

Transliteration in Chinese-to-English Translation from the Perspective of Xuanzang's "Five Principles of Non-Translation"

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Abstract

Xuanzang, a renowned translator of Buddhist scriptures in ancient Chinese history, advocated the use of transliteration in his translation theory, which is primarily reflected in his "Five Principles of Non-Translation". These principles primarily apply to five aspects: mysterious terms, polysemous words, borrowed words, conventionally translated terms, and special Buddhist terminology. This article delves into the transliteration methods employed in translating Chinese to other languages, drawing on the "Five Principles of Non-Translation". It examines the essence of this theory and its contemporary feasibility, highlighting the value of Xuanzang's principles.

Keywords

Xuanzang; Five Principles of Non-Translation; Chinese-to-foreign translation; Transliteration.

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, due to the existence of extensive conditions for meaning conversion among various languages, translation between different languages is feasible. However, this does not mean that languages are completely translatable. Restrictions exist at various levels of language, preventing the complete interlingual transfer of meaning. This incomplete equivalence gives rise to untranslatability in translation processes, where a forced literal translation can lead to misunderstandings and hinder cultural exchange. Therefore, transliteration, a translation method that preserves the original meaning of words, can effectively mitigate untranslatability. This method emerged in translation practices over a thousand years ago. During his translation of Buddhist scriptures, the Tang dynasty monk Xuanzang observed that some contents, due to their solemnity and specific meanings, could not be translated directly. Based on this, he summarized and proposed the famous "Five Principles of Non-Translation". This article analyzes the meaning of these principles and explores the importance of transliteration in translation processes, particularly in Chinese-to-English translation.

2. The Meaning of the "Five Principles of Non-Translation"

Transliteration is a translation method that avoids direct translation. [1]The specific connotations of the "Five Principles of Non-Translation" are as follows.

2.1. "Mysteries are not translated"

The use of transliteration for terms with a mystical aura maintains their mystery and preserves the reverence of Buddhist believers, crucial for the development of Buddhism. This principle is primarily applied in religious contexts. When dealing with religious terms, we should consider adopting this principle. Xuanzang believed that mysterious terms should not be translated directly but should retain their original forms through transliteration. For instance, "dharani" refers to the secret language of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, often used as spells. If translated

directly into Chinese as "secret language" or "truthful words," it would lose its original Buddhist significance and mystical aura, neglecting the inherent mysticism of spells. Therefore, the principle of "Mysteries are not translated" emphasizes the effect which beyond the literal meanings, rather than a literal interpretation. Many Buddhist believers do not understand Sanskrit and rely on transliteration to maintain the mystery and solemnity of Buddhist scriptures when chanting. However, complete transliteration can also hinder the effective transmission of Buddhist scriptures' content, leaving readers and believers with only a superficial understanding of the sounds but not the meanings behind them.

2.2. "Polysemous words are not translated"

When a word has rich and diverse meanings, and no equivalent word in the target language can fully capture all its meanings, transliteration is adopted. Therefore, the principle of "Polysemous words are not translated" is clear: when a specific term in Buddhist scriptures has multiple interpretations, to avoid loss of meaning, transliteration should be used instead of paraphrase. For example, the Sanskrit word "bhagavan" has six meanings: freedom, splendor, dignity, fame, auspiciousness, and nobility. In such cases, transliteration should be employed to avoid ambiguity. The word "bhagavan" has six meanings in Sanskrit, but there is no single Chinese word that can encapsulate all these meanings. Therefore, to ensure that the translation fully reflects the original meaning, transliteration is used to preserve the mystique and deep meanings. In current translation practices, this principle can also be applied to words with complex and multifaceted meanings. For instance, the term "yin yang" is a suitable translation for the concept of Yin and Yang in Chinese philosophy, as it encompasses a wide range of opposing forces and phenomena. Similarly, the term "Tao" cannot be adequately explained by simply translating it as "way"; thus, transliteration as "Tao" or "Dao" is appropriate.

2.3. "Words without equivalents are not translated"

When a concept or object exists in one culture but not in another, transliteration is adopted. For instance, Xuanzang retained the transliteration of "yanfu tree" because he believed that "such a tree does not exist in China." Many unique Chinese philosophical terms are typically translated using transliteration. As mentioned earlier, "Tao," when a certain object belongs exclusively to one culture but not another, transliteration is often employed in translation. For instance, Xuanzang preserved the transliteration of "Yanfu shu" rather than translating it because he believed that "there is no such tree in China." Many philosophical terms unique to China are also typically translated using transliteration. Take the term "Dao" as an example. When it is not used to refer to a physical object like a "road," it describes an abstract philosophical concept. Similarly, terms like "Qi" also have Chinese characteristics and are difficult to find equivalents in other languages. Directly translating "Dao" as "way" would lead to a complete misunderstanding of its cultural connotation and change its meaning. Therefore, to preserve its integrity, most people agree that "Dao" should be translated as "Dao" or "Tao" directly. Similarly, translating "Qi" as "gas" or "air" would violate the principles of Chinese culture. There are many other examples, such as the translation of sports, food, traditional Chinese medicine, musical instruments, and other terms unique to Chinese culture. These can be translated using transliteration, such as "taijiquan" for Tai Chi, "yangge" for yangko, "pipa" for pipa, "erhu" for erhu, "jiaozi" for dumplings, "zongzi" for zongzi, and "mantou" for steamed bread. Of course, we also adopt transliteration when translating items unique to other cultures, such as "chocolate," "coffee," "brandy," "ballet," "waltz," and "aspirin."

2.4. "Maintaining Ancient Customs through Transliteration"

This principle refers to the continuation of established transliteration methods for certain terms to avoid misunderstandings and errors. Widely recognized and familiar terms, such as names and place names, should maintain their original transliteration methods to prevent

confusion. For example, well-established translations like "Sun Yat-Sen" for Sun Zhongshan and "Confucius" for Confucius, as well as "Peking" for Beijing, "Macau," and "Hong Kong," have been widely accepted and therefore do not require further changes. However, it's worth noting that established customs are not immutable. With social development and deeper cultural exchanges, some translation methods can be adjusted according to circumstances. For instance, although "Peking" was once the common translation for Beijing, the pinyin form "Beijing" has gradually become equally acceptable.

2.5. "Maintaining Reverence through Transliteration"

Some terms with special meanings, if translated literally, may appear too shallow or trivial. Transliterating them, however, preserves a sense of mystery and grandeur, showing respect. This principle applies to preserving transliterations to show respect in Buddhist contexts. Similarly, some terms with special meanings or functions may also require transliteration. For example, the Sanskrit term "Prajna" is a religious term pronounced as "bō rě" and means "ultimate wisdom" or "wisdom of discernment." In Indian yogic scriptures, it is defined as the method of eliminating the union of the seer and the seen, leading to liberation. Through the practices of the eight limbs of yoga—ethics, physical purification, posture, regulation of the breath, withdrawal of the senses, concentration, meditation, and wisdom—impurities tapers off, and the light of knowledge illuminates discernment. Reaching the final limb involves this ultimate wisdom, which requires extraordinary effort to achieve. Simplifying "Prajna" to mean ordinary wisdom would be superficial and fail to convey its original Buddhist significance. Similarly, in Chinese-to-English translation, there are terms like "Tuina" (massage therapy) that, if translated as "massage," would give English readers a superficial impression and fail to reflect its therapeutic effects. Using transliteration better preserves its status in traditional Chinese medicine. Another example is the film "Guasha" (scraping therapy), which, if translated as "the treatment," fails to capture its significance in traditional Chinese medicine. Translating it as "Guasha" better reflects the lack of understanding among Westerners and enhances the cultural conflict and artistic sensibility. Another prominent example is the translation of "long" (dragon). Since the English word "dragon" conjures up images of ferocity and evilness, translating "long" as "dragon" undermines its noble and dignified image in Chinese culture. Fortunately, this translation has been officially revised, with the Chinese international channel adopting "Loong" as the English translation. This is a testament to the constant evolution of translation methods with the times.

3. Chinese-to-Foreign Translation and the "Five Non-Translations" Principle

3.1. The "Five Non-Translations" in Food and Beverage Translation

Cantonese morning tea is a popular dietary custom in Guangdong province. It is a social and dietary tradition among the Han ethnic group, commonly seen in southern China regions such as Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang, with Guangdong being the most prominent. In Guangdong, people enjoy drinking morning tea, sometimes even considering it as breakfast. It is a common sight to see families gathered around a table, enjoying their meal and spending quality time together. Cantonese people often indulge in tea three times a day: morning, noon, and evening, with morning tea being the most emphasized. Locally, drinking morning tea is synonymous with eating morning tea, as it is often accompanied by dim sum. Greeting someone in the morning with "Have you had your tea yet?" is a common way to say "Good morning," reflecting the deep love for tea drinking. The combination of tea with dim sum or stir-fried noodles and buns is a distinctive feature of Cantonese morning tea [9].

With the popularity of Cantonese morning tea, English has also adopted specific terms such as "Dim Sum" for the snacks and "Yum Cha" for drinking tea. Tea houses and morning tea are

translated directly as "Tea House" and "Morning Tea," respectively, demonstrating the profound influence of Cantonese morning tea [6].

The "Four Heavenly Kings" of Cantonese dim sum—char siu bao, shrimp dumplings, egg tarts, and dry steamed siu mai—also deserve their own English translations. Char siu bao, a steamed bun filled with grilled pork, would be translated as "steamed bun stuffed with grilled pork" to fully explain its making process and characteristics. However, such a translation lacks the conciseness and elegance of the Chinese term and can be challenging to remember. In this case, adopting the "Five Non-Translations" principle and transliterating char siu bao as "Cha Siu Bao" would facilitate its circulation, make it easier for target language readers to remember, and possibly spark their interest in exploring deeper layers of Chinese culture, thereby contributing to the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture. It is evident that "bao" in the Chinese context refers to a type of bun unique to Chinese cuisine, and thus, transliterating it as "bao" enhances the dissemination of Chinese culture. Similar examples include the translation of crystal bao, which could be "steamed dumpling filled with lard and sugar," but is more interestingly transliterated as "Crystal Bao."

Shrimp dumplings also occupy a significant place in the culinary world. Since dumplings have already found their way into Western culture and possess a certain cultural foundation, it is advisable to adopt the "following ancient precedents" approach and translate shrimp dumplings directly as "shrimp dumplings." Furthermore, from the perspective of inheriting and disseminating excellent traditional Chinese culture, it is imperative to interpret and propagate Chinese traditional culture using Chinese language. This approach can better preserve the uniqueness of Chinese culture and minimize misunderstandings and misinterpretations among Western readers [5].

Cultural confidence leads to national confidence, and linguistic strength contributes to cultural strength. This underscores the need for language workers to strengthen their linguistic confidence. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of fostering four confidences: confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture. He has stressed that "cultural confidence is the most fundamental, widespread, and profound confidence" [8]. Culture, like faith, is sacred and deserves utmost respect. Preserving more of it will earn more respect. In the translation of Chinese dish names, guided by the "Five Non-Translations" principle and through the transliteration of Chinese-characteristic dish names, we can better demonstrate our cultural confidence, facilitate the acceptance of Chinese culture by foreigners, and introduce China to a wider audience [2]. This also requires translators to pay more attention to traditional Chinese culture when translating dish names, injecting new vitality and dynamism into them in light of current times. Combined with Xuanzang's "Five Non-Translations" principle, it is essential to retain the Chinese characteristics of dishes to facilitate their dissemination abroad. Therefore, the translation of dish names requires translators to prioritize retaining Chinese characteristics, respecting Chinese subjectivity, and fully exercising their subjective initiative. Building on Xuanzang's "following ancient precedents" approach, we should tell Chinese stories well and convey Chinese culture through dishes to all corners of the world.

3.2. The "Five Non-Translations" in Place Names

Place names are the names given to specific locations on the earth's surface by people in order to identify their surroundings during communication. They reflect the products, geomorphic features, social customs, economic conditions, historical culture, changes, religious beliefs, and other aspects of a particular region, nation, or historical period. China, with its vast territory and rich resources, exhibits diverse cultural characteristics in its place names. Literal translation preserves the unique charm of the Chinese context and makes it easier for foreign readers to locate a specific place through its pronunciation, thus making a significant

contribution to the dissemination of Chinese culture. Place names are not only linguistic symbols representing geographical entities, but also embody profound historical and sociocultural connotations. The translation of Chinese place names is a crucial aspect of China's cultural outreach.

The English translation of Chinese place names is not a simple mechanical process of translating from Chinese to English, but a way to convey the cultural connotations of China [3]. Ge Xiaoqin and Ji Zhengming proposed in 2006 that the translation of place names should adopt the method of "transliterating the proper name and translating the generic name" [4]. In China, the translation of provincial names is also a noteworthy topic. For instance, the provinces of Shandong and Shanxi, which literally mean "the province east of Taihang Mountains" and "the province west of Taihang Mountains," respectively, would be translated as "the province in the east of Taihang Mountains" and "the province in the west of Taihang Mountains" if their meanings were fully translated. However, this would result in complex and difficult-to-remember expressions that lack the dignity befitting an administrative province. Therefore, adopting the method of transliteration and translating them directly as "Shandong Province" and "Shanxi Province" is more dignified and easier to remember.

Furthermore, the translation of subway station names is also crucial for promoting Chinese culture. Take the Chengdu Metro Line 4 as an example. Chengdu Metro Line 4 is the third metro line built and operated in Chengdu City. Its first phase (from Intangible Cultural Heritage Expo Park Station to Wannianchang Station) was opened on January 1, 2016. The second phase, including the west extension (from Wansheng to Intangible Cultural Heritage Expo Park) and the east extension (from Wannianchang Station to Xihe Station), was opened on June 2, 2017. Currently, there are a total of 30 stations on this line. The table below shows the English translations of all the station names in the order from Wansheng to Xihe.

Table 1: Chengdu Metro Line 4 Station Names and Translation Methods

Numble	Station name in Chinese	Translation in English	Translation Methods
1	Wansheng	Wansheng	Transliteration
2	Yangliuhe	Yangliuhe	Transliteration
3	Fengxihe	Fengxihe	Transliteration
4	Nanxun dadao	Nanshu Avenue	Transliteration &feature
5	Guanghua gong yuan	Guanghua Park	Transliteration &feature
6	Yongquan	Yongquan	Transliteration
7	Fenghuangdajie	Fenghuang Street	Transliteration &feature
8	Machangba	Machangba	Transliteration
9	Feiyibolanyuan	Intangible Cultural Heritage Park	Literal translation
10	Caiqiao	Caiqiao	Transliteration
11	Zhongba	Zhongba	Transliteration
12	Chengduxizhan	Chengdu West Railway Station	Literal translation
13	Qingjiangxilu	Qingjiang Road West	Transliteration &feature
14	Wenhuagong	Cultural Palace	Literal translation

15	Xinancaida	Southwestern University of Finance and Economics	Literal translation
16	Caotangbeilu	Caotang Road North	Transliteration &feature
17	Zhongyidashengyiyuan	Chengdu Universiti of TCM & Sichuan Provincial People’s Hospital	Literal translation
18	Kuanzhaixiangzi	Kuanzhaixiangzi Alleys	Transliteration &feature
19	Luomashi	Luomashi	Transliteration
20	Taishengnanlu	Taisheng Road South	Transliteration &feature
21	Shieryiyuan	Chengdu Second People’s Hospital	Literal translation
22	Yushuanglu	Yushuang Road	Transliteration &feature
23	Shuangqiaolu	Shuangqiao Road	Transliteration &feature
24	Wannianchang	Wannianchang	Transliteration
25	Huaishudian	Huaishudian	Transliteration
26	Lailong	Lailong	Transliteration
27	Shiling	Shiling	Transliteration
28	Chengdudaxue	Chengdu University	Literal translation
29	Mingshuwangling	Mingshuwangling	Transliteration
30	Xihe	Xihe	Transliteration

Examining the above table, it is evident that 14 stations on Chengdu Metro Line 4 are translated using the method of transliteration, 9 stations are translated using a combination of transliteration and descriptive translation, and 7 stations are translated using literal translation. Overall, a total of 23 stations, accounting for 76.7%, are translated using transliteration or a combination of transliteration and descriptive translation.

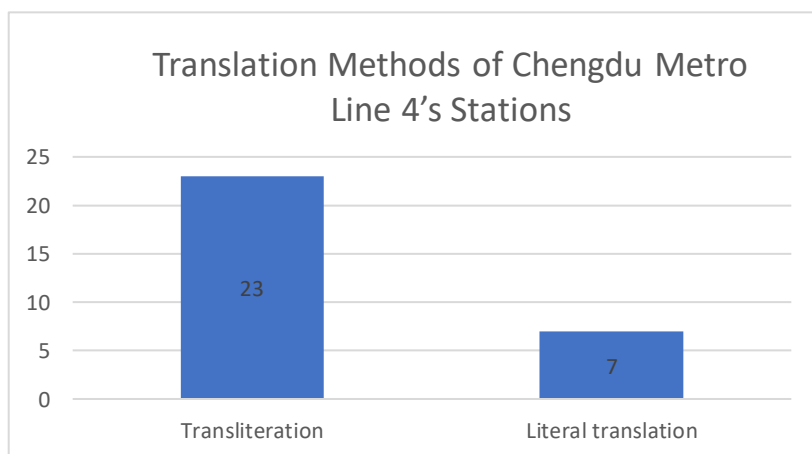


Figure 1: Translation Methods of Chengdu Metro Line 4 Station Names

In light of current developments, the State Council Information Office held a press conference on November 10, 2023, to release the white paper "The Practice and Historic Achievements of the Party's Strategy for Governing Tibet in the New Era." This white paper comprehensively

reflects the governance practices and achievements in Tibet since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and is the first programmatic document on the Communist Party of China's governance strategy in Tibet since the new era. An interesting detail in the English version of the white paper is that the term "Xizang" is used for Tibet, whereas the 2021 version used "Tibet." This change demonstrates the evolving terminology system regarding Tibet.

Among the "four confidences" proposed by President Xi, cultural confidence is crucial. As the carrier of culture, language confidence is also particularly important. As actual users and successors of Chinese, we Chinese people bear the important task of promoting Chinese culture to the world. Firm language confidence is a manifestation of China's subjective consciousness and status, and it holds strategic significance for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In the process of translating and disseminating Chinese characters and culture, it is necessary to retain Chinese characteristics, which is not only an advantage but also a necessary requirement for Chinese culture to "go global." In today's world, exchanges between countries are increasing. With the advancement of globalization and the Belt and Road Initiative, cultural and linguistic exchanges between China and foreign countries

3.3. "Five Types of Non-Translation" in Traditional Culture

Culture-loaded words refer to those that carry unique cultural connotations of a language or an ethnic group. Given the profound and extensive nature of Chinese culture, it is appropriate to adopt transliteration for some culture-loaded words with rich connotations. In the translation process, these words cannot be directly translated into the target language, and a forced translation may be contrived or even misleading.

Words with Chinese characteristics, such as the names of musical compositions, poetic forms, traditional Chinese medicine, medicinal diets, solar terms, foods, and traditional musical instruments, are difficult to translate directly into English and can be transliterated.

Convention is a translation principle, and usually, the original translation is maintained unless there are extremely necessary or unavoidable reasons. This is because translation is built on the long-term accumulated experience of predecessors and others, possessing cumulative characteristics. Just like language knowledge, it cannot be easily interrupted or discarded. Moreover, because cumulative knowledge in translation exists and spreads through words, it means that translation can often directly benefit from the cultural achievements created by predecessors and others[7]. In the translation process, we need to ensure that these Chinese culture-loaded words are accurately and fully presented in the English translation, while ensuring that the translation retains Chinese characteristics and is consistent with English norms. Take Pearl S. Buck as an example. Her Chinese name is Sai Zhenzhu, but if her English name were translated as "Pearl S. Zhenzhu," it would confuse readers. Conversely, the same applies to the process of translating from Chinese to English. If every proper noun relies on individual and random translation activities by different translators, and each word is re-selected for translation, it will lead to a disruption of translation traditions and confusion in translation works. Nowadays, many Chinese literary and film and television works are stepping onto the world stage, and these works contain rich Chinese cultural connotations. Every culture-loaded word radiates the "charm of China."

In fact, different geographical environments, religious developments, humanistic histories, economic development conditions, and other factors have jointly shaped the unique cultures of various ethnic groups, creating the specificity of each nation's culture. With the development of the society and culture of each nation, its vocabulary will inevitably undergo unique adjustments and advancements. Therefore, the principle of "Five Types of Non-Translation" can be adopted. These words with unique cultural characteristics of a nation often have no corresponding words in other cultures for translation. Retaining and promoting the

untranslatable parts is often conducive to cultural dissemination. Nowadays, in the era of vigorously promoting Chinese culture and facilitating cultural exchanges between China and the West, we often find the application of the principle of "non-translation due to lack of corresponding expressions." For example, when translating "yin" and "yang," it is obviously inappropriate to translate them into "negative," "positive," "female," or "male" as it would lose the rich connotations of these two words and fail to cover all the meanings they refer to in Chinese. In this case, because they have multiple meanings and are not translated, it is more appropriate to adopt transliteration and translate "yin yang" into "yin yang." This can also promote the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture and increase its international influence.

This year, the English channel CGTN also translated the Year of the Dragon as "Loong Year" and dragon dance as "Loong Dance." The word for the Chinese "dragon" has now been revised to "loong," officially distinguishing it from the long-used "Dragon." The Chinese "dragon" has been a totem image throughout history. In ancient times, the dragon was believed to be a mysterious creature capable of controlling the weather. In feudal times, the dragon was seen as a symbol of the emperor. Why was the English translation of the dragon changed to "loong"? Let's first understand the differences between the Chinese dragon and the Western dragon. In China, the dragon is a very important symbolic sign with multiple meanings. It was initially a symbol of imperial power, representing authority and dignity. In traditional culture, the dragon is listed alongside the phoenix, unicorn, and other auspicious symbols, implying happiness and good fortune. It is also our spiritual totem. Legends depict the dragon as capable of flight, transformation, and controlling the weather. Regarding its image, the "Erya Yi" records that it has antler-like horns, a camel-like head, rabbit-like eyes, snake-like neck, clam-like belly, fish-like scales, eagle-like claws, tiger-like palms, and cow-like ears. Although the dragon is fictional, it represents our spiritual totem and has multiple beautiful meanings, deeply loved and welcomed by people. However, in Western mythology, the dragon is a powerful creature with wings, scales, a long snake-like tail, and the ability to breathe fire.

4. Conclusion

Xuanzang's "Five Not-to-Translate" theory is highly forward-looking, and the practices of later generations have further proved the necessity and feasibility of transliteration. The "Five Not-to-Translate" theory still holds significant practical significance in current translation practices, playing a positive guiding role in our cultural exchanges with various countries, especially in the process of Chinese-to-English translation. Therefore, in the process of actual translation, translators should refer to the "Five Not-to-Translate" theory, combine it with traditional Chinese culture, and strive to do a good job in translation, contributing to the dissemination of Chinese culture.

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