Current Research Status

At present, the inheritance, dissemination, and ITDCC at home and abroad are as follows:

## 2.1. Overseas Dissemination and Development

As of now, the ITDCC abroad are mainly reflected in the following four aspects:

### 2.1.1. The Ontological Communication of the Calligraphy World

According to relevant researches, there are four types of ontological communication of the calligraphy world:

- (1) Organic spread: It was spontaneously passed down by overseas Chinese, such as compiling and publishing English versions of Chinese textbooks<sup>[2]</sup>;
- (2) Conscious Learning: Since 1968, Paris III University has offered calligraphy courses. It was the first time that a calligraphy course was offered in a French university, with 10-20 students enrolling each year.
- (3) External Communication: There are only several calligraphers who actively promoted and communicated Chinese calligraphy externally through their own actions<sup>[3]</sup>.
- (4) Proactive communication by international friends: The former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon used to take an interest in Chinese calligraphy in his spare time, actively learning, practicing copying masterworks, and creating his own pieces.

### 2.1.2. Translation and Communication Studies in the Field of Translation

Based on his edited work *The Art of Chinese Calligraphy*<sup>[4]</sup>, Ouyang Zhongshi, China's first Doctoral Supervisor in Calligraphy, once collaborated with well-known domestic translators to publish its English version in the United States in 2008, which has been regarded as the "authoritative" version among American sinologists.

### 2.1.3. The Courses Offered by Confucius Institutes

Currently, there are 496 Confucius Institutes established in 160 countries and regions around the world, together with 851 Confucius Classrooms in primary and secondary schools. This reflects the influence of Chinese culture on foreign cultures<sup>[5]</sup>. However, only a portion of these offer Chinese calligraphy courses. Due to a shortage of Chinese language teachers for foreigners, and the insufficient cultural literacy of volunteers in calligraphy, it is not possible for them to introduce and promote Chinese calligraphy culture comprehensively and systematically. Most courses can be offered only in the form of writing classes, which is not a true inheritance and dissemination of calligraphy culture, and does not meet the requirements for bringing Chinese calligraphy culture to the world at all.

## 2.2. Domestic Inheritance and Translation

After Chinese calligraphy was successfully listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009, the ITDCC domestically have mainly manifested in the following two aspects:

### 2.2.1. Gradually Promoting "Scatter-type" Research

Studies<sup>[6-11]</sup> mainly focus on the "scattering points" of certain elements of calligraphy culture. Their perspectives are traditional, the entry points are relatively small, and they have to form a systematic approach yet.

### 2.2.2. Bilingual Presentation of "Systematic" Precision Translation

Some researchers<sup>[1,6,7,12-15]</sup>, who are both knowledgeable in Chinese calligraphy and proficient in translation, have highlighted the achievements in this field. To meet the contemporary demand for Chinese culture to "go global".

These bilingual talents who are not only versed in calligraphy but also proficient in translation, are needed to continue advancing researches and systematically promoting the quality of translation and introduction of Chinese calligraphy cultural texts.

### 3. Basic Characteristics of Translation and Introduction

Driven by the “Chinese Academic Translation Abroad” project, several versions of ITDCC have been published abroad. However, the researches within China are still in the initial stages, which show three trends as following:

#### 3.1. Three Trends in Translation and Dissemination

The trends in the ITDCC emerge through English monographs, paper review and the English translation of classic works as follows:

##### 3.1.1. Dissemination through English monographs

English monographs on the ITDCC are relatively rare in total. A typical example is Lin Yutang<sup>[16]</sup>, who, by translating and commenting on famous works such as Lady Wei Shuo’s *Stroke Order Diagram* and Wang Xizhi’s *On the Arrangement of Strokes*, highly summarized the principles of “vitality and rhythm” “innate spirit” and the spiritual realm of “harmony between heaven and humanity” embodied in Chinese calligraphy. Lin also compiled anecdotes about the calligrapher Huai Su and addressed the translation of the calligraphy term “flying white”.

##### 3.1.2. Communication Through Paper Review

Research papers evaluating the ITDCC are also very seldom, such as the analysis of Lin Yutang’s strategies for translating and introducing Chinese calligraphy: the intertextual relationships of “Chinese Calligraphy” and its ancient theoretical texts, as well as the spirit of calligraphy conveyed by Lin Yutang in his translations, like “learning from nature” and “the unity of heaven and man”<sup>[6]</sup>.

##### 3.1.3. Spread Through the English Translation of Classic Works

From the famous prose works *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion* by Wang Xizhi, the “Sage of Calligraphy” in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, to *Treatise on Calligraphy* by Sun Guoting, a Tang Dynasty master of cursive script who unified calligraphy theory and practice, and further to the ancient primers for young learners covering “three” “hundred” and “thousand”, there have been quite a few English translations from domestic to international contexts, among which, there are focuses mainly on:

- (1) The English translation of *Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion*: It emphasizes the syntactic differences between English and Chinese in terms of form and meaning, highlighting the handling of cultural elements such as history and chronology, ancient customs, allusions, and traditional artifacts in the English translation, as well as the accurate conveyance of ideological connotations and cultural elements<sup>[17]</sup>.
- (2) *English Rhymes Three-Character-classic*<sup>[18]</sup> is a translation in which three English words correspond to three Chinese characters. Such translations are rarely referred to as “miraculous restorations” in the translation community.

## 3.2. A Breakthrough in Corpus-based Translation

At the present stage, the translation and introduction of the Chinese calligraphy cultural corpus has emerged, filling up the gap for translation studies gradually as follows:

### 3.2.1. Foundations of Corpus-based Research

The foundations of corpus-based research were mainly put on the agenda by Gu Yi and her postgraduates. One was attempted to establish a small Chinese-English parallel corpus, retrieving translations for common calligraphy terms, summarizing and identifying existing problems in the translation of specialized calligraphy terminology<sup>[19]</sup>. This research has played a standardizing role in the writing of English abstracts for master's and doctoral theses in Chinese calligraphy. The other was based on a comparable corpus, a comparison was made of the English explanatory texts of Chinese and Western calligraphy exhibitions in terms of lexical richness, lexical density, thematic words, and aesthetic evaluation vocabulary; Meanwhile, the language features of English explanatory texts for Chinese calligraphy exhibitions were analyzed<sup>[20]</sup>. The study proposed language strategy suggestions for the construction and application of comparable corpora in the international dissemination of Chinese calligraphy.

### 3.2.2. Professional Corpus-based Researches

Professional corpus-based comprehensive research is a typical perspective to open up the study in a new era. One study examined the Chinese-English corpus for translating and introducing the “Dunhuang Style” calligraphy culture of Gansu Province, elaborated on the current state and significance of research on the foreign dissemination of Chinese calligraphy culture, and explored the research topic from aspects such as basic ideas and methods, key difficulties, main content, and innovations<sup>[15]</sup>. Another study employed a corpus-driven critical discourse analysis approach, using an LDA topic model based on a self-built corpus, and identified three major macro-themes as Chinese traditional culture and calligraphy, Chinese calligraphy art and Chinese painting and calligraphy art exhibitions<sup>[21]</sup>, which proposed communication strategies such as leveraging the digital intelligence “train”, targeting market demand, and cultivating versatile calligraphy talents, aiming to construct a new period, multi-dimensional dissemination system for Chinese calligraphy in ASEAN countries under the context of the “Belt and Road” Initiative .

## 3.3. The “Regional Style” on the Agenda

Regional calligraphy culture is the crystallization of calligraphic works with distinct local characteristics. Conducting translation and introduction studies of it is a creative effort to focus on the theme of calligraphy culture and highlight local identity in the context of China's cultural “going global”. This is mainly reflected in the rise of the “Er-Cuan style” and the continued popularity of the ‘Dunhuang style’.

### 3.3.1. The Rise of “Er-Cuan Style”

Unearthed in Qujing, Yunnan Province, the *Stele of Cuan Longyan* and the *Stele of Cuan Baozi* are collectively referred to as the “Er-Cuan” culture in the history of calligraphy. The translation and introduction study of “Cuan's culture”<sup>[22]</sup> opened the prelude to regional cultural translation research using calligraphy as a material carrier. Researches on the translation and introduction of this specialized aspect of Chinese calligraphy culture requires more bilingual experts who are not only knowledgeable in calligraphy skills and expertise but also well-versed in local calligraphic cultural characteristics to conduct in-depth series of translation studies. This is a long process that requires years of accumulation.

### 3.3.2. The Popularity of “Dunhuang Style”

Lu Junhu and others<sup>[1,15]</sup> have been focusing on the ITDCC of “Dunhuang Style” in Gansu Province, opening the prelude to regional cultural translation studies based on Chinese-English corpora. Their researches concentrate on in-depth translation studies starting from works of “Dunhuang Style” calligraphy culture there, while continuously training postgraduates majoring in translation studies. Such a talent cultivation model is expected to gradually produce systematic and series-based research outcomes for the ITDCC of “Dunhuang Style” in Gansu Province.

### 3.4. Two Monographs

As of now, there have been two specialized publications on the study of translating and introducing Chinese calligraphy culture abroad. The specific research situation is as follows:

#### 3.4.1. Introduction to Stele and Calligraphy Culture

As the result of a provincial-level research project titled “Investigation and Study of English Translation for the External Promotion of Calligraphy in Public Places in Zhejiang Province”, there are mainly three parts in the book *Research on the Translation and Introduction of Chinese Calligraphy and Stele Culture: A Case Study of Representative Sites in Zhejiang Province*<sup>[23]</sup>: (1) the principles, methods, and strategies for translating calligraphy for foreign audiences; (2) the English translation of commonly used calligraphy terms; (3) important calligraphy promotion sites within the province, such as the Hangzhou Beilin Museum, Shaoxing Lanting Museum, and Zhejiang Museum, as examples to evaluate and analyze their translations. This monograph plays an important role in addressing the translation practice issues caused by the current lack of research and practice in translating Chinese calligraphy culture, the absence of published monographs on the translation of calligraphy culture, and the lack of bilingual dictionaries of calligraphy terms and related corpora.

#### 3.4.2. Translation and Introduction of Calligraphy Texts

The first relatively systematic research on the ITDCC texts within China is the book *Research on the Translation of Chinese Calligraphy Texts*<sup>[24]</sup>, which is the first study to review the English translations of Chinese calligraphy texts that have appeared from the 1920s to the early 21st century. It categorizes the types of calligraphy texts translated and, on this basis, constructs four main research modules: (1) the study of English translations of calligraphy treatises; (2) the study of English translations of calligraphy popularization materials; (3) the study of English translations of museum exhibition captions, and (4) the study of back-translation of calligraphy texts without original references. As the first study to apply several existing theories to the translation of calligraphy texts, it not only expands the scope of these theories but also provides theoretical guidance for the translation and research of calligraphy texts.

## 4. Prospects from the Perspective of Feasible Translation Studies

A “three-dimension” has been proposed for the international dissemination of Chinese calligraphy: “the cultural dimension” “the artistic dimension” and “the textual dimension”<sup>[25]</sup>. But it only elaborated from the semiotic significance inherent in calligraphy itself and the perspective of calligraphers, neglecting the “translation and introduction dimension” of the international dissemination of Chinese calligraphy<sup>[15]</sup>. In other words, the fact that the ITDCC can be promoted through foreign language translation and introduction. Therefore, as a translator familiar with both translation and Chinese calligraphy, one can introduce Chinese calligraphy culture

from the following three aspects:

#### **4.1. Studies on the Translation of Communicative Perspective**

Research from the perspective of calligraphy communication studies may play a fundamental role in popularizing Chinese calligraphy culture abroad, through direct dissemination and museum explanations:

##### **4.1.1. Direct Transmission of Calligraphy Styles**

Systematically speaking, the traditional ways in which Chinese calligraphy survives and develops can be mainly categorized into five types: “replicative transmission” (including copying, rubbing, and engraving), “inscriptive transmission”(including static inscriptions on steles and plaques, as well as the creator’s personal, face-to-face writing), “borrowing transmission” (including Chinese characters, literature, politics, religion, gifts, and collections), “teaching transmission”(which is direct and interactive), and “exhibitive transmission” (which is both every day and concentrated)<sup>[26]</sup>. This direct transmission allows the audience to grasp the meaning intuitively, eliminating much of the confusion of intermediary interpretation, but it still relies on on-site explanations and the assistance of necessary consecutive interpretation.

##### **4.1.2. Interpretive Communication of Calligraphy Exhibition**

In various exhibition halls, whether it is the interaction and explanation between donors and recipients, or the interaction and explanation between visitors and guides, the ITDCC may not be separated from the necessary role of language “interpretation”. And all of these “explanations” are inseparable from the “translation and dissemination” method, which should be used primarily in foreign languages. For this, integrating relevant communication theories and guided by cultural studies, bilingual “explanations” are provided, and on-site accompanying translation or common-sense “interlanguage” communication is carried out to meet the “explanation” needs of both parties, thereby accelerating the strategic steps for promoting Chinese calligraphy abroad. This is also one of the inevitable ways for the ITDCC overseas.

#### **4.2. Studies on the Translation of Cultural Perspective**

Starting from both popular culture translation and professional culture translation, researches on the ITDCC can achieve certain systematic and comprehensive dissemination:

##### **4.2.1. Translation Through the Perspective of Popular Culture**

The traditional ITDCC of Chinese scholars’ researches generally took place within the narrow scope defined by the calligraphy culture itself. They were either concentrated in search for concepts in relevant literature or explore traces of the formation of writing styles within related categories, with their focus confined only to specific areas within Chinese calligraphy culture. Moreover, such scholars only address the interpretation of certain concepts or specific categories, essentially providing a review of particular phenomena within Chinese calligraphy culture.

##### **4.2.2. Translation Through the Perspective of Professional Culture**

Professional ITDCC for international audiences involves exploring the cultural connotations of Chinese calligraphy and its equivalent modes of expression in foreign languages. This includes the history of Chinese calligraphy culture, theoretical history, the development of various calligraphic schools, and evaluations of calligraphers and their styles, both past and present. Also, the contemporary aesthetic elements of Chinese



calligraphy culture can be translated from a professional perspective. Only by deeply exploring the cultural connotations of Chinese calligraphy can its translation be meaningful, its introduction be heartfelt, its description be vivid, and its depiction be tangible, thereby conveying the “majestic spirit” of Chinese calligraphy culture and enabling foreign Sinologists as well as enthusiasts, promoters, and advocates of Chinese calligraphy culture to achieve a comprehensive understanding of it.

### **4.3. Studies on the Translation of Terminology-based Perspective**

As is known, the terminology of calligraphy culture is key to the external translation and introduction of Chinese calligraphy. Building a terminology database for translation research plays a professional role in the ITDCC. Specifically, it can be divided into the translation of basic terminology and precise bilingual explanations as following:

#### **4.3.1. Translation of Basic Calligraphy Terminologies**

In the context of the “Belt and Road” initiative, conducting research on the external translation and introduction of Chinese calligraphy culture requires a certain foundational knowledge of Chinese calligraphy. It involves accurately, equivalently, and systematically understanding and explaining basic strokes, writing techniques, character structuring methods, ink usage methods, page layout, as well as aesthetic terminology, among other aspects. Although the existing translations can play certain roles in dissemination in some aspects, due to factors such as temporal and spatial context, situational context, and audience type, the current versions and translation methods are either too general or too verbose, which not only results in pragmatic ineffectiveness but also fails to meet the basic standards of terminology translation.

#### **4.3.2. Interpretation of Precise Bilingual Languages**

Special categories of Chinese calligraphy culture, such as the calligraphic elements of bamboo slips and wooden tablets, seal carving techniques, calligraphy theory, as well as reviews of calligraphers throughout history and their styles, all require precise and accurate bilingual explanation and translation. If terms could be categorized, a search engine developed, and integrated into a “Chinese Calligraphy Culture terminology database”, it could not only provide technical support in Chinese calligraphy knowledge for bilingual lesson preparation by relevant teachers of Chinese as a foreign language and volunteers at Confucius Institutes and domestic and international “Chinese language” classes, but also help foreign students understand the profound culture of Chinese calligraphy.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, implementing China's strategy of “going global” with its culture requires promoting the translation of Chinese calligraphy culture and the transformation of its achievements, and reconstructing the important position of Chinese calligraphy culture in the global discourse system.

Based on the current state of research on foreign communication and translation, and considering the fundamental characteristics of research on the ITDCC, it is clear that as long as efforts are made simultaneously in the development of calligraphy itself and the enhancement of translation capabilities to cultivate translation talent, and a “three-dimensional” approach to translation is provided from the perspectives of communication, cultural translation, and terminology research, the international influence of Chinese calligraphy culture can be expanded, the national brand image of Chinese calligraphy culture can be enhanced, and the international soft

power of Chinese calligraphy culture can be strengthened in the long run.

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