

# On the Characteristics and Translation Strategies of TCM Terms

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The translation of traditional Chinese medical terms (TCM terms) is conducive to the dissemination of traditional Chinese medical culture and the complementarity and mutual learning between Chinese medicine and Western medicine. Based on the analysis of lexical features of TCM terms and discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the existing translation strategies of Chinese medicine terms, this paper puts forward three C-E translation principles of TCM terms, including moderate foreignisation, phonetic translation, and unified English translation standards and proposes translation strategies of equal translation, transcreation, and literal translation.

*Keywords:* TCM terms, term characteristics, English translation of terms, translation strategies

## Introduction

The degree of scientization, systematization, and standardization of terminology represents the development of a discipline (Fang, 2023). Currently, the English translation of TCM terms has attracted extensive attention from scholars. As of December 29, 2020, among the Top 10 terminology translation publications in CNKI, three are Chinese medicine ones, with a combined publication volume of 11% of the total (Xu & Luo, 2021). However, the existing textbooks, monographs, and journals have different translations for some TCM terms, sometimes, even in the same literature. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss the translation principles and strategies based on the analysis of the characteristics of TCM terms to improve the international discourse power of Chinese standards for translation of TCM terms.

## Characteristics of TCM Terms

### Philosophical Nature

Humboldt (1999) pointed out that language is the external representation of national spirit. To turn in a good translation, one must first understand the cultural factor behind it, namely, the spirit of classical Chinese philosophy, “Tao”, which originated from the unity of heaven and man in the *I Ching* and the pre-Qin Yin-Yang and Five Elements ideas. For example, the word “天癸” means “male essence and female blood”, but *The Original Tenets of Medical Classics* said, “天癸者，非精非血，乃天一之真”. The commentator Yang Shangshan in Sui Dynasty indicated that “天癸，精气也”. “天癸” is an invisible essence of “yin” and “yang”, which is related to the human reproductive function of the abstract material and contains the Taoist “yin” and “yang” sympathetic changes. Therefore, it cannot be referred to as semen or menstruation as in Western medicine.

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### Ambiguity

Ancient medical texts are concise and profound, often using the same word to refer to different objects. Coupled with interchangeable words, ancient medical texts are difficult to understand and translate. For example, “*Tian Yuan Ji Da Lun*” (or *The Yin and Yang of the Five Elements Motion and the Six Kinds of Weather as the Guiding Principles of the Universe*) in *Su Wen* (or *Plain Questions*) reads, “论言五运相袭而皆治之，终期之日，周而复始”。 In this sentence, “期” means “one year”. However, “*Mai Yao Jing Wei Lun*” (or *The Essentials and Fundamentals of Diagnostic Palpation*) in *Su Wen* says, “阴阳有时，与脉为期。期而相失，知脉所分，分之有期，故知死时”。 The word “期” also means “date/period”. Another example is the statement in *Nan Jing* (or *The Classic of Difficult Issues*), which reads, “胃者，水谷之海，主稟。四时皆以胃气为本”。 “稟” is not “稟赋” (“endowment”), but the interchangeable character for “廩”, which means “granary”, a metaphor for “grain storehouse”, referring to the stomach as the organ for storing grain.

### Literariness

Ancient people revered literature as they used a lot of words with splendour and delicacy as well as allusions and metaphors, emphasizing the artistic conception. In ancient China, literature penetrated into all aspects of life. Chinese medicine, as a strong gene of literature and history, inevitably has a strong literary flavour. Taking “白虎历节” (“white tiger biting the joints”) as an example, the disease is generally considered to be pain in the extremities and joints like a white tiger biting the joints, intolerable as one cannot flex. In Western medicine, it is simply called severe and migratory arthralgia. Although the Western medical expression sounds more scientific, it has lost the beauty and characteristics of the original text. Another example is “当归” (“angelica”) alias “文无” (“Wen Wu”, meaning “no text”). Cao Cao, a politician in the Three Kingdoms Period, admired the name of Tai Shi Ci, a general of the Eastern Wu, and sent him a parcel with no letter, but only angelica, to persuade Tai Shi Ci to return to the imperial court. The event is which “当归” alias “文无” was derived from.

### Diachronic Changes

Since Chinese medicine has a long course of development, many terms are given new meanings as time changes. A word in modern Chinese may carry different meanings from what it used to in the ancient times. For example, *The Life of Zhu Danxi* reads, “或阴阳两虚湿热自盛者，又当消息而用之”。 The word “消息” does not indicate “information”, but refers to “abatement” in ancient Chinese. Another example is the word “指” in *On Channels of Ling Shu*, “足太阴脾经，起于大指之端，循指内侧白肉际”， which stands for “toes”, while in modern Chinese, “指” only retains the meaning of “fingers”.

## Principles of English Translation of TCM Terms

At the beginning of the 19th century, Protestant missionaries from the West introduced modern medicine into China by “preaching with the help of medicine” (L. H. Chen & L. Y. Chen, 1999). Influenced by “Eastward Progression of Western Medicine”, a large amount of Western medical knowledge came into affect China, and subsequently the Western medical terminology. Nowadays, these terms and concepts have been widely accepted by the public, including drug terms, disease names, clinical examination terms, etc. By analogy, we can also transform TCM terms into global knowledge. In the process of spreading Chinese medicine culture, it is necessary to apply to the following three principles.

### Moderate Foreignisation

We find that in the spreading process of Western medicine, the Chinese translation often adopts foreignising translation, because it is difficult to find equivalent terms for many Western medical concepts in Chinese.

Similarly, it is a tall order to find equivalent terms for most TCM terms in English. At the same time, given that TCM terms are a mix of Chinese history, literature and philosophy and have gone through a long course of development, the philosophical ideas and uniqueness of TCM terms also determine that the English translation must be based on foreignising translation. Jiang (2021) suggested that the process shall be “oriented to the target language” and “based on Chinese culture”. While domesticating translation requires the translation to fit the expression and norms of the target language, the Chinese characteristics and medical connotation of the terms are sacrificed in the process. Therefore, for culturally loaded terminology, it is necessary to adopt a moderate foreignising translation method so as to let the target readers to maintain a sense of “foreignness”. For example, Wiseman (2000), a British translator of Chinese medicine, used the method of “source language orientation” to translate “狐惑” into “fox creeper”, “益气” into “boost qi”, and “壮阳” into “invigorate *yang*”. Compared with domesticating translation, which tends to dissolve the cultural connotations of the source language, this highlights the Chinese characteristics and is conducive to transforming the cultural heritage into cultural capital, providing a cultural foundation for the development of the Chinese medical economy.

### Phonetic Translation

Linguistic nationalism points out that it is unquestionable to express national possessions and sovereignty by using national words and appellations. Therefore, we must insist on retaining Chinese elements in the translation of TCM terms and on phonetic translation. Pinyin is China’s unique way of expressing sounds, but since the 26 letters of the English alphabet are still used, it is inevitable that there will be some inconvenience and puzzles for foreign readers who are used to Wade-Giles when translating from Chinese to English. Therefore, we should fully consider the tolerance of the target cultures. Therefore, it is a better choice to use the Wade-Giles phonetic transliteration to expand the dissemination of TCM terms, such as Ginseng.

### Unified Standard

The lack of a unified standard for the English translation of TCM terms is an important reason why it is difficult to disseminate. Taking the translation of “黄帝内经” as an example, in *The WHO International Standard for TCM Terms* published in 2022 it was translated into “Huangdi Neijing”. However, in *The International Standard for the Chinese-English Comparison of Basic Terms and Terminology of Traditional Chinese Medicine* (hereinafter referred to as *The Chinese-English Comparison Standard*) published in 2007 it was translated into “Huangdi’s Internal Classic”. Li (2005) translated it into “Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine”; Luo (2009) translated it as “Introductory Story of Huangdi Neijing”. And Unschuld (2016) translated *The Ling Shu* to “Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen Nature: The Ancient Classic on Needle Therapy”. One term with numerous translations is obviously not conducive to the dissemination of terminology. Meanwhile, although standards for English translation of terminology have been promulgated, mistranslation and multiple translations of the same terminology are still endless. Therefore, the implementation of existing terminology standards should be intensified to improve the requirements for the standardized use of terminology. As for “黄帝内经”, “Huangdi’s Internal Classic” in *The Chinese-English Standard* should be adopted. *The Chinese-English Comparison Standard*, published by People’s Health Publishing House in 2007 and authored by the World Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine, is normative and authoritative and has already had a certain influence, and

therefore should be used as a guideline for the translation of TCM terms. Compared with finding an optimal translation, expanding the dissemination of TCM terms and winning recognition are a more important issue.

### **Translation Strategies for English Translation of TCM Terms**

According to Pitch and Draksau (1985), a standard terminology system should comply with the rules of no synonyms or near-synonyms, no multiple words with one meaning or one word with multiple meanings, no variant words or multiple writings, but shall be able to derive new words, etc. However, these rules cannot be met by TCM terms, resulting in TCM terms' inability to create the Medical Subject Headings as the Western terminology does. For example, some translators have tried to borrow Latin/Greek roots, such as "anem" (i.e., wind) and "hygr" (i.e., wet) to create TCM terms, but such translations are difficult to be understood by neither Chinese or Western medical practitioners, which is obviously not successful. Therefore, the translation strategy should take into full consideration the characteristics of Chinese terminology, which we summarize into the following three kinds: equivalent translation, transcreation, and literal translation.

#### **Equivalent Translation**

According to Huang and Chen (2001), terminology translation is not only "translation", but to find equivalent terms from the same disciplines in the target language, which is "equivalent translation". Xie et al. (2005), translators with the background in Western medicine, translate "风火眼" as "acute conjunctivitis". Although the symptoms of the two are similar, Chinese and Western medicine interpret the pathology differently. While in Chinese medicine wind-fire eye is caused by the six elements (wind, cold, summer, dampness, dryness, and fire), Western medicine determines that the root cause is bacterial infection (i.e., inflammation). Therefore, the method of "equivalent translation", although seemingly feasible, is actually far from the concept of the term, and even has completely misinterpreted the connotation of TCM terms.

The difference in the interpretation of pathology negates most of the translations. However, there are still some terms that can find equivalents, including: (a) dosage form terms, including "露" (syrup), "汤" (decoction), "膏" (paste), "茶" (drink), "丸/丹" (pill/pellet), "散" (powder), etc.: Dosage terminology is of shallow literary and cultural nature, and most of the terms can be found equivalents in English; (b) pharmaceutical terms, such as "佛手" (Finger Citron), "麻黄" (Ephedra Herb), "杜仲" (Eucommia Bark), and "厚朴" (Mangnolia Officinalis): Although the vast majority of Chinese herbal medicines have their own extant translations or Latin names, the essence of traditional Chinese medicine lies in the esoteric nature of its prescriptions. Therefore, the names of Chinese medicines appearing in Chinese herbal prescriptions should adopt "Chinese phonetic translation (Latin name)", reflecting the characteristics of Chinese medicine and emphasizing the right of Chinese medicine to speak. For example, "Ginseng". The phonetic name "Ginseng" is used much more frequently than the Latin name "Panax". As the Chinese name is shorter and easier to remember than the Latin name, which is favourable for dissemination, "Chinese phonetic translation (Latin name)" mode not only achieves the purpose of cultural dissemination, but also ensures the readability by adding explanations; and (c) expressions indicating the efficacy of Chinese medicine: The efficacy of Chinese medicine does not have philosophical connotations, so it can be directly translated. Since Chinese language is discrete (Wang, 2013) and is featured with one-word polysemy and ambiguity, and that the four-letter words in these expressions often imply logical relations, it is necessary to excavate and visualize the logical relations in the translation. For Example:

(i) Using parallel phrases:

清热解毒 clearing heat and detoxifying clearing heat and detoxifying

(ii) Using adverbial clause of purpose:

活血通络 promoting blood circulation to remove obstruction in the channels

(iii) Using adverbial clause of manner:

补肺定喘 relieving wheezing by tonifying the lung

### Transcreation

Due to the cultural specificity of TCM terms, when it is difficult to find a completely equivalent term in English, “transcreation” may be a suitable alternative and the most common means of dealing with philosophical TCM terms.

Phonetic translation or phonetic translation + paraphrase should be the first choice for translating TCM noun terms, so that it is “easy to look at the words to understand the meaning or to know the origin” (Shen, 2015, p. 29), such as Chinese medical terminology “气” (Qi), “神” (Shen), and “术数” (Shushu), as well as quantifiers like “钱” (Qian), “两” (Liang), “斗” (Dou), and “升” (Sheng).

For example, there are two translations, “mind” and “spirit” for “神” (Shen). “Mind” in the *Cambridge Dictionary* is interpreted as “the part of the human being that enables a person to think, feel emotions, and understand things”, meaning physical “senses” or “consciousness”. The word “spirit” is interpreted as “ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving, especially the dominant spirit of a particular group of people, activity, time, or place”, which indicates a subjective ideology. The meaning of “Shen” is different from both. *Su Wen—Liu Jie Cang Xiang Lun* (or *Treatise on the Six Periods and Visceral Manifestation*) says, “五味入口，藏于肠胃，味有所藏，以养五气。气和而生，津液相成，神乃自生”. Chinese medicine has established the concept of Shen as the “master of human life”, and the human body’s five visceral functions, qi, blood, emotional, and mental activities must rely on Shen’s command. It can be said that “mind” is a physiological concept and “spirit” is a social concept, while “Shen” not only covers both the individual’s mind and spirit, but also points to the harmonization of “yin” and “yang”, and the harmony of all beings, with both natural attributes and physiological nature, reflecting the idea of “unity of heaven and man” in classical Chinese philosophy. Therefore, neither “mind” nor “spirit” can replace “God” equivalently, so the only alternative is to directly transliterate “神” into “Shen” and then elaborate on it.

### Literal Translation

Wei and Xu (2004) proposed a translation principle of imitating English translated words with literal translation method. Due to the polysemous nature of the Chinese language, coupled with factors, such as elision, interchangeability, and ancient and modern synonyms, translators may misunderstand the source language. For example, *Treatise on Cold Damage Diseases* says, “少阴病，下利，脉微濡，呕而汗出，必数更衣，反少者，当温其上，灸之”，in which the word “更衣” is often mistranslated as “change one’s clothes”. Though logically consistent with the previous “汗”，it is easy to ignore the fact that the ancient Chinese nobles and rich people usually change their clothes before going to the toilet, so “更衣” has become a euphemism for “urinating and defecating”, and therefore “更衣” should be translated as “go to the lavatory”. Another example is that Wei (2006) translates “开鬼门” in *Huangdi’s Internal Classic—Su Wen—Tang Ye Lao Li Lun* as “open ghost gate”. But here “鬼” is actually the interchangeable character for “魄”，“魄门” refers to “the pores”，and “开鬼门” means “to open the pores to sweat”. From the above discussions, it can

be seen that although literal translation is the easiest way to translate terms for the target readers, it is likely to misinterpret the meaning of the source language, so extra attention shall be taken when translating terms containing cultural meanings.

### Conclusion

This paper introduces the characteristics of TCM terms and discusses three translation principles including moderate foreignisation, adherence to phonetic translation, and adoption of a unified translation standard. The paper also proposes three translation strategies including equivalent translation, transcreation, and literal translation. TCM terms contain the essence of Chinese medicine, and its English translation is bound to be full of challenges. To further improve the English translation of TCM terms, we also need to pay attention to the following three points. Firstly, Chinese medicine originates from classical Chinese philosophy, and its English translation cannot only mechanically translate the medical prescriptions into foreign languages, but also input the spirit of Chinese philosophy into the West. Secondly, many medical practitioners have made innovations on the basis of absorbing the essence of ancient prescriptions, and the translation of TCM terms should also keep pace with the times. Thirdly, the translation of TCM terms often results in fallacies due to the translators' insufficient command of ancient Chinese (e.g., not realizing the meaning of Chinese characters, differences between ancient and modern Chinese), Chinese medicine, and English language. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the cultivation of interdisciplinary talents with multi-faceted development in medicine, translation, literature, history, and philosophy, and at the same time, to strengthen the cooperation between domestic and foreign translators.

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