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## Approaches to translating tea terms: a case study of *Chinese Paintings on Tea*

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### ABSTRACT

Approaches to translating tea terms: a case study of *Chinese Paintings on Tea*

Chinese tea culture is rich and diverse, with a long history of over 2,000 years. Over the centuries, it has developed its own unique language and terminology, with a wide range of tea types, brewing methods, and cultural practices that are closely intertwined with the Chinese way of life. Terms are words and compound words that in specific contexts are given specific meanings – these may deviate from the meanings the same words have in other contexts and in everyday language. Translating Chinese tea terms can be a challenging task, as these terms often carry cultural, historical, and regional nuances that may not have direct equivalents in other languages. In 2017, the author translated the book *Chinese Paintings on Tea* into English, which was then published by a U.S. publishing house and sold on Amazon.com. In *Chinese Paintings on Tea* many tea terms are used to depict the classical painting works, which illustrate values and virtues rooted deeply in traditional Chinese culture. As a translator, translating terms was a very big challenge for the author, so, based on the practice of translating *Chinese Paintings on Tea*, this paper focuses on exploring the translatability of Chinese tea terms, and examines the challenges that arise in the translation process, and puts forward some translation approaches that might be adopted in practice. By translating Chinese tea terms into other languages, it becomes more accessible and approachable for the readers who may not be familiar with the Chinese language or culture to understand and appreciate the unique qualities of Chinese tea.

**Keywords:** limitation; translation; tea term; approach

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### 1. Research background

This paper is based on the author's translation practice of *Chinese Paintings on Tea*. The book contains two hundred and three famous Chinese paintings from

Tang Dynasty to the year 1949 with the topic of tea or tea related materials. The author of this book discusses their four aspects: the poetic connotations in paintings, the contemplation of retreat, the state of mind and the perspectives of ancient Chinese. Between painting and poetry, however, tea served as an essential medium for its ability to bring peace and clarity to minds, and thus was indispensable in the daily life of ancient Chinese. The affinity between tea and painting began to incubate in Wei and Jin Dynasties. Tea drinking has been popularized as a means of stimulating minds, illuminating thoughts and comprehending the Tao, and since more than fifteen centuries ago people have expressed their enjoyment of tea drinking in their paintings. During that time painting also evolved into a more versatile, entertaining form of art, outgrowing its traditional role of spreading social morals. The appreciation of painting and the fashion of tea drinking quickly became widely popular pursuits among the cultured social classes, from celebrities who replaced liquor with the more elegant tea to monks favoring the use of tea to treat guests. The brewing and drinking of tea was the culmination of many delights in scent, color, shape, and taste, all carefully considered during cultivation and processing. The drink became a catalyst for creation of artworks, gradually becoming the subject of painting. By Tang Dynasty, tea was already ubiquitously found in Chinese life, being regarded as one of the seven necessities of life, among the ranks of Guqin (a seven-stringed plucked instrument in some ways similar to the zither), Weiqi (a game played with black and white pieces on a board of 361 crosses), calligraphy, painting, poetry and liquor.

Three main categories of paintings are included in *Chinese Paintings on Tea*: figure paintings to highlight values in beings; landscape paintings to display harmonious relationships between human beings and the nature; and bird-and-flower paintings to reflect purity and enjoyment of life. These paintings depict various activities tied with tea, illustrating the abstractions of Chinese culture with visual images and opening the realms of arts in the rich culture related to tea. In *Chinese Paintings on Tea*, many technical terms are used to depict the classical works, illustrating values and virtues rooted deeply in the traditional Chinese culture. According to Antoni Oliver, terminology is very important for translators, but the way they address this field of knowledge is very different from terminologists, which includes not only the units that would be considered as real terms by a terminologist, but also other units requiring a specific translation in the given subject field (Oliver 2017: 150).

As the popularity of tea has grown, so has the need for translations of Chinese tea terms. Chinese tea can be classified into six major types: green, black, oolong, white, yellow, and dark tea. Each type of tea has its unique processing methods and flavor profiles, which are shaped by various factors such as terroir, climate, and processing techniques. Therefore, in translating Chinese tea

terms into English, there are often challenges that arise from the complexity and subtlety of the language, as well as the cultural differences between China and other countries. Many Chinese tea terms are firmly rooted in Chinese history, mythology, and philosophy, and may not have direct equivalents in other languages. In addition, the tonal nature of the Chinese language, combined with regional and dialectical variations, can make it difficult to accurately translate Chinese tea terms into a target language.

## 2. Linguistic limitation

Gogol has once proposed that “the ideal translation [is] one that is like a completely transparent pane of glass through which people can see the original without being aware of anything intervening” (Wellwarth 1981: 146). Eugene Nida, the renowned American linguist, said “Translation consists in the reproduction in the receptor language of the closest natural equivalent to the message of the source language, first in meaning and then in style” (Nida 1993:87). In my translating practice, it is advisable to maintain the precise and accurate meaning of the original and create the most equivalent version.

Linguistic limitation in translation occurs when there is no corresponding linguistic equivalents in the target language (TL) to replace those in the source language (SL). According to Catford (1965: 136), in linguistic untranslatability the functionally relevant features include some which are in fact formal features of the language of the SL text. If the TL has no formally corresponding feature, the text, or the item, is (relatively) untranslatable. Linguistic untranslatability means the failure to find a TL equivalent due entirely to differences between the SL and the TL. More specifically, it is a case of “collocational untranslatability”, which Catford defines as: untranslatability arising from the fact that any possible TL near-equivalent of a given SL lexical item has a low probability of collocation with TL equivalents of items in the SL text which collocate normally with the given SL item (Catford 1965: 136–143). Anton Popovič (as cited in Bassnet-McGuire 1980: 34) defines linguistic untranslatability as a situation in which the linguistic elements of the original cannot be replaced adequately in structural, linear, functional or semantic terms in consequence of a lack of denotation or connotation. In a paper entitled *On the Impossibility of Translation*, Robert Payne (1971:361–364) states that the world’s languages resemble infinitely complicated grids, and the basic patterns of these grids scarcely ever coincide. On some rare occasions translation succeeds beyond all possibility.

According to the above linguists, the differences between languages lead to some impossibility of translation. In the tea terms translation, it is more difficult as many Chinese tea terms have multiple meanings, depending on the context in which they are used. They may deviate from the meanings the same words have

in other contexts and in everyday language. For example, *Dahongpao* is a type of oolong tea from the Wuyi Mountains in Fujian Province. The name *Dahongpao* literally means big red robe and is said to refer to a red robe worn by a monk who saved the tea plants from a fire. However, the pronunciation and tone of the word can change its meaning. *Dahongpao* can also mean a big red cloak or big red armor depending on the tone in which it is spoken. The Chinese tea term *Hongcha* can refer to black tea, but it can also refer to the tea that has a red or brown color. Similarly, the term *Huacha* can refer to tea that is infused with flowers, but it can also refer to any tea that has a floral aroma. The Chinese tea term *Chadao* can be translated as “the way of tea” or “the tea ceremony.” However, the translation “the way of tea” is more literal, while the translation “the tea ceremony” is more descriptive, either of which causes some loss of the original meaning. In addition, the meaning of a term can change depending on the context. For example, the term *Chaxiang* refers to the aroma of tea. However, in the context of tea tasting it specifically refers to the aroma of the tea leaves before they are brewed. Another example: the term *Cha* can refer to both the leaves of the tea plant and the beverage that is made from these leaves. It is commonly translated into English as *tea*. However, in some contexts, it can also mean plant, vegetable, or herb. These linguistic differences can make it difficult to translate Chinese terms without ambiguity. Therefore, translators must be aware of the different meanings of Chinese tea terms to ensure accurate translations.

### 3. Cultural limitation

According to Peter Newmark, if the text describes a situation which has elements peculiar to the natural environment, institutions, and culture of its language area, there is an inevitable loss of meaning, the translator’s language can only be approximate. (Newmark 1988: 7–8). The concept “culture-bound term” has been frequently used in the studies of terms. Malcolm Harvey (2000: 357–369) argues that culture-bound terms refer to concepts, institutions, and personnel which are specific to the source language culture. Javier Franco Aixela, a Spanish translator, was the first to put forward the concept of “culture-specific items (CSIs)”. He defined CSIs as:

[...] textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different inter-textual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text (Aixelá 1996: 58).

Aixelá (1996: 57) believes that culture-bound terms are terms that are not easily translatable into a language, mainly including two categories, that is, proper noun and common expression. Wei Xiangqing (2018: 67) believes that

culture-specific items, especially those born in a particular nation, embody specific cultural traditions, cognitive thinking, and core values of a nation, demonstrating distinct cultural heterogeneity and thus posing great challenges for the translation practice. John Catford (1965: 99) describes that cultural untranslatability arises when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the SL text, is completely absent from the culture of which the TL is a part.

The translation field has widely agreed that cultural divergence is a most important factor leading to the loss of meaning. Language and culture cannot exist without each other, and language is one of the important means that represent elements of culture. In translating activity the most serious translation errors do not usually result from misunderstanding the source text, but of wrong cultural assumptions. It is true that words carry along the cultural content since they are supposed to reflect culture, but matching words does not mean matching cultures.

For instance, in English, the word *make* can serve as a general word to be used with a wide range of nouns to indicate that someone performs an action. In Chinese, the term “make tea” has a number of different verbs referring to the same action; they are *Dancha*, *Pengcha*, *Zhucha* and *Fencha*, showing a way of making tea. Each verb *Dian*, *Peng*, *Zhu* and *Fen* adds certain special features to the basic meaning of the word “make”, but it’s difficult to find an equivalent in English without the loss of its cultural meaning. Another example, the term *Gongfucha* refers to a traditional Chinese tea brewing method that emphasizes the skill and precision of the tea master, and is named after the Chinese term for mastery or skill (mean *gongfu*). If translated as *Gongfu tea* or *tea ceremony*, neither of the two versions can capture the full meaning and cultural significance of the Chinese term, and thus may require additional explanation or context to convey the intended meaning. Another example: the Chinese tea term *Chadang* was frequently used as tea-things in ancient times to stir tea dust in it with boiling water. *Dang* is a tea utensil with a small hole, used to pour tea into tea bowls. The tea term *Chadang* does not find any equivalence in English. It is hard for English-speaking people who have never seen *Dang* to understand how to use the tool.

From the above analysis it is quite clear that differences between languages and cultures encumber the translatability and various loss in meaning may make a translation of Chinese tea terms an imperfect and approximate one. However, by consulting multiple sources and references to raise awareness of the unique of Chinese tea terms, translators can ensure the accuracy and relevance of translations.

#### 4. Translation approaches

In dealing with different tea terms, different methods are adopted. Thus, through linguistic changes, through a refinement of interpretative means, through shifts

in receptive sensibility (Steiner 1975), something untranslatable, whether due to linguistic reasons or cultural reasons, will be translatable. The translation of Chinese tea terms into English is a complex process that requires a deep understanding of both languages. There are many different ways to translate these terms, and the best approach depends on the specific term and the context in which it is being used.

It is also important to consider the purpose of the translation. If the purpose is to provide information about Chinese tea culture, then a more literal translation may be appropriate. However, if the purpose is to promote Chinese tea culture, then a more creative translation may be necessary to make the term more appealing to Western audiences.

#### 4.1. Literal translation

In translating tea terms, literal translation is one of the most straightforward translation approaches, where the translator translates the Chinese tea term using its English equivalent based on literal meaning of the term. For example, the Chinese tea term *Longjingcha* is a famous green tea from Hangzhou, in Zhejiang Province. It is stir-fried mostly made by hand and known for its high quality, earning it the title of famous tea in China. The tea gets its name from the village of Longjing, where it is grown. The name “Dragon Well” comes from a story about a dragon that lived in a well near the village. When the villagers tried to dig the well, the dragon appeared and caused a drought. The villagers were only able to restore the water by asking the dragon for permission, so it can be translated as “Dragon Well tea”. The name “Dragon Well Tea” is also descriptive of the tea’s unique taste and appearance.

As a matter of principle, a translator is not supposed to add any meaning to or subtract any meaning from the original work. But Chinese and English are two entirely different languages, whose creators and native speakers have such entirely different historical and cultural backgrounds, that many tea expressions so well understood in the country of their origin, can hardly make sense to the foreigners if translated literally without the necessary “amplification”. Therefore, the good method of finding acceptable version is to give a literal translation and then add some explanation. For example, the Chinese tea term *Diancha* is one of the ancient tea-making methods. There are two types of Diancha: one is to mix boiling water with tea powder in the teacups, and the other is to make tea in the tea basin and then spoon tea water to teacups when drinking. It is necessary to literally translate it into tea-making with some explanation, which can help the reader to better understand the context in which the term is used.

Literal translation can be a useful approach to translating Chinese tea terms that are well-known in English. For example, *Green tea* is a well-known term in English, and Chinese tea term *Lyucha* can be easily translated into English as

Green tea. However, literal translation can be a difficult approach for translating Chinese tea terms that are not well-known in English. For example, the term *Wuyi oolong* can be a little difficult to understand. A literal translation of this term would be Wuyi oolong tea. If it is translated as “oxidized tea” to tell its function, it would be more helpful for someone who is not familiar with Chinese tea.

The advantage of this translation approach is that it retains the original meaning of the Chinese tea term. However, in some cases it may not fully capture the cultural meaning and connotations of the term, as many Chinese tea terms have a rich history and cultural heritage that goes beyond their literal meaning.

#### 4.2. Transliteration

Transliteration is the process of transferring a word from alphabet of one language to another language. Transliteration helps people pronounce words and names in foreign languages. Transliteration does not tell the meaning of a word that is written in another language, only gives an idea of how the word is pronounced by putting it in a familiar alphabet. It changes the letters from the word’s original alphabet to similar-sounding letters in a different one. In translating tea terms, transliteration is another approach where the translator renders the Chinese tea term phonetically using the English alphabet. This approach is often used for translating proper nouns, where the name cannot be translated literally. And in most cases it is combined with literal translation. For example, the Chinese tea term *Puer cha* can be transliterated as Puer tea.

The advantage of this approach is that it preserves the sound of the original Chinese tea term, which can help in its recognition and pronunciation by English speakers.

#### 4.3. Adaptation

Adaptation is a translation approach that adapts the Chinese tea term to fit the target culture’s language and context, taking into account the cultural significance and connotations of the term. This approach is often used for translating expressions, where the direct translation may not make sense in the target language. For example, the Chinese tea term *Meihuaxiangpian* can be adapted as “plum blossom fragrance tea,” where the term’s cultural significance lies in its association with the plum blossom, which is a symbol of perseverance and resilience in Chinese culture.

Some Chinese tea terms can be translated literally into English, while others require more creative translation approaches. For example, in the term *Shaqing*, “sha” means “to kill,” and “qing” is the color “green.” This term literally means “degreening”, one of the initial manufacturing processes of green tea. The main purpose is to destroy and passivate the enzyme activity of fresh leaves by high

temperature, inhibit the enzymatic oxidation of tea polyphenols in fresh leaves, evaporate some water in fresh leaves, make tea soft, easy to roll and shape, at the same time send out green odor, promote the formation of good aroma. The term was also used to depict one of the ancient procedures for making bamboo slips in preparation for them to be written on.

Today, however, it is often used to describe wrapping up a film shoot or clinching a project in the general sense. So, the tea term *Shaqing* can be translated literally as “kill green” or “destroy greenness.” However, this translation does not capture the full meaning of the term. A more accurate translation of *Shaqing* would be “enzyme-inhibit.”

Another example is the term *Chazhi*, which can be translated literally as “tea quality.” However, this translation does not capture the full meaning of the term, which refers to the richness of tea in the taste. *Chazhi* would be adapted as “richness of tea flavor.”

The advantage of this approach is that it captures the cultural and historical context of the term, which can help the reader to appreciate its significance and make the term more accessible.

## 5. Conclusion

Ultimately, in my opinion, the best approach to translating Chinese tea terms into English is to consider the target audience, the purpose of the translation, and the full meaning of the term. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and the best approach will vary depending on the specific term and the context in which it is being used. Translators may face challenges in accurately conveying the meaning, cultural significance, and context of Chinese tea terms, but by using the appropriate translation approach and having a deep understanding of the source and target cultures, it is possible to create accurate and culturally appropriate translations, help to promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation and enable people from different cultures to learn and enjoy Chinese tea culture.

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