

# Research on Metonymy Translation of TCM Classics Based on Relevance Translation Theory A Case Study of “Huangdi Neijing” Translated by Luo Xiwen

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## ABSTRACT

“Huangdi Neijing” (“Yellow Emperor’s Internal Canon of Medicine”) is a treasured classic that has laid the foundational theories of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). As one of the earliest classics in this field, it has had a profound and lasting impact. Metonymy, a common phenomenon in TCM literature, is the use of one entity to refer to another that is closely related yet essentially distinct. This illustrates the distinct cognitive framework that is inherent in TCM and poses serious difficulties for the translation of these books into English. Relevance Translation Theory, which emphasizes the ideal correlation between the source and target texts, provides a new approach for translating TCM metonymy into English. Drawing upon this theoretical framework, this paper takes Luo Xiwen’s translation of “Huangdi Neijing” as an example to explore the English translation strategy of metonymy in TCM. The goal is to consolidate and summarize translation strategies in order to promote the international dissemination of TCM culture and to serve as a reference for future study on the English translation of TCM classics.

**Keywords:** TCM translation, “Huangdi Neijing”, Relevance Translation Theory, Metonymy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Huangdi Neijing” is one of the earliest medical classics in China. It is divided into two parts: “Lingshu” and “Suwen”. It has created a thorough theoretical framework for TCM and established a strong basis for its future growth. Professor Luo Xiwen is an expert in the field of TCM classics research and English translation. In his later years, he began to translate “Huangdi Neijing”. Although he only translated the first 22 chapters of “Suwen”, his work has established a benchmark in the field of TCM English translation due to its rich cultural connotation and great research value. The translation provides a convenient way for foreign scholars eager to learn Chinese medicine, as well as practical examples and theoretical guidance for translation beginners.

The language of “Huangdi Neijing” contains cultural charm, and metonymy is widely used. Metonymy, as a cognitive mechanism, facilitates cognitive transformation by mapping the features of entity conceptions within the same cognitive

domain. Given the cultural differences between Chinese and foreign languages, the correctness of the English translation is critical for readers to understand the book and promote “Huangdi Neijing”. Luo Xiwen took into account the actual demands and cognitive background of TCM English readers when translating and extended the translation culture to promote readers’ knowledge of TCM philosophy and culture. This translation concept is consistent with the central premise of Relevance Translation Theory, which is to obtain the best contextual effect with the least cognitive effort while ensuring the efficiency and accuracy of information transmission.

From the perspective of Relevance Translation Theory, this paper will deeply analyze the translation examples of metonymy of “Huangdi Neijing” in Luo Xiwen’s translation, summarize its translation strategies, provide references for translators of TCM classics, and promote the accurate dissemination and in-depth exchange of TCM culture in the international arena.

## **2. THE GUIDING ROLE OF RELEVANCE TRANSLATION THEORY IN THE TRANSLATION OF TCM CLASSICS**

In 1986, French scholar Dan Sperber and British scholar Deridre Wilson[1] first proposed Relevance Theory in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Subsequently, inspired by this, Gutt[2] applied Relevance Theory to the field of translation and formally proposed Relevance Translation Theory in 1989. He believed that in translation practice, relevance covers two levels, namely maximum relevance and optimal relevance. Maximum relevance emphasizes that the receiver strives to achieve maximum contextual effect with minimum effort when interpreting information, while the optimal relevance focuses on the receiver obtaining sufficient contextual effect through effective efforts.[3]

When translating concepts and material specific to Chinese culture, Relevance Translation Theory emphasizes the translator's responsibility to provide adequate clarity so that the reader can receive appropriate contextual effects and reach the best relevance after a set amount of thinking. This theory has been widely used in TCM translation. For example, Lang Tao[4], Liu Jing[5], Chen Yi[6] and Liu Xianpeng[7] have discussed the application of Relevance Translation Theory in TCM terminology, cultural default, medical concept translation and future-to-English translation from different perspectives, demonstrating the guiding significance of this theory for TCM translation.

To overcome the challenges of translating TCM classics, the translator must evaluate the target audience's cognitive environment and guarantee that the translation impact reflects the feelings of the original readers. While maintaining the style of the original text, it should ensure that the translated readers can obtain the best contextual effect, provide sufficient explicit information, strengthen the connection between the readers and the original text, achieve maximum relevance, and further improve the readability of the translated text, so as to more effectively promote and spread the academic ideas of classical Chinese medicine overseas.

## **3. THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES ANALYSIS OF METONYMY IN "HUANGDI NEIJING" BASED ON RELEVANCE TRANSLATION THEORY**

There are many types of conceptual metonymy in TCM, including phonetic metonymy (part for part), part for whole, part for whole, part for part, result for process, way for process, function for process, etc.[8] These sorts of metonymy are common in TCM classics, which set higher standards for translators' comprehension and translation efforts.

To guarantee the replication of communicative intention and effect, Relevance Translation Theory promotes the highest level of relevance between the source and destination texts. Translation is a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication endeavor, but translators have significant obstacles when translating TCM classics because of the complexities of metonymy. In order to deal with this problem, Xiong Bing[9] indicates that translation strategies can be classified into domestication and foreignization when summarizing language translation strategies.

Based on the classification framework presented above, this research will incorporate metonymy examples from "Huangdi Neijing" with the Relevance Translation Theory to outline the translation methods under domesticating and foreignizing strategy.

### ***3.1 Foreignizing Strategy***

The foreignizing strategy seeks to remove the cultural variations in the original text so that the translated content is more similar to the target language habit. Under the foreignizing strategy, translation methods include zero translation, transliteration, word-for-word translation and literal translation.

#### ***3.1.1 Transliteration + Annotation***

Transliteration is a translation process that refers to the terms in the source language that are difficult to properly correlate to the target language, such as proper nouns, place names, personal names, etc., according to the pronunciation of the words in the target language. When the words in the source language lack corresponding words or concepts in the target language, translation cannot directly start

from lexical, grammatical or semantic conversion, so transliteration becomes a feasible choice.[10] Transliteration is frequently used in the translation of TCM classics because TCM concepts and terminology do not have an equivalent English expression.

- Source Text: 五七阳明脉衰，面始焦，发始堕。 [11]

Target Text: When she comes to thirty-five, the Yangming Channels begin to decay, her face begins to lose luster and hair starts to fall off.

[Note] The Yangming Channels refer to the Hand Yangming Channel of the Large Intestine and the Foot Yangming Channel of the Stomach both of them pass the head. When they decay, the head loses the nourishment of both of them and begin to fade in appearance.[12]

In the theory of TCM, “阳明脉” is a major element of the twelve meridians, the earliest known as the stomach meridian of foot-Yangming. It regulates the passage of qi and blood through the stomach and large intestine. A woman’s face will inevitably age as her qi and blood flow in these two meridians deteriorates. In the conceptual metonymy of “organ representing human body function”, “阳明脉”, as the simile body, symbolizes the whole part of “stomach and large intestine meridians” and incorporates the metonymy of the whole kind of partial generation.

“阳明脉” in this sentence is a unique concept of TCM and a culture-loaded word. Luo Xiwen adopted the transliteration method and translated it as “Yangming channel”. Also, Luo Xiwen explains the Yangming channel through the notes at the end of his translation.

Readers familiar with TCM will find this translation useful in grasping the unique terms in the cognitive environment, as it successfully captures the essence of Chinese culture. Annotations allow target language readers who do not have a cultural background in TCM to connect with their own cognitive context. Therefore, according to the reader’s cognitive context, the translation method of transliteration + annotation can achieve the best relevance for both readers with TCM knowledge backgrounds and ordinary foreign readers.[13]

### 3.1.2 *Literal Translation*

Literal translation is a translation method that aims to preserve the original text’s substance and accurately conveying the original text’s intention. In the processing of linguistic forms, appropriate changes or transformations are allowed to make the translation conform to the lexical and syntactic norms of the target language.[14] This translation method can integrate the essence of the original text with the expression habits of the target language, ensure the natural fluency of the translation, and improve the reader’s reading experience and acceptance.

- Source Text: 因于露风，乃生寒热。 [11]

Target Text: Exposure to pathogenic Wind will induce chills and fevers. [12]

Here, the pathogenic factor of “风” in the modern context is transformed into “attack by wind evil” in the theory of TCM, which constitutes a metonymy of “concrete refers to abstract”. The transformation of experienced specific disease symptoms such as “寒热” into the “disease with cold and heat symptoms” described by TCM is a metonymy of “disease symptoms represent disease”.

In this sentence, “寒” and “热”, as figurative bodies, are mapped to the ontological concepts of “cold image disease” and “heat image disease” respectively in TCM theory. In view of the intrinsic connection and similarity between the concepts of aversion to cold and fever and cold-like and heat-like diseases, the translator translated “寒热” into “chills and fevers” in the translation of this sentence, which not only retains the characteristics of TCM terms, but also conveys similar contextual effects.

This translation method not only retains the metonymic thinking of TCM language in the original text, but also successfully conveys the meaning of the concept of “寒热”, so that readers can understand the meaning and information in the original text. Therefore, literal translation can clearly convey the contextual meaning of the original text, achieve the best correlation, and ensure the smooth progress of communication.

### 3.2 *Domesticating Strategy*

The domesticating strategy preserves the original text’s cultural differences while also bringing the translation’s style closer to that of the original. Under this strategy, there are translation

methods such as free translation, imitation, variation translation and recreation.

### 3.2.1 Free Translation

Free translation emphasizes the profound significance and rhetorical devices of language, maintaining the core essence of the source text through interpretive methods, and rendering the translation more fluid and natural. Unlike literal translation, free translation places greater emphasis on conveying the underlying meaning and emotion of the original text, rather than being confined to a strict word-for-word rendering. Through the application of free translation, translators can more effectively communicate the information and stylistic nuances of the source text to the target language, resulting in a translation that is both engaging and accessible.

- Source Text: 夫上古圣人之教下也，皆谓之虚邪贼风，避之有时，恬淡虚无，真气从之，精神内守，病安从来。[11]

Target Text: In remote ages, the Sage taught his people the way to keep good health: One should always keep away from invasion of climatic pathogenic factors, get rid of various desires and content oneself with nothingness. While Primordial Energy permeates, with Vital Essence and Spirit being kept in the Interior, one is free from all diseases.[12]

This sentence regards “虚邪贼风” as a “pathogenic factor”, that is, the qi of the four seasons, which not only vividly depicts the scene of the body being attacked by pathogenic factors, but also elucidates how the figurative metaphor of “虚邪贼风” adeptly refers to the abstract and intricate concept of “pathogenic factor”. This metonymic approach significantly enhances the richness and depth of linguistic expression, and skillfully crosses the boundary between figurative and abstract.

Due to the fact that only a very small number of TCM terms are widespread, such as yin and yang, qi, etc., transliteration of other terms is difficult for Western readers to understand. Therefore, when translating terms like “虚邪贼风”, it is not advisable to rely solely on transliteration. Directly transliterating such terms would not facilitate comprehension. A literal translation, for instance, “deficiency-evil and thief-wind”, would likely surpass the cognitive threshold of the readers, failing to establish a meaningful connection between the source text and its audience, and thus falling short of the intended translation impact.[15]

Therefore, a free translation approach is adopted here to translate its ontology into climate pathogenic factors, so that readers can obtain the best contextual effect and maximum correlation with minimum effort, making it more accessible for Western readers to understand.

Generally speaking, when the original text goes through the cross-cultural translation process, the cultural context of the target text often diverges significantly from that of the original text, which may lead to cognitive deviation and disconnection between the target audience and the author of the original text.[16] Luo Xiwen took this into account throughout the translation process, and tried to ensure the accuracy and easy understanding of the translated text.

### 3.2.2 Imitation

Imitation refers to a method that does not rigidly follow the vocabulary and syntactic structure of the source text. Instead, it uses the original text as a reference and makes appropriate adjustments to align with the linguistic features and the audience’s requirements of the target language.[17] In the realm of translation, translators have the flexibility to opt for conveying merely the overarching meaning, essence, or essential information of the source text through selective omission and enhancement, or to provide a richer rendition by incorporating additional details and elaborations beyond the original text.[18]

- Source Text: 岐伯对曰：春脉者，肝也，东方木也，万物之所以始生也，故其气来软弱，轻虚而滑，端直以长，故曰弦，反此者病。[11]

Target Text: Qi Bo: Pulse in spring is a manifestation of the Liver condition and pertains to the Wood element in the east, representing the germination of all creatures. When the pulse appears, it comes in a soft, weak, light, deficient and slippery way with a presentment being long and straight. If the pulse runs counter to this, it will indicate a disease.[12]

The term “气” described in this particular context refers specifically to the “脉气” as it is understood within the framework of TCM. Similarly, the term “弦” is deployed to depict the notion of “弦脉”, which is a distinct pulse pattern recognized in TCM diagnostics. In this instance, both “气” and “弦” serve as metaphorical entities, each representing more specialized medical concepts within the realm of TCM diagnostics: “脉气” and “弦脉”. This usage exemplifies the

rhetorical technique known as metonymy, where a part stands in for the whole, thereby enriching the language with deeper layers of meaning.

Within the pulse diagnosis methodology of TCM, “弦脉” represents a precise and particular pulse concept. It characterizes a pulse that feels taut and elongated, with a distinct sensation under the fingers that is akin to the tactile experience of pressing upon the strings of a musical instrument. However, in the translation by Luo Xiwen, the metaphorical aspect was omitted, and only the literal term “pulse” was used. This approach might prove challenging for readers who are not familiar with the intricacies of TCM, as it fails to convey the full depth of the concept.

However, the translation by Veith, states “therefore one compares them to the strings of a lute”, employs an imitative translation strategy. By likening it to the strings of a pipa, a traditional Chinese lute, Veith’s translation preserves the inherent qualities of “弦脉” while effectively communicating its essence. This method not only conveys the intended meaning but also resonates with the cultural context, making it more accessible to readers.

Imitation necessitates that the translator possess not only a robust command of language but also a profound comprehension of the cultural nuances embedded within the source text. The translator must grasp the entirety of the original content and make judicious adjustments that align with the linguistic peculiarities and the cognitive needs of the target audience. Such a translation adheres more closely to the principle of optimal relevance, ensuring that even those readers who do not understand the theoretical knowledge of TCM can readily grasp the medical significance of “弦脉”. Consequently, the use of imitative translation in the realm of TCM translation can effectively achieve optimal relevance, proving to be an approach that resonates with readers from diverse knowledge backgrounds.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Relevance Translation Theory plays a crucial role in the English translation of TCM classics. It provides guidance for choosing translation strategies that ensure the translation not only accurately conveys the essence of TCM but also aligns with the cultural nuances of the target language. The application of this theory has greatly promoted the international communication and

dissemination of TCM classics. When translating TCM classics, such as “Huangdi Neijing”, it is essential to seek the highest degree of relevance to faithfully reproduce the pragmatic effect of the original text. Translators can adeptly translate TCM concepts and terms through transliteration or literal translation, thereby preserving their inherent cultural characteristics. Additionally, they can employ free translation or imitation translation to elucidate TCM terms and concepts in detail. However, the English translation of TCM metonymy is not static, the optimal translation approach should be selected based on the specific context and translation objectives to more effectively convey their significance, thereby fostering the advancement and promotion of TCM culture.

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