

# Research on Title Translation of TCM Classics

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) culture constitutes a vital component of the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation. The translation of TCM classics into English serves as a crucial medium for the dissemination of this traditional knowledge. The naming of TCM classics must encapsulate the essence of their content to facilitate reader comprehension and pique academic interest. Despite the wealth of TCM classics, only a select few have been thoroughly researched and rendered into English, whereas the majority lack English translations or have translations that have not gained widespread academic acceptance. This paper aims to examine the English translations of TCM classic titles through the lenses of linguistic characteristics, translation strategies, and translation challenges. The intention is to offer insights that may benefit future scholarly inquiry into the translation of TCM classic names and other titles of ancient Chinese texts.

**Keywords:** *Traditional Chinese medicine, Title translation, Translation strategies.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The English title translation of the TCM classics has a crucial role in the international dissemination of Chinese medicine. The name of the book is a high degree of condensation of the content of the book, which is directly related to whether it can attract the readers' interest and let the readers know the general content of the book. At present, there are many research on the English translation of TCM classics, but most of them are about the contents of the books or the specific TCM terms, and there are very few researches on the English title translation of the TCM classics. At the same time, the research object focuses on the very famous medical books in Chinese medicine, such as *Pen-tsao Kan-mu (Compendium of Materia Medica)*, *Huangdi Neijing (Inner Canon of Huangdi)*, and *Shanghan Zabing Lun (Treatise on Cold Pathogenic and Miscellaneous Diseases)*. The research on the TCM classics with relatively low popularity is very rare. In this paper, we will select typical examples from personal translation practice to explore the translation methods of Chinese medical books, with a view to summarizing the best translation methods and providing reference for the translation of titles of other ancient books.

## 2. LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF THE NAMES OF CHINESE MEDICAL TEXTS

Most of the ancient books of Chinese medicine are reference books, belonging to informational texts, and their main function is to convey information. At the same time, the style of Chinese medicine ancient book titles follows the general style of ordinary ancient book titles, and there will be a situation where the original book has no name and the person who later organizes the book formulates the name. The following patterns can be found by dividing the titles of Chinese medical books according to their lexical meaning or morpheme.

### 2.1 *Being Concise and Information-oriented*

Most of the names of Chinese medical books have the characteristics of simplicity and accuracy, often the title of the book highly summarizes the entire content of the book. Dividing the title of the TCM classics into several parts according to the lexical meaning, certain pattern can be found that the structure of titles are usually consisted at least two of the following elements, including "the name of the person, the name of the place, the family

name", "the disease syndrome category or medical discipline category", "words indicating experience or insights", "words indicating scope", "words that represent it is a book or collections of several books".

In example of *Wanshi Fuke Huiyao* or *Wan's Gynecology Compendium* (《万氏妇科汇要》), "Wanshi" means a family named Wan, "Fuke" means gynecological diseases, and "Huiyao" refers to a summary that related to the former disease syndrome category. Therefore, the general content of this book is that the medical practitioners named Wan were the most experienced in the treatment of gynecological diseases, so the book is about the treatment of gynecological diseases. Consequently, the title of this book means the treatment of gynecological diseases summarized from Wan's clinical treatment experience.

The book called *Dou Zhen Quanshu* or *Encyclopedia of pimples and rashes* (《痘疹全书》) also follows the above pattern. The title of the book can be divided into three parts: "Dou", "Zhen" and "Quanshu". Among them, "Dou" and "Zhen" are the concepts of traditional Chinese medicine. The two characters “痘” and “疹” contains all the skin diseases that manifest as skin redness, swelling, itching, ulceration, pus. But when the two characters combined, they will form a new term, which generally refers to smallpox. "Quanshu" is a scope word, referring to the complete content of the book without defects, recording all the knowledge categories or a certain knowledge category accumulated by humans in the past. The content of *Dou Zhen Quanshu* includes all the causes, symptoms, and treatments of acne and rash, rather than just recording knowledge related to smallpox. Therefore, the title should be translated into *Encyclopedia of pimples and rashes* rather than *Encyclopedia of smallpox*.

The more famous TCM classics also follow the same law, such as *Shanghan Zabing Lun* or *Treatise on Cold Pathogenic and Miscellaneous Diseases* (《伤寒杂病论》). "Shanghan" and "ZaBing" are parallel structure. They both mean a category of certain disease. "Shanghan" refers to the disease caused by external cold pathogen. "Zabing" refers to internal miscellaneous diseases. "Lun" is the word suggesting the title of the book, which indicates the discussion or analysis of the former category. The book *Shennong Bencao Jing* or *Sheng Nong's herbal classic* (《神农本草经》) can also be divided into three parts. "Shennong" is a person's name according to its lexical meaning,

"Bencao" denotes the discipline of Chinese herbal medicine, and "Jing" is a word that specifically refers to a canonical book.

This kind of title summarizes the relevant contents of the book in the most concise language. Since it follows certain laws and is easier to be divided into different parts through word meanings according to the Chinese language habits, this kind of TCM classics is usually less prone to comprehension problems in the translation process.

## 2.2 Polyphonic Words or Words with Multiple Meanings

As there are many polyphonic characters or words with multiple meanings in the Chinese language, when dividing the titles of Chinese medical classics into different parts under the principle of lexical meaning, it will be found that a certain character or word has more than one pronunciation or more than one meaning. A typical example is Bian Que's *Nan Jing* or *Classic on Medical Problems* (《难经》), which can only be divided into the word "difficult" and the word "classic", which specifically refers to the classic. The character "难" is a polyphonic character with two pronunciations in Chinese. There are four tones in Chinese called yin flat tone (阴平), yang flat tone(阳平), rising tone(上声) and falling tone(去声). But the public usually use the first tone, the second tone, the third tone, and the fourth tone to represent them respectively. The character “难” can be pronounced in the second and fourth tone. And different tones of the character have different meanings. It means "difficulty, problem" when read in the second tone, and "calamity, tribulation" when read in the fourth tone. In the official translation, “难经” is translated as *Classic on Medical Problems*, and the word "medicine" is added by the translator, which reflects the translator's understanding of the general content of the book. If the translator did not understand the general content of the book and used a direct translation to understand and translate it, he might have translated the book into *Classic on Problems* or *Book of Suffering*. Although it is well-known that the book is about traditional Chinese medicine, Chinese medicine not only pays attention to the clinical manifestations of illnesses, their causes, and treatments from the point of view of the doctor, but also pays attention to the patient's illnesses from the point of view of the patient. And in traditional Chinese medicine, paying attention to the mental health of patients is also a very important part, and there are also Chinese medicine books on how to pay attention to the mental health of patients. If the translator understands the book title from the perspective of the patient, they might be misled by the second meaning of “难”, because it is indeed a

suffer for patient to suffer from disease. Consequently, the translator might think that the book is about the patients' experiences and psychological states according to his own understanding and then choose the meaning of "suffering", and then the final version of translation might turn out to be *Book of Patient's Suffering*. When translating this kind of book title, it is necessary to have a certain understanding of the general content of the book, and find out the actual pronunciation of the polyphonic words in the title and their corresponding meanings, in order to accurately grasp the content of the original text, and to avoid mistranslation.

### 2.3 Words with Metaphor

In some Chinese medical texts, there are cases where the title of the book contains a metaphor, the meaning of the word in the title is different from its literal meaning. For example, the Ming Dynasty TCM practitioner Zhu Rongdong wrote a book called *Yizong Chiyu* or *Essential Tenet of TCM Practitioner* (医宗尺玉). The term "Yizong" can denote the tenet of TCM practitioner, and it is also a word used in ancient China to describe experienced doctors, some of whom founded their own school of TCM concept and were honored as medical master. The character "尺" is a unit of length in ancient China, and its standard is different in different dynasty. Nowadays, one "chi" is equal to 33.3 centimeters. The original meaning of "chiyu" is one "chi" in diameter of precious jade, which is often associated with preciousness as it is hard to see such a huge jade, so "chiyu" is often used as a metaphor for something big and precious. The Chinese idiom "医宗尺玉" is derived from *Li Ji -Li Yun*, also known as *The Book of Rites -Rites Application* (礼记·礼运). This idiom describes the tenets and principles of medicine as being like a huge jade, which can only be put to good use at the right time. It means that the principles and methods of medicine need to be decided according to the specific situation and are not set in stone.

Another example of a metaphor is a medical book called *Maiifa Zhizhang* or *The Tricks of Feeling the Pulse* (《脉法指掌》) written by the Qing Dynasty physician Chen Qiyin. The word that contains the metaphor is "zhizhang"(指掌), which can be further divided into "zhi" and "zhang" according to its lexical elements. When used as a noun, "zhi" means finger and "zhang" means palm of the hand. As a verb, "zhi" means to point with the finger, and "zhang" means to grasp or strike with the hand. There are two meanings of

"zhizhang", one is to use them both as nouns to indicate the fingers and the palm of the hand, and the other is to point at the things on the palm of the hand with the fingers. Finger and palm have a symbolic meaning of manipulating or controlling in China. Therefore, finger and palm are usually used as a metaphor to describe things that are easy to understand or things that are very familiar and understandable, or things that are easy to control. In the process of pulse diagnosis in Chinese medicine, it is necessary to use the fingers to feel the patient's pulse, therefore, in the *Maiifa Zhizhang*, "zhizhang" is very appropriate, which not only indicate that it is easy to master the method of pulse diagnosis, but also can indicate the action of pulse diagnosis. However, because the method of pulse diagnosis includes both the movements during pulse diagnosis and how to differentiate between different pulse patterns, the first meaning is usually chosen when selecting the meaning.

When translating the title of a book that contains a metaphor, if the translator directly adopts the original meaning of the word, it will result in a mistranslation, for example, the book *Yizong Chiyu* or *Essential Tenet of TCM Practitioner*(医宗尺玉) is not just about an enormous jade collected by a Chinese doctor for medical use. Even if the translator knows the underlying meaning or the metaphorical words, since concrete things are often used in Chinese as metaphors for abstract concepts, there may be different interpretations of the abstract concepts, so it is still necessary to read the original text to determine the specific meaning.

## 3. ENGLISH TRANSLATION

As of the end of the Qing Dynasty, there were nearly 8000 types of traditional Chinese medicine classics, whose titles were concise and summarized in Chinese characters, with obscure and difficult to understand semantics, and were deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture. The titles of traditional Chinese medicine classics have metaphorical connotations, which can easily lead to improper information conversion during English translation. Therefore, it is necessary to use a combination of foreignization and domestication methods for English translation.

### 3.1 Foreignization

The essential attribute of "foreignization" is the "original author orientation", which means that the translator tries to approach the original author as

much as possible in translation, specifically by preserving the language, literary, and cultural characteristics of the original text as much as possible. The translation methods under the strategy of foreignization are: zero translation; transliteration; word for word translation; literal translation. Since traditional Chinese medical classics usually served as medical reference books, in most cases, the titles of Chinese medical texts can intuitively reflect the contents of the books. Readers do not need to read the contents of the books, and they can know what the contents of the books are roughly related to by reading the titles alone. The translation of the names of such books can be done directly by the method of direct translation. For example, *Shanghan Dayi Lan*, also known as *The Comprehensive Guide to Cold Damage* (《伤寒大易览》). As for the title that contains multiple meanings of the characters, as long as the specific meaning can be known, the direct translation method can still be used, such as the Classic on Medical Problems.

In some cases, the omission is used in the translation process. "Omission" refers to the deletion of certain words, sentences, or paragraphs from the original text according to the lexical, syntactic, semantic, rhetorical, or stylistic needs of the target language, or due to certain specific cultural norms of the target language, in order to express the original ideas more concisely and smoothly, or to better achieve specific translation purposes. For example, the English translation of 《人参传》 could be *Ginseng* rather than *The Biography of Ginseng*. Using *Ginseng* as the title of the book is more concise and intuitive, achieving the goal of allowing readers to understand the content of the book solely through its title.

### 3.2 Domestication

The essential attribute of "domestication" is the "target audience orientation", which means that the translator tries to approach the target audience as closely as possible in translation. The translation methods under domestication strategy are: free translation; imitation translation; variation translation; recreation translation. Domestication is defined as a method of translation that is faithful to the content of the original text without being bound by the form of the original text and that translates according to the meaning of the original text. For the third case mentioned above, the naturalization method is generally needed. First, a direct translation cannot accurately convey the intended

metaphorical meaning of the text. In addition, different metaphorical images are used in different language backgrounds, and sometimes the meaning behind the same thing is different in different language and cultural backgrounds. To deal with this situation, the translator needs to familiarize himself with the cultural background of both the target language and the target language, and choose the images with the same metaphorical meaning, or directly adopt the method of paraphrase translation to translate the metaphorical meaning without pursuing the form of the original text.

A Chinese classic called 《医镜》 (*Yi Jing*), which does not have the official English version, literally means medical mirror. However, the title cannot be directly translated into *Medical Mirror* as it may confuse the reader about its content. The content of this book is actually about how most diseases and pathogens manifest on the body, and by observing changes in the body, the TCM practitioners can infer which disease the patient is suffering from. In this case, using free translation to explain the meaning of the book is more suitable. Personally, I would translate the book into *Pathogens and Manifestations*. My translation only provides one idea, and there may be a more suitable version to translate the book in the future.

## 4. TRANSLATION DIFFICULTY

Traditional Chinese medicine classics usually have a long history, but due to the imperfect technology of protecting ancient Chinese classics and the absence of printing techniques, many of them have experienced damage and were later rewritten based on human memory. Therefore, traditional Chinese medicine classics need to undergo continuous testing, and future generations need to supplement and improve the content of the classics based on their own experience. The above historical facts have led to two major difficulties in translating traditional Chinese medicine classics today: the similar editions of the same book and the word errors in the transcription process.

### 4.1 Similar Editions of the Same Book

There may be several different or similar versions of the same TCM text. For example, *Sheng Nong's herbal classic* (《神农本草经》), *The Hymn Sheng Nong's Herbal Classic* (《神农本草经赞》) and *The Compendium of Songs on the Sheng Nong's Herbal Madica* (《神农本草歌括》). These three books have different content. Their titles look similar

because *Sheng Nong's Herbal Classic* is a classic book of Chinese medicine with high reputation. And many people will study this classic and conduct deeper research based on the classic, then they may organize their own experience and record their insights into a new book, causing the formation of many interpretations of the TCM classics.

Another situation is the difference between the family version and the official version of the same book, such as the *Nvke Yaoyan* (《女科要言》), also known as *Wanshi Furen Ke* (《万氏妇人科》) and *Wanshi Nvke* (《万氏女科》). This happened because some families who study certain subject of TCM for generations kept the book within the family for future generations of family members to conduct further research, and each member would add to the book with their own discoveries. However, when a member of the family became an official at the imperial court, the official department also had the book and renamed it, resulting in multiple editions of the same book. When translating such titles, it is also a challenge to reflect the differences between the different editions.

In this situation, brackets or notes can be added after the title with a content called "certain version". For example, the 《神农本草经赞》 can be translated as *Sheng Nong's Herbal Classic(Hymn Version)*. And the 《女科要言》 can be translated as *Essential Principles of Gynaecology(Official Version)*. This method can clearly help readers understand the differences between different versions, but it may make the title too long.

#### 4.2 Word Errors in the Transcription Process

There is a situation that certain character pattern in the title does not exist in modern Chinese language, or the meaning of the character is not suitable in the title. For example, the character "筏"(pronounced as "fa" with the second tone in Chinese) in 《慈幼筏》. In Chinese, the word "筏"(fa) refers to raft made of bamboo, wood, etc. and does not have the meaning books or paper. In Chinese, the characters "笺"(pronounced as "jian" with the first tone in Chinese) and "筏"(fa) look very similar to each other. However, "笺"(jian) can mean the paper used for writing letters and the explanatory notes in the texts. Therefore, as the name of the book, the character "笺"(jian) is more in line with common sense. The reason for this phenomenon is that before the invention of the ancient printing press, most of the books were spread through the

transcription method, in which the situation of clerical error is possible to occur. When the original books were lost, the transcribed versions with clerical errors were passed down. Such errors in the process of transcription often have a negative impact on the translator, and due to the difficulty of tracing back, it is difficult for the translator to know what the original correct character is, and the translator can only guess which is the correct one and then consult the data and try to confirm, which causes great difficulties to the translator.

In this case, the translator can directly correct the erroneous parts of the original text before translating. However, such translation may result in readers not being able to find the original text when they want to read the original text after reading it, because the title of the original text is incorrect, and the translator has not translated the "error". Therefore, it may be necessary to add annotations to inform readers that there are errors in the original title. To facilitate readers' understanding, the errors have been translated into the current version while retaining the original Chinese title.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The translation of Chinese medical book titles is challenging. In addition to excellent translation skills, translators are required to have the knowledge in Chinese language and history, which makes it convenient for them to trace the roots of the books in the process of translation. This paper mainly analyzes the language features in the titles of TCM classics, the translation strategies, and some translation difficulties in the titles translation. The translation of the titles of TCM books has certain guiding significance for the translation of the contents of Chinese medical books. In the content of Chinese medical books, there are also some other directions to be researched, such as interchangeable characters, variant characters, and taboo characters, etc. And further research can be conducted from these aspects.

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