

A Study on the C-E Translation of Foshan Kung Fu's Culture Specific Items

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Abstract

This research is conducted within the scope of Chinese culture's "going global". The discussion mainly revolves around the following issues: how to standardize the English translation of Foshan Kung Fu Culture Specific Items, how to tell Chinese stories well, and how to promote a deeper understanding of Foshan Kung Fu culture among overseas audiences. Two main conclusions are drawn from the research: (1) Foshan Kung Fu Culture Specific Items have translatability; (2) the translation of Foshan Kung Fu Culture Specific Items into English is a process of "finding translations". For those who have not found standardized Culture Specific Items in English translation, we suggest using Cantonese or Hanyu Pinyin plus English interpretation, which can better solve the problem of different translations of terms. Choosing this translation method not only preserves heterogeneity, but also showcases the cultural connotations behind Foshan Kung Fu. The discussion on the standardization of English translation of exclusive items in Foshan Kung Fu culture can promote deep and authentic cultural exchange. Extensions to other bodies of translation may yield similar results.

Keywords

Foshan Kung Fu Culture; Culture Specific Items; English translation; Standardization.

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of global integration, the era has arrived where the international community hopes to further understand China and Chinese culture through the exchange, integration, and mutual learning of different civilizations. With China's tremendous achievements in economy and sports, its international status and influence continue to rise, and Chinese culture has once again attracted the attention of the world. As an important part of Chinese culture, Kung Fu has also attracted the attention and devotion of people all over the world. According to the "Global Survey Report on China's National Image" released by the Foreign Communication Research Center of the China Foreign Languages Administration from 2014 to 2023, "Kung Fu", "Traditional Chinese Medicine", and "Chinese Cuisine" have consistently ranked among the top three representative elements of Chinese culture. In 2023, the proportion of overseas respondents who believe that "Kung Fu" best represents Chinese culture is as high as 46%, which demonstrates the enormous charm of Chinese Kung Fu culture in the hearts of international friends. Chinese Kung Fu is a beautiful business card for spreading rich traditional Chinese culture to the outside world. This research is conducted under the background of Chinese culture's "going global" initiative, exploring how to establish standardization for the English translation of Foshan Kung Fu Culture Specific Items. This research can promote the further development and external exchange of Foshan Kung Fu culture.

2. Development and External Exchange of Foshan Kung Fu

Chinese Kung Fu has profound and rich connotations, and the Chinese culture and virtues it embodies have the potential to contribute significantly to human happiness. Foshan is a renowned hometown of martial arts and the main birthplace of the Southern School of Kung Fu in China. In 2004, Foshan was awarded the title of “Kung Fu City” by the Chinese Kung Fu Association, becoming the only “Kung Fu City” in the country. Kung Fu is a treasure in the traditional culture of Foshan. At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, the practice of martial arts had spread throughout the urban and rural areas of Foshan. In the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, various schools of Kung Fu emerged, with a large number of Kung Fu masters and martial arts schools emerging. In modern times, influenced by the Anti-Japanese War and the domestic revolutionary war, there was a crisis of discontinuity in the popularity of Foshan Kung Fu. This extended until the 1990s when, with the spread of Kung Fu themed films and TV shows, Foshan Kung Fu once again attracted widespread attention. The widely popular southern martial arts styles and schools such as Cai Lifo Quan, Hong Quan, and Wing Chun Quan all have their roots in Foshan. In the history of Foshan, there have been many martial arts celebrities who have dominated the world: Zhu Kezhen, the Ming Dynasty martial arts champion; Yao Daning, the Qing Dynasty martial arts champion; Hong Fei-hung, the famous martial arts master; Liang Zan and Yip Man, the Wing Chun masters; Bruce Lee, the pioneer of world martial arts reform; and so on. At present, there are 52 types of martial arts such as the above-mentioned Cai Lifo Quan, Hong Quan, Wing Chun Quan, etc. in Foshan City, with 297 registered Kung Fu gyms and a Kung Fu followers of about 100,000 people. Foshan Kung Fu, as an important component of Lingnan’s distinctive culture, shoulders the important mission of constructing and developing Lingnan culture (Editor’s note: Historical Lingnan encompasses modern Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, Hong Kong, and Macau.). Therefore, maximizing the effectiveness of Foshan Kung Fu cultural translations into English is critical to introducing Chinese culture to foreign friends, promoting the “going global” of traditional Chinese culture, and establishing China’s image as a world power.

International dissemination of Chinese rich traditional culture and the translation that enables the dissemination are critical to achieving the targeted global sharing and promotion of Chinese culture internationally. With the strengthening of government support for local cultural initiatives, the English translation of Kung Fu culture in Foshan has achieved significant results. However, there is still a substantial gap between the current status of Kung Fu cross-cultural dissemination through translation and the development of Foshan’s cultural construction.

3. Research on the English Translation of Exclusive Items in Foshan Kung Fu Culture

The quality of English translation of some existing Foshan Kung Fu promotional materials is not ideal, particularly inconsistent English names for Culture Specific Items and insufficient depth in exploring the connotations of Culture Specific Items. An illustrative example of the phenomenon of inconsistent English names for Culture Specific Items can be found in the English translation of “工字伏虎拳” (Gong Zi Fu Hu Quan) which is variously translated as “Gong Character (I-shaped) Taming the Tiger Fist”^[1] at the Foshan Ancestral Temple Museum, and as “I-shaped Tiger Subduing Fist”^[2] in the English book *Chinese Foshan Kung Fu Culture*, and as “Gung Gee Fok Fu Kuen”^[3] in the book *Hung Kuen Training*. This inconsistent naming impedes cultural exchange, as it creates difficulty for foreign readers who will not naturally connect these names based on the existing translations. This inconsistent naming causes confusion, thus introducing unnecessary barriers to cross-cultural communication and

exchange. For the English translation of “工字伏虎拳” (Gong Zi Fu Hu Quan), we will provide a “suggested translation” in the following text.

3.1. What is a Culture Specific Item

Aixela (1996)^[4] defines Culture Specific Items as certain words or phrases that appear in a text which, due to the absence of a corresponding item in the target language or having a different textual status, meaning or connotations from those in the source language, are difficult to translate. To study Culture Specific Items, the first and foremost task is to grasp the essential attributes and characteristics of their cultural connotation correctly, to proactively identify Culture Specific Items, and to never blindly copy or replicate others' immature and one-sided definitions^[5]. Culture Specific Items refer to the cultural expressions exclusive to a certain ethnic group, have distinct and unique cultural connotations of that ethnic group, and represent the diverse forms of human beings that distinguish them from other ethnic groups. They are composed of special parts of culture, and their relationship with the culture is the relationship between part and whole. Culture Specific Items can also manifest in two forms. The first occurs when there are similar expressions in other ethnic groups with different semantics and contexts. In this case the Culture Specific Items can be meaningfully translated using the similar expressions. The second involves unique cultural items that are different from other ethnic groups. This second, Exclusive Culture Specific Items, type holds no similar correlations among other ethnic groups due to differences in regions, races, countries, classes, or historical periods. In the context of China's cultural “going global” initiative, we believe that when a gap occurs in Culture Specific Items between two ethnic groups, the translator should use Cantonese or Hanyu Pinyin plus an English interpretation. Done consistently across various translations, this translation method will not only preserve heterogeneity, but also showcases the cultural connotations behind Foshan Kung Fu.

3.2. Exploration of English Translation of Exclusive Items in Foshan Kung Fu Culture

In foreign countries, many Exclusive Culture Specific Items of Foshan Kung Fu are either spelled using Wade-Giles Pinyin or directly transliterated from Guangdong Cantonese dialect according to the translator's pronunciation. Both Wade-Giles Pinyin and Cantonese Pinyin are products of history, and once understood, it is not difficult to comprehend the reasons behind them. Yet another acceptable method of translation is Hanyu Pinyin.

Firstly, we explore the history of Wade-Giles Pinyin. In the 19th century, two famous British sinologists Sir Thomas Wade and Herbert Allen Giles invented a Western Romanized spelling (namely, Wade-Giles Pinyin, also known as Webster's Pinyin) for foreigners to spell Chinese Mandarin. This system was created in 1867 and was gradually abolished after 1958 when Hanyu Pinyin became the preferred spelling in the mainland of China. Wade-Giles Pinyin continued to be used in by Western authors and publishers rendering Chinese in English until the late 1970s. In the 1980s, China began to enforce the use of Hanyu Pinyin to replace the century old Western Romanized spelling used by Westerners in official documents. The use of Wade-Giles Pinyin, therefore, predates the use of Hanyu Pinyin, causing severe disconnections between romanizations in earlier and current texts. Despite the concerted efforts of China to promote Hanyu Pinyin, the foundation for spelling Chinese Kung Fu culture exclusive items in foreign countries was built on Wade-Giles Pinyin and shifting traditional methods naturally presents challenges. Therefore while “功夫” is consistently Romanized as “Kung Fu,” but “咏春拳” appears as both “Wing Chun” and “Ving Tsun.”

Next, we consider the influence of Cantonese Pinyin. Foshan Kung Fu's first vehicle for going abroad in the past century was Hong Kong Kung Fu movies. In the early 1970s, a wave of Chinese Kung Fu films swept the world. From 1971 to 1983, Bruce Lee movies flourished in

Hong Kong, the United States, Japan, and even Europe. Lee's Kung Fu skills fascinated many fans around the world, and people rushed to learn Kung Fu. The popular worldwide spread of Cantonese Kung Fu blockbusters predated the official Kung Fu dissemination in mainland China. The Cantonese Kung Fu titles that were popular from the 1960s to the 1980s mainly used the Cantonese Pinyin method for English translation. The expansion of Kung Fu movies also resulted in the establishment of martial arts schools, but Kung Fu has long been a cultural export, particularly from Guangdong province. Guangdong is located along the mainland coast near Hong Kong and has been engaged in foreign trade for a long time. All through history, Guangdong people have been going overseas to seek their fortunes. Naturally some of these people carried martial arts skills with them. Therefore, Foshan Kung Fu has spread overseas with overseas Chinese – long before the advent of the Kung Fu blockbuster. Martial arts schools can be found in major, medium, and small cities all around the globe, especially in Europe and the Americas. This gradual infiltration laid the foundation for the flood initiated by Bruce Lee.

In the 1960s, before the becoming popular in Western movies, Bruce Lee mainly spread Kung Fu by opening martial arts schools and recruiting apprentices. In April 1962, Bruce Lee (then known by his Chinese name, Zhen Fan) opened the "Zhen Fan Martial Arts Hall" in Washington, D.C., where he recruited foreigners as apprentices and taught "Zhen Fan Boxing" openly to spread his Kung Fu ideas to the world. Bruce Lee also established Kung Fu branch schools in Seattle, Oakland, Los Angeles, and other places to teach students. Bruce Lee's move to open a martial arts school established Chinese Kung Fu's place in the culturally diverse United States, gradually gaining equal status with Japanese Karate, and even surpassing Karate in popularity for a certain period of time. Following on Bruce Lee's success in this cultural expansion, Leung Ting established the "Wing Chun Leung Ting Boxing School" with the mission of promoting Wing Chun Kung Fu in 1970. Since that time this franchise has expanded, opening 4,000 Wing Chun martial arts schools in 64 countries with has over 2 million disciples. So, in foreign countries, some Exclusive Culture Specific Items of Kung Fu culture have been transcribed using Cantonese Pinyin and continue to use this format.

Thirdly, we consider the use of Hanyu (Mandarin) Pinyin. Many Exclusive Culture Specific Items of Foshan Kung Fu are transcribed in English according to Hanyu Pinyin or translated into English. This is generally the preferred method for current translation. In the exhibits from the Foshan Ancestral Temple Museum and the book "Chinese Foshan Kung Fu Culture" for example, we find that some representative figures, routines, and equipment names of Foshan Kung Fu are different, resulting in the phenomenon of multiple translations of specific words or phrases. Yet because of the complex history of Kung Fu, complete standardization may not be the best solution.

According to the current literature on the internationalization promotion of Kung Fu, there are two forms or channels for the dissemination and promotion of Chinese Kung Fu to the outside world: one is the folk form, and the other is the official form. Chinese Kung Fu has a history of more than 100 years of spreading to foreign countries through folk forms, which predates the official promotion of Chinese Kung Fu. We believe that since the Wade-Giles and Cantonese spellings, which are exclusive to Kung Fu culture, have been widely accepted abroad, accepting these historical forms is important and those familiar with each form can justify continuing to use them according to convention, such as using "Wong Fei-hung" for "黄飞鸿," "Lam Sai Wing" for "李世荣," "Yip Man" for "叶问," "Bruce Lee" for "李小龙," "Hung Kuen" for "洪拳," and "Po Chi Lam" for "宝芝林."

In the process of selecting translation modes for cultural and Culture Specific Items, translators should consult various relevant translation materials of Culture Specific Items at home and abroad, and, if necessary, consult authoritative experts. The implementation process of Culture Specific Items usually results in one of the following three outcomes: (1) finding commonly

accepted translated names abroad or finding existing standardized translated names domestically; (2) finding multiple non-standardized translated names, or (3) translation not found. When faced with the first outcome, translators should choose to use standardized translated names directly. When faced with either of the latter two outcomes, translators may choose the mode of transcription most in keeping with the tradition of the venue in which the translation will appear, being careful to maintain internal consistency in subsequent translations.

From the perspective of language adaptability selection conversion (Hu Gengshen, 2004^[6]; 2022^[7]), for the proprietary items of Kung Fu culture, if we find standardized translated names written in Cantonese Pinyin or Wade-Giles Pinyin abroad, we should use these translations to help overseas audiences spell out the proprietary items of Kung Fu culture, thereby helping Foshan Kung Fu culture go global. As an additional benefit, this approach also makes Cantonese speaking Hong Kong and Macao people, as well as overseas Chinese, feel more comfortable with the texts, supporting the economic and cultural integration of the Guangdong Hong Kong Macao Greater Bay Area.

If multiple non-standardized translated names are found, or if no translated names are found, we suggest translators choose the mode of transcription most in keeping with the tradition of the venue in which the translation will appear for the Culture Specific Items. The Culture Specific Items of Kung Fu culture belong to the greater class of Culture Specific Items, and Culture Specific Items often lack words with completely equivalent meanings in English, but many are translatable. We^[8] suggest that the English translation of Foshan Kung Fu culturally loaded words should also interpret their unique cultural connotations after transliteration, which is the method of transliteration and interpretation, that is, adding English annotations to Wade-Giles Pinyin, Cantonese Pinyin or Mandarin Pinyin. Choosing such a translation method can, through historically consistent transliteration, preserve cultural heterogeneity and by adding annotations interpreting and translating the deeper cultural aspects^[9], we can showcase the rich cultural connotations within Foshan Kung Fu. According to this principle of English translation, we suggest “Gongzi Fuhu Quan” may be beneficially translated as, “Gung Gee Fok Fu Kuen (the Gong Character [I-shaped] Taming the Tiger Fist).” An additional, and more complex example follows. In the Foshan Ancestral Temple Museum, “五郎八卦棍” is rendered, “Wulang Eight Diagram Pole.”^[1] This is an Exclusive Culture Specific Item. The same phrase in the English translation of the book *Chinese Foshan Kung Fu Culture* is “Diagram Pole Fighting.”^[2] In *Hung Kuen Training*, the same phrase appears as “Yang Family Fifth Son’s Eighth Trigram Long Pole.”^[3] While each of these has its historical importance and value, we suggest using Hanyu Pinyin followed by a succinct explanation: “Wulang Bagua Gun (Eight Trigram Long Pole)”.

4. Conclusion

The existence of multiple translations and inconsistent names for Exclusive Culture Specific Items presents significant barriers to cultural exchange. The confusing array of various names for single objects and concepts makes it difficult for foreign readers to determine whether these different translations correspond to the same or different items. This uncertainty can make people feel confused and uncomfortable, thus bringing difficulties to cross-cultural communication and exchange. We believe that Exclusive Culture Specific Items have translatability, and the process of translating Culture Specific Items into English is actually a process of “finding translation”. The results of “finding a translation” usually include the following three situations: (1) finding commonly accepted translated names abroad or finding existing standardized translated names domestically; (2) finding multiple non-standardized translated names, or (3) translation not found. We use different methods to translate the

proprietary items of Foshan Kung Fu Culture into English in different situations. If there are already standardized translations, we will continue to use them according to convention; If we cannot find a standardized translation or if there are multiple translations of a word, translators may choose the mode of transcription most in keeping with the tradition of the venue in which the translation will appear, being careful to maintain internal consistency in subsequent translations.

We hope that this research on the English translation of Foshan Kung Fu Exclusive Cultural Items can provide reference for the English translation of other related Culture Specific Items. Through improving the consistency in translating Culture Specific Items, we can tell Chinese cultural stories well, and thus better promote the dissemination of culture to the outside world. We hope this paper will be applied directly to Foshan Kung Fu cultural translations as a means of aiding Kung Fu enthusiasts as they seek to experience traditional Chinese culture and better understand the lifestyle of ordinary Chinese people, thus promoting deep and authentic cultural exchange.

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