

Study on the English Translation of Museum Exhibits under the Cultural Translation Theory

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Abstract: Museum exhibits are the crystallization of human wisdom and also carriers of culture, playing a significant role in cross-cultural exchanges. As cultural exchanges between China and the world deepen, how to effectively translate museum exhibits and promote Chinese culture has become an important research topic in recent years. This paper selects some English translation examples from the official website of the Shenzhen Museum for study. Through the lens of the Cultural Translation Theory, it explores the fundamental principles and effective translation strategies and recommendations for translating exhibits into English.

Keywords: Museum Exhibits, Cultural Translation Theory, Translation Strategies.

1. Introduction

Museum exhibits convey essential information about culture and history, helping people understand the changes in different cultures, eras, and societies, and promoting understanding and respect for cultural diversity. As vital institutions for promoting Chinese culture, more and more museums are adding English translations to their exhibits. On the one hand, English serves as a crucial medium for global cultural exchange. Providing translations for exhibits can better convey their historical, cultural, and artistic backgrounds, helping more people to get to know Chinese culture. On the other hand, exhibits with translated texts can attract more international visitors, enhancing the museum's international reputation and influence while also boosting the tourism industry. Translating museum exhibits typically involves multiple complex factors, such as language, culture, specialized knowledge, and artistic considerations. Questions about how translators handle exhibit information, which translation strategies to employ, and how to transform exhibit information into readable target texts are all worth exploring.

2. An Overview of the Cultural Translation Theory

Cultural translation theory is a paradigm that extensively studies the relationship between translation and culture, encompassing intricate issues such as cultural differences, power dynamics, and identity. Susan Bassnett, a prominent British translator who has made significant contributions to this theoretical field (Bassnett, 1990), posits the following perspectives: 1. Translation should be based on culture as its fundamental unit, transcending mere textual discourse; 2. Translation is an act of communication, not merely a process of decoding and encoding; 3. Translation should focus on the equivalent functions of the source text within the target culture, rather than solely describing the source text; 4. Across different historical periods, translation adheres to varying principles and norms to meet the cultural needs and the requirements of diverse groups within a culture. She emphasizes that translation should be rooted in the culture of the language in question, reaffirming the pivotal role of

cultural factors in translation and broadening the scope of translation. Translation is not merely the conversion of one language into another; it also involves the transformation of culture, context, and subtle nuances. Translators need to consider the influences of culture and context to comprehensively interpret texts and convey information.

3. Principles and Common Issues in the English Translation of Museum Exhibits

3.1. Principles for the English Translation of Museum Exhibits

Museum exhibits carry rich information and elements, reflecting the uniqueness and diversity of different eras and cultures of various ethnic groups. When translating them into English, translators need to follow certain principles.

3.1.1. Accuracy

Accuracy refers to the translated text of the exhibit adhering to format standards, spelling, and grammatical correctness, ensuring that the target readers can understand the sentence structure and meaning.

3.1.2. Conciseness

Conciseness means that the translated text of the exhibit should be as concise as possible, avoiding lengthy, complex, or obscure expressions, ensuring that the target readers can quickly obtain the necessary information.

3.1.3. Communicative Effectiveness

Communicative effectiveness refers to the translator starting with the culture that is rooted in the language, flexibly applying translation strategies and techniques. This ensures that the conveyed information in the translation is more precise and efficient, achieving the desired expressive outcome.

3.2. Common Translation Issues in the English Translation of Museum Exhibits

3.2.1. Spelling Errors in the Translation

Museum exhibits encompass a wealth of information, such as the production era, excavation site, material, crafting

technique, decorative patterns, names of models, etc. Translators need to exercise particular caution when translating these details into English to avoid spelling mistakes. As demonstrated by the following example, spelling errors can be found in the translations of some exhibits on the official website of the Shenzhen Museum.

Table 1. Examples of Spelling Errors in the Translations

Example	Source Text	Target Text
1	圆涡菱格纹彩陶壺	Earthenware Pot with Painted Decoration
2	“禽父丁”铜爵	Ritual Wine Vessel (Jue) Cast with Its Owner Name Qin Fu Ding

Table 1 shows that in Example 1, the translation "Decoration" contains a spelling error and should be "Decoration". In Example 2, "禽父丁" is a personal name, and its correct translation format should be "Qin Fuding", not "Qin Fu Ding". Additionally, in Example 2, "Owner" should be in possessive form, i.e., "Owner's". These spelling errors may lead to inaccuracies in the information perceived by the target readers and also affect the professionalism and readability of the translation.

3.2.2. Inconsistent Translation of Terms

"The translation of cultural relics may not have a definitive version, but it must adhere to consistent translation principles" (Zhu, 2017). Apart from the aforementioned spelling errors, there are also inconsistencies in the translation of certain terms for exhibits, as illustrated in the following examples.

Table 2. Examples of Inconsistencies in the Translations

Example	Source Text	Target Text
1	青釉堆塑谷仓罐	Green Glazed Granary with Molded Decoration
2	青釉贴塑龙凤纹 盘口壺	Celadon Glazed Jar with Dragon and Phoenix Applique

From Table 2, it can be seen that there are discrepancies in the translation of the term "青釉": in Example 1, it is translated as "Green Glazed", while in Example 2, it is rendered as "Celadon Glazed". The inconsistency in translations not only diminishes the professionalism and credibility of the translation but may also confuse visitors.

3.2.3. Lack of Annotations for Specific Cultural Terms

Specific cultural terms refer to words used within a particular culture, language, or region. These terms often reflect the values, traditions, beliefs, or social structures of that specific culture and may not have direct counterparts in other cultures or languages. When translating such specific cultural terms, translators can add appropriate annotations based on the context to convey the cultural nuances of the native ethnic group as effectively as possible, as illustrated in the following example.

Example 1

Source Text: 送子观音铜像

Target Text: Bronze Statue of Child-Giving Guanyin

In this example, "送子观音" is a specific cultural term with both cultural and religious implications. The translation of this term lacks corresponding explanations, making it challenging for target readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture

to comprehend. Therefore, translators can add appropriate annotations for this specific cultural term, such as "Child-Giving Guanyin (Goddess of Fertility)".

4. English Translation Strategies and Recommendations for Museum Exhibits

4.1. English Translation Strategies for Museum Exhibits

The translation of museum exhibits is a communicative activity that bridges languages and cultures. Translators need to be proficient not only in the source and target languages but also possess a profound understanding of both the domestic and foreign cultural contexts to ensure that the translation accurately conveys its intended meaning. Given that each exhibit possesses its unique linguistic and cultural attributes, English translation strategies must be tailored to specific circumstances.

4.1.1. Literal Translation

Literal translation refers to a translation that is both faithful to the content of the original text and adheres to the structure and form of the original. Due to significant cultural differences between the East and the West, translators often need to determine whether there is a corresponding expression in the target language that aligns with both the form and content of the source language. This ensures that the target readers can gain an understanding and emotional experience similar to that of the original readers. If this condition is met, the English translation of an exhibit can adopt the literal translation method. For example, "菱形纹铜尺" can be translated as "Lozenge-Patterned Bronze Ruler" or "Bronze Ruler with Lozenge Pattern." Using the literal translation method not only maximizes the fidelity to the original text but also ensures a clear structure in the translation, reducing the reading time for the target audience and enabling them to quickly grasp the key content of the translation, thereby enhancing cultural communication effectiveness.

4.1.2. Semantic Translation with Phonetic Annotation

In museum exhibits, there are times when certain words appear in the description or name that do not have a direct English equivalent. This means that there is a semantic gap in the translation process. Semantic translation with phonetic annotation refers to a translation approach where the translator not only translates the meaning of these words but also adds phonetic symbols or annotations to indicate their correct pronunciation. For instance, "蹴鞠" is a traditional ancient Chinese sport similar to soccer and is considered a precursor to modern football, with a long-standing tradition in Chinese history. Using the strategy of semantic translation with phonetic annotation, the exhibit "蹴鞠纹铜镜" can be translated as "Bronze Mirror with Pattern of Ball-kicking (Cuju)". In this manner, the translation not only conveys the meaning of "蹴鞠" but also provides its pronunciation, enabling the audience to gain a comprehensive understanding of the exhibit while enhancing their impression of it and promoting cultural exchange.

4.1.3. Free Translation

Free translation refers to the approach where the translator translates based on the overall meaning of the original text, aiming to convey the essence of the content in a more natural

manner rather than translating word-for-word or sentence-by-sentence. This often involves modifications in sentence structure, changes in grammar, and substitutions of vocabulary, among other things. The purpose of free translation is to make the translated text more natural, readable, and aligned with the cultural expressions of the target language. In the English translation of museum exhibits, free translation can be employed to bridge cultural gaps, elucidate cultural elements, customs, or symbols present in the original text, and provide the target audience with a better understanding. For example, “青花折枝花卉纹六方瓶” can be translated as “Exquisite Hexagonal Vase Adorned with Delicate Cobalt Blue Floral Patterns.” In this translation, expressive words such as “exquisite,” “delicate,” and “cobalt blue” are used to highlight the characteristics of the exhibit rather than providing a literal translation. Additionally, the translated expression is fluent and harmonious, integrating seamlessly with the linguistic conventions of the target language, making it easier for the target audience to appreciate and understand the exhibit.

4.1.4. Expansive Translation

Expansive translation refers to the approach where the translator adds extra information or details in the target language to convey the meaning of the original text more comprehensively. This can encompass explanatory text, cultural context, specific details, or supplementary information. In the context of English translations for museum exhibits, the strategy of expansive translation is undeniably vital. This is because it aids in mitigating comprehension barriers arising from cultural differences, allowing for a clearer depiction of the deeper meanings and historical contexts of the exhibits. This approach caters to audiences with diverse cultural backgrounds and varying levels of language proficiency. For example, the exhibit “龙纹方形铜盆” can be translated as “Rectangular Altar Piece for Incense or Food with Dragon Patterns.” The addition of “for Incense or Food” describes the intended use of the bronze basin, which might not be explicitly stated in the original text. Clearly, such a translation method provides the target audience with richer historical and cultural insights about the exhibit, enabling them to more fully appreciate and understand its unique attributes.

4.1.5. Abridged Translation

“To ensure that the target text serves its intended purpose, translators must convey the information from the original text appropriately to the target readers to achieve the desired effect” (Zhang, 2013). Abridged translation refers to the translator's practice of selectively omitting or reducing information or details from the original text while ensuring that the core meaning remains unchanged. This simplification aims to make the translation more suitable for the needs of the target audience. For instance, in the exhibit “河津窑白地黑花开光诗文八方枕” the phrases “白地黑花” and “开光” carry specific cultural connotations. Translating each of these phrases in detail might result in a lengthy translation that could be challenging for the target readers to understand. Therefore, rendering the original text as “Octagonal Pillow with Poem (Hejin Ware)” conveys the core information more clearly to the target audience. The key to this translation strategy lies in striking a balance between conveying the essence of the original text and ensuring the comprehensibility of the translation for the target readers, thereby adapting the translation to their specific needs.

4.2. English Translation Recommendations for Museum Exhibits

4.2.1. Pay Attention to the Spelling of the Translation

The spelling of the translation directly influences the impression the target readers have of the exhibit. Therefore, after completing the translation, translators need to meticulously review it. For ambiguous expressions, translators should proactively consult relevant materials or seek advice from experts to ensure the accuracy of the translation. This is crucial for showcasing cultural heritage, building cultural bridges, and fostering understanding between different cultures. Translators must approach the spelling of the translation with a high sense of responsibility and dedication, ensuring that the target readers can accurately comprehend the content of the exhibit.

4.2.2. Establishing A Terminology Database to Standardize the Translation of Terms

“A terminology database is a centralized repository, similar to a database, designed to systematically manage approved terms in both the source and target languages” (Li, 2021:78). On one hand, establishing a terminology database aids in standardizing the translation of terms, ensuring accuracy and quality in translations. On the other hand, it enhances translation efficiency, for instance, by preventing the repeated translation of the same term. Creating a terminology database for museum exhibits undoubtedly assists translators in swiftly identifying specialized expressions, thereby conveying the essence of the exhibits accurately and enhancing the visiting experience for the target audience.

5. Conclusion

Museum exhibits embody rich cultural elements, reflecting the history, traditions, and values of specific cultures. The English translation of these exhibits is not merely a conversion from one language to another but also serves as a medium for cultural exchange. This paper analyzes and studies selected translation examples from the Shenzhen Museum's official website within the framework of the Cultural Translation Theory. The findings indicate: (1) There are numerous issues in the English translations of the exhibits, such as spelling errors, inconsistent translations of terms, and a lack of annotations for specific cultural words. (2) Translation strategies such as literal translation, semantic translation with phonetic annotation, free translation, expansive translation, and abridged translation can effectively assist target readers in understanding the information and meanings of the exhibits, promoting cross-cultural communication. (3) The choice of translation strategy should be based on the language proficiency and cultural background of the target readers. Adjusting the density of information in the translation appropriately can enhance its readability. In conclusion, when translating museum exhibits, translators need to consider the needs of the target audience, select appropriate translation strategies, and make the translation easily comprehensible, thereby successfully conveying the essence and cultural value of the exhibits.

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