

A Cognitive Translation Study of Traditional Chinese Health Preservation Culture: Semantic Reconstruction and Cross-cultural Transmission

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Abstract: This study centers on the cognitive translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture, presenting innovative and practical insights. By employing cognitive translation theory, including cognitive schemas and concept integration, this study addresses translation challenges and proposes semantic reconstruction principles. The research delves into cultural barriers and solutions, as evidenced by case studies like the “Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor” and “Treatise on Febrile Diseases.” Future efforts should expand case studies and refine cross-cultural transmission strategies. Integrating traditional Chinese health preservation culture with modern technology will further promote global communication and cultural exchange.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese health preservation culture; Cognitive translation; Semantic reconstruction; Cross-cultural transmission

Online publication: September 27, 2024

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, the international propagation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture is of vital importance, given its unique principles and benefits. Centered on “harmony between man and nature”, “balance of yin and yang”, and a “holistic concept”, this culture emphasizes the unity of individuals with their environment and the importance of prevention. Liu Miqing, in “An Outline of Cultural Translation”, underscores the crucial role of cultural factors in translation, highlighting the need for the accurate transmission to aid comprehension^[1]. Its traits, which are comprehensiveness, systematicness, individuality, and long-term benefits, are deeply intertwined with Chinese traditional values. Translators must understand the cultural context and employ suitable strategies to convey these profound meanings to target language audiences. The study introduces cognitive translation theory to address translation challenges and offers new insights for global propagation, to enhance cross-cultural communication and promote the global spread and exchange of

traditional Chinese health preservation culture.

2. Theoretical basis of cognitive translation theory

This paper first delves into the theoretical foundation of cognitive translation theory.

2.1. Definition and core of cognitive translation theory

“Cognitive translation theory is a methodology that applies cognitive science principles to translation studies. It emphasizes the cognitive activities in the translation process, including the translator’s understanding of the original text, processing of information, and generation of the translated text. This theory holds that translation is not only a language conversion but also a creative process based on cognitive activities by the translator”^[2]. This definition mainly comes from Italian scholar Ricardo Martín. In 2007, Martín first proposed the concept of “cognitive translation studies”, marking the official entry of translation studies into the “cognitive turn” era^[2]. He advocates combining scientism and humanism to establish cognitive translation studies with both scientific and humanistic qualities.

The core concepts of cognitive translation theory include cognitive schemas, concept integration, and mental space theory. As early as 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson dedicated themselves to the study of cognitive semantics in their book “Metaphors We Live By”, connecting the human conceptual system with physical experience and providing rich theoretical perspectives and interpretation methods for translation studies, laying the foundation for the subsequent development of cognitive translation theory^[3]. German scholar Hans Vermeer emphasized in his book “A Skopos Theory of Translation” that the translator’s cognitive schema plays a key role in translation decision-making^[4]. Translators rely on their existing cognitive schemas to understand and analyze the original text. Fauconnier and Turner provided an in-depth explanation of concept integration in their book “The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities”, pointing out that in the translation process, concept integration can help translators fuse and innovate different concepts^[5].

2.2. Development of cognitive translation theory and contributions of scholars

The development of cognitive translation theory has gone through a process from theoretical foundation construction to practical application expansion. Foreign scholars have made important contributions in this field. In 1980, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson dedicated themselves to the study of cognitive semantics in their book “Metaphors We Live By” providing theoretical perspectives and interpretation methods for translation studies^[3]. In 2007, Ricardo Martín’s concept of “cognitive translation studies” laid the foundation for the development of this theory^[2]. Anthony Pym’s “Exploring Translation Theories” in 2010 deeply analyzed different translation theories and also involved relevant content of cognitive translation theory^[6]. Mona Baker’s “In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation” in 2011 discussed the role of cognitive factors in translation, providing new ideas for the development of cognitive translation theory^[7].

Domestic scholars have also played an important role in the development of cognitive translation theory. The book “New Developments in Cognitive Translation Studies” by Wen Xu et al. published in 2019 systematically summarized the research results of cognitive translation studies in China in the past decade and looked forward to future development trends^[8]. Li Zhaoguo’s “Research on the International Dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine” in 2020 deeply summarized, analyzed, and studied the history, current situation, and future of the international dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine, providing rich cases and practical

experience for the application of cognitive translation theory in the field of traditional Chinese medicine ^[9].

2.3. Application of cognitive translation theory in the translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture

Cognitive translation theory provides important theoretical support and methodological guidance for the translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture. In this regard, many scholars have conducted in-depth research. Li Yonghong, in “A Preliminary Study on Translation Competence and the Cultivation of Translation Competence from the Perspective of Cognitive Translation Theory” in 2019, took cognitive translation theory as the guide and explored the specific operation methods of undergraduate translation teaching ^[10]. At the same time, he pointed out that cultivating students’ translation thinking mode is the main task of translation teaching, which also provides certain inspiration for the cultivation of translation talents for traditional Chinese health preservation culture. Peng Changliu, in “The Metaphorical Cognitive Mechanism and Translation Research of Traditional Chinese Medical Terminology” in 2021, based on the conceptual metaphor theory proposed by cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff, interpreted the metaphorical cognitive mechanism of commonly used traditional Chinese medical terminology and analyzed its English translation strategies, providing a useful reference for the translation of terminology in traditional Chinese health preservation culture ^[11]. Zhang Yan and Li Jia, in “A Study on the Comprehension in the English Translation of Traditional Chinese Medical Classics from the Perspective of Cognitive Translation Studies — Taking the English Translation of ‘Treatise on Febrile Diseases’ as an Example” in 2019, based on the understanding of the comprehension theory, discussed the translator’s comprehension concept in the English translation process of traditional Chinese medical classics “Treatise on Febrile Diseases” through comprehension reproduction and comprehension reconstruction, providing a new research perspective for the translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture ^[12]. Wang Yin mentioned in “Cognitive Translation Studies” in 2023 that this theory can guide translators to deeply understand the philosophy and cultural connotations behind traditional Chinese health preservation culture ^[13]. For example, when translating the “Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor”, it is necessary to deeply understand philosophical thoughts and medical theories with the help of this theory. Zhang Yue emphasized in “A Cognitive Perspective Study on the Translation of Traditional Chinese Health Preservation Culture” in 2024 the importance of cognitive translation theory in the translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture and believes that this theory can help translators break through language and cultural barriers and achieve high-quality translations ^[14].

Cognitive translation theory holds significant value for translating traditional Chinese health preservation culture. Research from both domestic and international scholars has laid a strong foundation for its further development and application. Future work can further innovate in applying this theory to enhance the global spread of traditional Chinese health preservation culture.

3. Semantic reconstruction in the translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture

The paper will discuss the semantic reconstruction in the translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture.

3.1. Necessity of semantic reconstruction

Traditional Chinese health preservation culture has unique and profound concepts. Its language often features

metaphorical, symbolic, and fuzzy qualities. Expressions like “deficiency of both qi and blood” and “nourishing yin and tonifying yang” are hard for non-Chinese readers to understand. There are significant differences in language structure, cultural background, and cognitive patterns between source and target languages. Literal translation can easily lead to misunderstandings. For instance, translating “Deficiency of both qi and blood” as “Qi and blood deficiency” and “get too much inner heat” as “excessive internal heat” may make it difficult for Western readers to accurately grasp the true meanings. Thus, semantic reconstruction is crucial for the translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture.

3.2. Principles of semantic reconstruction

3.2.1. Principle of fidelity

In semantic reconstruction, be faithful to the original meaning, retain core concepts and key information, and avoid adding, deleting, or distorting. For example, a literal translation of “the heart governs the spirit” fails to convey its connotation in traditional Chinese medicine. Adding an annotation like “The heart governs the spirit (In traditional Chinese medicine, it refers to mental activities and consciousness)” ensures fidelity and provides background. This is not a mechanical word-for-word translation. It requires a deep understanding of traditional Chinese health preservation culture to convey the core meaning accurately. For terms with profound cultural connotations, study classic literature for accuracy.

3.2.2. Principle of readability

The translated text should follow the habits and norms of the target language and be highly readable, avoiding rare and complex vocabulary and sentence structures. For instance, “Liver Qi stagnation due to depression” for “liver depression and Qi stagnation” is in line with English expression habits and is easy to understand. Translating “get too much inner heat” as “suffer from excessive internal heat” is more according to English expression and improves readability. This principle demands that the language not only conforms to the target language’s habits but also considers readers’ cognitive levels and reading expectations. Referring to similar texts can enhance the translation’s readability.

3.2.3. Principle of cultural adaptability

Fully consider the cultural background and cognitive habits of target language readers to ensure the translation is reasonably accepted and understood in the target language culture. For example, explaining “treating winter diseases in summer” is a traditional Chinese medical approach where certain winter-prone diseases are treated in summer to leverage the body’s physiological changes. Annotating “moxibustion” as “moxibustion (A traditional Chinese therapy using mugwort heat to stimulate acupuncture points)” helps readers understand its cultural connotations and functions. This principle emphasizes crossing cultural barriers and requires translators to understand the target language culture and skillfully use translation techniques to enhance cultural adaptability.

3.3. Specific strategies and methods of semantic reconstruction

3.3.1. Annotation method

For unique terms and concepts in traditional Chinese health preservation culture, add annotations in translations to explain meanings and cultural backgrounds for target language readers. For instance, annotating “imbalance of yin and yang” as “Imbalance of Yin and Yang (In traditional Chinese philosophy, Yin and Yang are opposing yet complementary forces maintaining balance).” For “five-tone therapy”, add an annotation like “Five-tone

therapy (In traditional Chinese medicine, different tones have various effects on the body for healing).” The annotation should be concise, accurate, well-placed, and not disrupt translation fluency.

3.3.2. Free translation method

For words and expressions hard to translate literally and rich in cultural connotations, use free translation to convey basic meaning and cultural imagery. For example, “Breathing exercises for health promotion in traditional Chinese medicine” for “qigong” shows its health-promoting meaning and cultural imagery. “Diet therapy for health maintenance in traditional Chinese medicine” for “diet therapy” highlights the role of traditional Chinese health preservation. Free translation demands a deep understanding of the source and target language cultures, grasping cultural connotations, and finding appropriate expressions while retaining original cultural imagery and avoiding excessive domestication and loss of characteristics.

3.3.3. Substitution method

Replace the original vocabulary with similar or adjacent concepts and vocabulary in the target language to reduce cultural barriers and understanding difficulties. For example, replacing “meridians” with “meridian channels” and “acupoints” with “acupuncture points” makes it easier for readers to understand and reduces cultural differences. Substitution should be cautious to ensure accurate transmission of the original meaning. Pay attention to the accuracy and professionalism of the substituted vocabulary to avoid misunderstandings.

3.3.4. Amplification method

To enhance understanding for target language readers, add concise, targeted explanations to translations of traditional Chinese health concepts. For instance, “Diet therapy” can be elaborated as “a practice in Chinese medicine using specific foods to promote wellness and treat ailments.” For “cupping”, describe it as “a therapy in which suction cups are applied to the skin to boost circulation and alleviate discomfort.” Ensure these additions are brief, relevant, and aid in comprehending the essence of Chinese health culture.

4. Cross-cultural transmission in the translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture

As this study explores cross-cultural transmission in the translation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture, the challenges and opportunities it presents should also be discussed.

4.1. Cultural barriers and challenges

4.1.1. Cultural differences in values

The contrasting health values in Chinese and Western cultures are rooted in deep historical, social, and philosophical differences. Western medicine emphasizes individual autonomy and scientific evidence, often employing direct treatments like drugs and surgery, reflecting a rationalist and scientific approach. In contrast, Chinese wellness culture promotes holistic harmony and balance, focusing on qi and blood regulation and the health of *Zang-fu* organs, in line with ancient Chinese philosophies of nature-human harmony and agricultural lifestyles. These differences create challenges in intercultural communication. For example, the TCM phrase “strengthening healthy qi and expelling pathogenic factors” encapsulates the holistic approach to health. To aid Western understanding, it could be annotated as “strengthening healthy qi and expelling pathogenic

factors” (Enhancing the body’s innate resilience and vitality to counteract disease-causing agents; “healthy qi” represents the body’s natural defenses, while “pathogenic factors” are harmful substances that lead to illness.) This annotation clarifies the TCM perspective for Western audiences.

4.1.2. Differences in language expression and rhetorical habits

The rhetoric of traditional Chinese health culture, rich in metaphors and symbols, can lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings. For example, the phrase “the heart opens into the tongue” may baffle Western readers. To clarify, a culturally informed translation could be: “The heart is connected to the tongue in TCM; the tongue’s condition can signify the heart’s health, as a red, swollen tongue may signal ‘heart fire.’” This approach not only translates the literal meaning but also explains the TCM rationale behind the metaphor, aiding Western readers in grasping TCM’s linguistic nuances.

4.2. Strategies and techniques for cross-cultural transmission

4.2.1. Cultural adaptation strategy

To cater to Western readers, adapt the content and presentation of traditional Chinese health preservation culture. Utilize modern digital platforms like video explainers, interactive e-courses, and infographics to align with Western information consumption habits. For example, create animated videos on health practices, integrate interactive features and expert Q&A in online classes, and use infographics to illustrate methods and benefits. Collaboration with professionals may be needed for technology and funding challenges, while online interactions can be managed by trained volunteers or interns. This cultural adaptation enhances the resonance of traditional Chinese health preservation in the target culture, improving communication effectiveness. Wang Yue’s “The Dissemination Research of Traditional Chinese Health Preservation Culture in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language” offers insights into translation issues, providing a fresh angle on cultural adaptation strategies for the research ^[15].

4.2.2. Cultural analogy strategy

Drawing parallels with familiar concepts in the target culture facilitates reader comprehension of unique aspects of traditional Chinese health preservation. For instance, likening “meridians” to Western “energy channels” utilizes the Western understanding of energy flow to explain the concept. Highlight the functions and effects of Chinese meridians, noting both similarities and differences to underscore their distinctiveness. However, caution is needed to avoid misrepresentation; for example, differentiating “qi and blood” from the modern concept of blood circulation. Cultural analogy aids in bridging unfamiliar TCM concepts with the target culture’s knowledge, fostering cross-cultural understanding.

4.2.3. Cultural interpretation strategy

Elucidate key concepts, terms, and cultural aspects of traditional Chinese health preservation. For instance, provide a comparative explanation of “qi and blood” with modern medical terms to help readers grasp its essence from a modern perspective while appreciating its unique TCM implications. Cultural interpretation should be concise and use accessible examples. Challenges in expression may arise, requiring skilled translators with strong cultural understanding. Collaborative translation teams, with input from TCM experts and linguists, can enhance quality. This strategy offers deep cultural insights for readers, aiding in understanding TCM nuances. For example, successful cases of cross-cultural Transmission such as “The Inner Canon of the Yellow

Emperor” and “Treatise on Febrile Diseases” can be analyzed.

5. Translation case of “The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor” (Li Zhaoguo’s version)

In Li Zhaoguo’s translation of “The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor”, the multifaceted concept of “qi” is adeptly handled, with annotations and free translations like “the vital energy that flows through the body and regulates its functions” and “vital force.” The translator elaborates on “qi” as an invisible force in TCM, driving bodily functions such as breathing, circulation, and metabolism. These detailed explanations aid target readers in grasping the unique TCM implications of “qi”, employing semantic reconstruction and cultural interpretation strategies. Li’s translation is chosen for its deep understanding and precise conveyance of TCM culture, bolstering cross-cultural communication. The translator’s strategy selection prioritizes the target audience’s cultural background and cognition, as well as the text’s professional and authoritative demands. For abstract TCM concepts, annotations furnish essential context, enhancing reader comprehension.

6. Translation case of “Treatise on Febrile Diseases” (Luo Xiwen’s version)

In Luo Xiwen’s translation of “Treatise on Febrile Diseases”, key terms are elucidated with annotations and explanations. “Taiyang disease” is rendered as “Taiyang disease (a TCM syndrome indicating the early stage of exogenous diseases affecting the body’s surface)”, providing clear medical context. Similarly, “Yangming disease” and “Shaoyang disease” are translated with descriptions of their stages and patterns, aiding reader comprehension. Luo’s approach, which includes cultural analogy and in-depth interpretation, helps explain TCM disease classification and treatment logic. For prescription-related syndromes like “Guizhi Decoction syndrome” and “Mahuang Decoction syndrome”, the translation not only names the syndromes but also delves into the ingredients’ effects and therapeutic roles, enhancing understanding of TCM diagnostics and treatment. Luo’s translation method, considering the complexity of TCM theory, offers comprehensive information through annotations, facilitating cross-cultural understanding.

The success of these translations demonstrates that conveying traditional Chinese health preservation culture across cultures necessitates a nuanced application of various strategies, adeptly navigating cultural nuances and delving into meanings. These well-crafted translations not only transmit knowledge but also pique the interest of target readers, encouraging deeper exploration and fostering global exchange of traditional Chinese health preservation culture.

7. Conclusion

In summary, this study delves deeply into the cognitive translation challenges of traditional Chinese health preservation culture. The study underscores the significance of semantic reconstruction and cross-cultural communication in translation and highlights how cognitive translation theory aids in comprehending and addressing translation issues. Through case studies, the study elucidates the use of cognitive schemas and concept integration in various text translations and the effectiveness of semantic reconstruction principles in overcoming translation obstacles. Additionally, it examines the applicability and constraints of cross-cultural transmission strategies, confirmed by successful translation examples.

This study, while valuable, has limitations that could be improved through further research, such as the need for more extensive case studies and a rigorous evaluation of cross-cultural transmission strategies. By refining theories and practices, integrating traditional Chinese health preservation culture with modern technology, and leveraging digital and multimedia platforms, communication can be enhanced. Strengthening international collaboration and involving more scholars and translators can support its global dissemination. Cognitive translation research in this field holds significant practical and academic value, promising to share the wisdom of this ancient heritage with a broader audience through ongoing innovation and effort.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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