

A Study on the Dish Names Translation of *A Bite of China* from the Perspective of “Transliteration in the Five Cases” Theory

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Abstract: “Transliteration in the Five Cases”, a translation theory first proposed by the renowned Tang Dynasty monk Xuanzang during his translation of Buddhist scriptures, advocates for the retention of Sanskrit transliteration in specific contexts to preserve the sanctity and accuracy of the sacred texts rather than using literal translation or free translation. The acclaimed food documentary *A Bite of China*, which first aired in 2012, resonated deeply with Chinese audiences through a profound sense of family, ethnic memory, and local culture. Its English-translated version has significantly promoted the humanistic spirit and excellent traditional culture hidden behind Chinese cuisine, becoming a significant display of China’s cultural soft power. This paper will bridge the traditional Chinese translation theory of “Transliteration in the Five Cases” with the food program *A Bite of China*, based on a deep understanding of the history and content of “Transliteration in the Five Cases”, to construct an analytical framework applicable to the translation of dish names.

Keywords: Transliteration in the Five Cases; *A Bite of China*; Dish names translation

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1. Introduction

As an important theoretical heritage in the history of Chinese translation, “Transliteration in the Five Cases” was proposed by Xuanzang, an eminent monk in the Tang Dynasty, in the translation practice of Buddhist scriptures. Its core is to emphasize the necessity of retaining the original language phonetic form in a specific context, that is, using transliteration to maintain the solemnity and accuracy of the meaning of the text. This theory not only has a profound influence on ancient Chinese translation thought but also has gradually surpassed the field of Buddhist translation because of its interdisciplinary interpretation and adaptability. “As a pioneer and guide in the history of transliteration, although the principle of ‘Transliteration in the Five Cases’ proposed by Master Xuanzang is aimed at the translation theory of Buddhist classics, it is still of great significance for other disciplines. Because of their distinctive national characteristics, cultural background,

and historical traditions, many terms in traditional Chinese medicine are very suitable for transliteration”^[1]. However, compared with its profound theoretical value, thematic research specifically for the “Transliteration in the Five Cases” is still insufficient in quantity, and the systematic and empirical discussion of its specific cultural practice types still needs to be deepened.

At the same time, against the backdrop of global development, the channels and carriers of cultural communication are becoming more and more diversified. Since its premiere, the documentary *A Bite of China* has successfully triggered a wide range of cultural resonances by highlighting the deep connotations of family ethics, local complexes, and humanistic care in Chinese food culture. “Judging from the title, ‘A Bite of’ is just a modifier, and ‘China’ is the central word. Food is secondary. What is really important is to promote the image of the country and display Chinese culture”^[2]. Its English translation undertakes the important mission of presenting the aesthetics and cultural concept of Chinese food to the world. Therefore, exploring the translation strategy of the core cultural symbol of the film—the dish names—is of practical significance to cultural dissemination and development. In view of this, this study aims to build a connection between traditional translation theory and modern cultural practice, and for the first time, Xuanzang’s “Transliteration in the Five Cases” theory is systematically applied to the special research on the translation of dish names in *A Bite of China*.

2. Introduction to “Transliteration in the Five Cases” theory

“Transliteration in the Five Cases” constitutes a crucial theory formulated by the Tang Dynasty monk Xuanzang during his practice of translating Buddhist scriptures, outlining five specific situations where transliteration should be adopted.

Although “Transliteration in the Five Cases” theory originated with Xuanzang’s insights, regarding the citation of the theory’s source, “For a considerable period, influenced by Liang Qichao’s ‘Translation of Buddhist Scriptures’, academia believed that the records of Xuanzang’s ‘Transliteration in the Five Cases’ first appeared in the Southern Song Dynasty in Zhou Dunyi’s ‘Preface to the Translation of Terminology’”^[3].

The original text introducing the “Transliteration in the Five Cases” theory states:

“一、秘密故，如‘陀罗尼’(dhāraṇī)直言，咒语。二、含多义故，如‘薄伽梵’(Bhāvavat)，具六义自在，盛，端庄，名际、吉祥，尊费。三、此无故，如‘阎浮树’(Jambū)胜金树，中夏实无此木。四、顺古故，如‘阿耨菩提’(Anu Bodhi)正偏知，非不可翻，而摩腾以来，常存梵音。五、生善故，如‘般若’(Prajñā)尊重，‘智慧’轻浅。”^[4]

Despite its professional specificity in the Buddhist context, its core connotations can be summarized as “Transliteration in the Five Cases”, advocating for the abandonment of free translation in favor of transliteration in five situations during the translation process: First, “Mystery is to maintain the religious mystery of the original text”^[5]. When the source text contains language akin to mantras, where the phonetic sound itself carries the full meaning, free translation cannot accurately convey the source’s intent, and only transliteration achieves an equivalent effect; Second, “Polysemy” — when a word or phrase in the source language possesses multiple meanings in its original culture, and a single corresponding word in the target language cannot encompass all those meanings through free translation, transliteration is adopted; Third, “Non-existence” — when the target language lacks a corresponding concept or object for something present in the source culture, free translation might lead to misunderstanding, hence transliteration is used; Fourth, “Adherence to the Past” — during translation, if a conventional, widely accepted transliteration already exists

for a specific source term, it should be followed to avoid causing new misunderstandings by introducing a new translation; Fifth, “Respect/Reverence” — it means that if transliteration, compared to free translation, is more likely to evoke respect and admiration for the source culture among readers, then transliteration is preferred. “Xuanzang’s ‘Transliteration in the Five Cases’ not only solves the translation obstacles brought about by semantic blanks, but also conforms to cultural needs and translation laws, and focuses on the effective dissemination of Buddhist scriptures translation in many situations”^[3].

3. Case analysis of food translation in *A Bite of China*

A Bite of China is a highly successful documentary. Its success lies not only in showing China’s food culture, but also in showing the native sentiment and traditional culture of the Chinese people to both domestic and international audiences through the window of food. There is not only delicious food, but also the Chinese culture and national spirit behind it. “Chinese dish as a means for delivering information and culture plays an important role in external exchange. Translation of Chinese dish names plays a unique role in catering culture guided by words”^[6]. For this reason, dish names in the documentary have rich cultural connotations. When translating these dish names, it is not only the food itself that needs to be considered, but more importantly, the vivid transmission of the culture contained in the food. Therefore, this article uses the “Transliteration in the Five Cases” to analyze the translation of dish names in the documentary, and sorts out and classifies the translation cases of dish names according to the theoretical content. The purpose is to restore and show the cultural charm behind the food as much as possible.

3.1. “Polysemy”

“Polysemy” originally referred to translating Buddhist scriptures when a single word encompasses multiple meanings, and no single word in Chinese can simultaneously cover all these meanings. In such cases, transliteration is adopted. If only one Chinese word were used for free translation, other important meanings of the original word would inevitably be lost, leading to a narrow and one-sided understanding. Based on this, the “Polysemy” principle applies to translating source language words with multiple meanings where no single target language word can accurately correspond. Chinese characters and words are often rich in meaning, a frequent occurrence in the names of Chinese dishes. Therefore, when translating these dish names, adopting transliteration in light of the “Polysemy” principle is precisely a wise move. The following are translations of dish names from *A Bite of China* that can be explained by the principle of “Polysemy.”

In China, “Chenpi” is both a high-quality spice and a commonly used medicinal ingredient. “Chenpi” needs to be stored for many years. It can be called “Chenpi” only after three years of storage, and it becomes particularly precious after ten years. The Chinese character “陈” has multiple meanings in Chinese, such as “old”, “aged”, “long-preserved”, etc. Since “Chenpi” is a condensed concept that combines “time and craftsmanship”, “dual use as medicine and food”, and “cultural philosophy”, any attempt to use phrases such as “dried”, “aged”, or “preserved peel” in the target language can solidify, distort, and even mislead the understanding of its complete connotation. Therefore, when presenting the dish “陈皮牛肉丝” in the documentary, it is directly translated as “Beef Shreds with Chenpi”, using the direct pinyin for Chenpi, so as to present its multiple meanings as a whole. Thanks to that, in the face of this unfamiliar transliteration word “Chenpi”, learners must understand it through definition, explanation, and background introduction to ensure the accuracy of the concept.

“片儿川” is a century-old classic noodle dish from Hangzhou, renowned for its delicious broth, smooth noodles, and rich toppings. It was once listed among “China’s Top Ten Noodles.” It is not only an indispensable part of daily life for Hangzhou locals but also carries the profound cultural memory of the city. The name “片儿川” itself originates from the local Hangzhou dialect: “片儿” refers to the sliced shape of the pork and bamboo shoots. While in the dish name “片儿川”, the character “川” is polysemous. “川” (chuan) in Chinese can mean “river”, which adds poetry and visual beauty to the name of the dish, making “片儿川” not only a bowl of noodles, but also an experience that combines vision and taste. Besides, here “川” has another, even more significant meaning, that is, it is the same as “氽” (cuan) (quick boiling ingredients in boiling water) phonetic characters, so as to clearly point out the core cooking method of the dish. This is a typical case of polysemy and may cause potential ambiguity in understanding. In conclusion, when introducing the dish “片儿川”, the documentary used the transliteration “Pian’er Chuan.” This treatment method not only follows the “Polysemy” principle, but also helps the local classic noodles to be understood by foreign diners with its unique cultural characteristics, thus promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture.

3.2. “Non-existence”

“Non-existence” means that when the target language lacks a concept or object matching the source culture’s context, direct transliteration is adopted to avoid translation errors. “Something exists in the source language but lacks in the target—on the surface, it is a language difference, but in essence, it is caused by cultural differences, which includes both abstract concepts and specific object names”^[3]. Corresponding to culinary culture, for food names with strong regional characteristics that have no equivalent in the target language, transliteration or partial transliteration is commonly used, such as Japan’s Sushi, Ramen, Italy’s Pizza, Pasta, and Mexico’s Taco, Guacamole. China also has many unique foods created by the people. The following dish names come from *A Bite of China*, which can be interpreted using the “Non-existence” principle.

“泡馍” is a unique traditional wheat food from Shaanxi, China, directly referring to the iconic snack of Xi’an. It is deeply intertwined with the local history and cultural atmosphere, and is a unique brand of Xi’an’s culinary culture. An article about it on Shaanxi Party-building Network put it like this: “It may seem like a simple dish, but it’s actually something deeply rooted in culture—a shining flower among Chinese cuisine. And that flower is the very knot of friendship, born out of the exchanges and connections that the Silk Road made”^[7]. The documentary’s free translation as “Soaked Buns” loses this dynamic interactive element and reduces the uniquely flavored “馍” to a common “bun”, stripping away the most essential regional culinary characteristic. Therefore, whether in terms of its unique cultural background or its distinctive dietary style, there is no corresponding food in the English-speaking world. In conclusion, when translating “泡馍”, directly using transliteration not only conforms to the “Non-existence” but also maintains its cultural uniqueness in the process of cultural dissemination.

“螺蛳粉” is a highly distinctive local snack from Liuzhou, Guangxi, China. Its signature “sour-stinky” aroma comes from pickled bamboo shoots. Naturally fermented, the bamboo shoots produce volatile amino acids, creating a unique and intense odor that is a challenge for first-timers but an irresistible “soul aroma” for enthusiasts. In recent years, thanks to industrial development and promotion on social media, it has become a nationwide phenomenon and a national comfort food. Luosifen is more than just food, it is a cultural symbol representing Liuzhou’s local characteristics and embodying the diversity and inclusiveness of Chinese cuisine. Neither objectively as a food item nor subjectively as a unique culture finds a counterpart in

Western culinary culture. Thus, translating “Luosifen” using transliteration brands it as a unique global food IP, standing out among numerous “Noodles”, representing an effective cultural export.

3.3. “Adherence to the Past”

“Adherence to the Past” originally meant that for certain Buddhist terms already translated by predecessors using fixed transliterations, widely recognized and conventionally used throughout history, one should follow these established translations rather than innovating. Stepping outside the realm of Buddhist translation, this principle is equally applicable for explaining some technical terms that have long been accepted and recognized through conventional usage. Chinese food culture has a long history, and the English translation of many classic dish names has long been conventional and does not need to be further changed to maintain its unique identity and historical continuity. The following are relevant cases found in *A Bite of China*.

“Chow Mein” is a transliteration word with a long history, which has long been fixed and integrated into the English vocabulary system. “At the end of the 19th century, the rapid economic development of North America and the improvement of social professionalization promoted the increase in demand in the catering industry. Chow Mein was gradually favored by other ethnic groups because of their rich taste and economy”^[8]. After over a hundred years of use, “Chow Mein” in English is no longer a strange foreign word but a clear and well-known fixed word. If it is translated as “stir-fried noodles”, in the current language use and cultural context, it will make the word look strange and unnatural, and cannot accurately correspond to the specific dish that has been widely recognized. Therefore, when introducing “炒面”, the documentary follows the principle of “Adherence to the Past” and directly adopts the transliteration form “Chow Mein” instead of “stir-fried noodles” or anything else that may confuse foreign diners.

Wonton noodles originated in Guangzhou, the millennia-old commercial city, and are a classic representative of Cantonese cuisine. “Wonton” is the Cantonese pronunciation-based transliteration of the Northern Chinese wheaten food “馄饨” (huntun). The ancient word “huntun” spread south to the Lingnan region with the immigrants from the north. In Cantonese pronunciation, “huntun” is pronounced the same as “wonton.” In writing, Cantonese people use the more vivid word “云吞” (wonton): “云” (cloud) describes the appearance of thin skin as elegant as a cloud after cooking, and the filling is faintly visible; “吞” (swallow) vividly depicts its small size and is suitable for one bite. In the mid-20th century, with the stability of the Chinese immigrant community and the popularity of Chinese restaurants around the world, the spelling “wonton” stood out among many variants, becoming a standard form and has been used to this day. Therefore, the documentary directly adopts the conventional Cantonese transliteration “wonton” instead of free translation, so as to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

3.4. “Respect/Reverence”

“Respect/Reverence” originally refers to the retention of the transliteration form of key and noble terms in the translation of Buddhist scriptures to maintain their solemnity and sacredness, thus stimulating the awe of readers. “Xuanzang proposed the term ‘Respect/Reverence’ because translators at that time often used Daoist and Confucian concepts to interpret Buddhist terms — a practice known as *geyi* (matching concepts), which was not conducive to the dissemination of Buddhist scriptures and the development of the status of Buddhism. Therefore, Xuanzang deliberately chose more solemn and respectful transliterations, such as ‘bore’ (般若) instead of translating it as ‘wisdom’ (智慧), in order to inspire awe and elevate the position of Buddhism”^[3]. It can be inferred that the “Respect/Reverence” principle also applies to other translation tasks

aimed at conveying deep cultural connotations and improving the cultural status of the source language. Take the translation of Chinese food as an example, many dish names often contain a long history and rich cultural connotations. In cross-cultural communication, retaining the transliteration form helps to establish authority and enhance cultural confidence. The following are the translations of dish names from *A Bite of China* that conform to this translation principle but were rendered through free translation:

“文思豆腐” is a famous classic of Huaiyang (the lower reaches of the Huai River and the Yangtze River) cuisine and a regular on state banquet menus. It originated from a Wensi elder in Tianning Temple in Yangzhou during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. At first, this was a pure vegetarian temple dish, which contained the purity and elegance of Buddhism. Therefore, the name “Wensi” not only defines the origin of the dish but also allows diners to see the cultural story behind it. Moreover, as described in the documentary *A Bite of China*, “When the hair-like tofu shreds are put into clean water, they spread like clouds in the sky and form a perfect Chinese wash painting”^[9]. This comment highlights the exquisite production skills behind the dish. It is for this reason that its production skills are also included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. The subtitles of the first season translate it as “Tofu Vermicelli”, which means shredded tofu, which greatly weakens the cultural connotation of the dish and reduces it to a bland description of physical form. In summary, transliterating “Wensi Tofu” preserves the personal name in the dish title, which is the dish’s historical origin. This can let foreign diners know the story behind it and stimulate their curiosity and respect for its culture. At the same time, with its status as an intangible cultural heritage, “Wensi Tofu” has become an independent cultural symbol in cross-cultural communication, which helps to strengthen cultural self-assurance.

“饺子” is one of the most representative and symbolic national delicacies in China. Shaped like ancient Chinese gold or silver ingots, they symbolize “bringing in wealth and treasure.” Hiding a coin inside one represents wishes for good fortune in the new year. On the occasion of New Year’s Eve, the whole family makes and eats “饺子” together, which is the most concrete embodiment of the Chinese concept of “reunion.” “Chinese Jiaozi can not only embody the harmonious Chinese culture, but also reflect the world culture of ‘embracing the world and achieving global harmony.’ Especially, when Chinese Jiaozi were added to the Beijing Olympics menu, it created a good chance for them to become as famous as Japanese sushi and Korean kimchi”^[10]. Therefore, Jiaozi is not only a delicious food, but also carries the unique national feelings of the Chinese people. The documentary uses the most common translation name “dumpling”, which instantly weakens its unique cultural connotation and emotional value. The transliteration “Jiaozi” raises it from the ordinary context of “dumpling” and makes it a unique Chinese cultural symbol, which can arouse people’s respect and curiosity about the stories behind the food, thus stimulating respect for Chinese culinary culture. We need to not only “rectify the name” at the language level, but also ensure that it goes to the world stage with the most complete and dignified identity at the cultural and psychological levels. This is a vivid manifestation of the ancient wisdom of “Respect/Reverence” in contemporary global cultural exchange.

4. Conclusion

This study, based on the traditional Chinese translation theory of the “Transliteration in the Five Cases”, shows that although the “Transliteration in the Five Cases” theory originates from the translation practice of ancient Buddhist scriptures, its core principles still have significant applicability and explanatory power in contemporary professional field translation, especially when translating dietary texts with deep cultural heritage.

Against the background of the acceleration of global integration and the continuous improvement of Chinese cultural soft power, food culture is an important carrier of international cultural exchange, and the

choice of translation strategy is very important. By analyzing the translation practices in *A Bite of China*, this paper argues that when dish names are rich in cultural connotations and national sentiments, employing transliteration or a “transliteration + gloss” strategy offers irreplaceable advantages over free translation in terms of conveying heterogeneous cultural images, building cultural confidence, and consolidating national identity, so that it can preserve the cultural characteristics of the source language to the greatest extent to promote deeper cultural understanding and communication.

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