

Problems and solutions in English translation of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)

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Abstract: This paper explores the challenges and strategies of translating traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) terminology into English. TCM, an integral part of Chinese cultural heritage, includes terms like "Qi" and "gan huo wang" (liver fire excess) that lack direct equivalents in Western languages, posing significant translation challenges. To address these issues, the research utilizes a theoretical framework distinguishing between direct translation (DT), which includes loan translation, transliteration, and literal translation—and oblique translation (OT), which involves interpretive methods such as free translation, dynamic equivalence, and adaptation. Through case studies, the paper offers practical guidance for medical translators and interpreters, promoting the international dissemination of TCM knowledge. It underscores the importance of understanding the cultural context of TCM to ensure that translations are both accurate and culturally resonant. This study advances the professionalization and globalization of TCM terminology translation, enhancing its acceptance and understanding worldwide.

Key words: Chinese; traditional Chinese medicine (TCM); English; translation problems; translation procedures

1 Introduction

Zero Starting Point: Learning Traditional Chinese Medicine (2nd Edition) is authored by Tian Xia Wu Ji and was published in 2023 by Beijing Medical Press. This book is designed as a comprehensive introductory guide for beginners in traditional Chinese medicine, thoroughly presenting the basic theories, diagnostic methods, and common treatment techniques of TCM. It elucidates core concepts such as Yin-Yang, the five elements, and organ system theories, integrating them with practical case studies to demonstrate their application in treating common diseases. This guide aims to help readers understand TCM from fundamental theories to practical applications comprehensively. During the translation process, I encountered the challenge of accurately translating specialized TCM terms, which often lack direct equivalents in English. To address this, I engaged in extensive literature research and collaborated with industry experts to ensure that each term was translated accurately and in a way that would be understandable to Western readers. To date, the translation has been completed up to page 45. This report is intended to share my translation experiences and challenges, as well as the strategies I employed to ensure the quality of the translation.

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), a treasure of Chinese culture with thousands of years of history, has garnered global attention for its profound medical theories and effective therapies. This paper aims to address the challenges and strategies involved in the English translation of TCM terminology, which is crucial for its accurate global dissemination.

TCM concepts such as "气(TT-Qi)" and "肝火旺(gan huo wang TT-liver fire excess)" lack direct Western equivalents, making it challenging to convey their full cultural and theoretical depth. The translation of TCM thus goes beyond mere linguistic conversion, demanding a deep understanding of its cultural context and medical philosophy.

The translation strategies for traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) terminology are crucial for effective communication and understanding of TCM concepts. This report draws on three years of medical translation experience to explore issues such as the absence of direct translation equivalents, polysemy, proprietary terminology, and abstract concepts. Various strategies including text augmentation, simplification, correspondence, and adjustment are employed to improve translation authenticity and readability.

By providing practical examples of translation challenges and proposed solutions, this paper serves as a guide for medical translators and interpreters, facilitating cross-cultural medical communication and advancing the globalization of TCM knowledge [8]. Future efforts will concentrate on expanding research and further optimizing translation strategies to enhance the international comprehension and acceptance of TCM terminology.

2 Translation problems and solutions

2.1 Direct translation in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) translation

Direct translation (DT) refers to the general word for word quotation of the original message in the TL, like loan translation, transliteration and literal translation [12].

2.1.1 Literal translation

In TCM translation, the use of literal translation is now very prevalent and has gained widespread acceptance in the domestic and international TCM translation community. The core of TCM basic theory is related to the theories of yin-yang and five elements. The concepts related to these two theories generally use direct translation.

Table 1. Literal translation in traditional Chinese medicine

Source Text	Target Text	Translation Strategy
阳化气	Yang transforming into qi	Literal translation
阴成形	Yin constituting form	Literal translation
母子关系	Mother-child relation	Literal translation
木生火	Wood generating fire	Literal translation
金克木	Metal restricting wood	Literal translation
阳中之阴	Yin within yang	Literal translation
阳中之阳	Yang within yang	Literal translation
补肾纳气	Supplementing the kidney to promote qi absorption	Literal translation
培土生金	Reinforcing earth to strengthen metal	Literal translation

The examples provided above do indeed involve a combination of literal translation and free translation. For instance, the translation of "补肾纳气" as "supplementing the kidney to promote qi absorption" involves a degree of interpretation, as the phrase "to promote" is not a direct translation of the Chinese characters. However, from a structural perspective, the translation still follows a literal translation strategy. Similarly, the translation of "培土生金" as "reinforcing earth to strengthen metal" uses a literal translation strategy, even though the English words used to convey the meaning of "培" and "生" could be different. For example, "cultivate", "bank up", "foster", and "strengthen" can all be used to translate these characters, but the choice of word does not affect the overall literal translation strategy. In traditional Chinese medicine

(TCM), the understanding of human physiology is unique and distinct from Western medicine. Therefore, translators often adopt a literal translation strategy to preserve the cultural characteristics of the original text. This approach ensures that the translation accurately conveys the meaning and concepts of TCM, even if the English words used are not direct equivalents. In summary, while the translations provided above do involve some degree of interpretation, they primarily follow a literal translation strategy to maintain the cultural and theoretical integrity of TCM.

2.1.2 Transliteration

Table 2. Transliteration in traditional Chinese medicine

Source Text	Target Text	Translation Strategy
气	Qi	Transliteration
气血运行	Promote qi and blood flow	Transliteration and adaptation

Transliteration is the most widely used method in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) text, which is an important method to keep the traditional Chinese cultural connotation in TCM translation [13]. To ensure the equivalence between the source language and the target language, the translator adopts transliteration in the translation of this term.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), qi is vital for human life and body functions. To preserve the original term's precise meaning and cultural nuances in translation, "气" in "促气血运行" is transliterated, allowing readers of the target language to appreciate both the standard and culturally specific expressions.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), "blood" is considered a fundamental substance essential for bodily functions. However, the direct translation of "血" as "blood" in "促气血运行" can lead to inaccuracies and confusion for Western readers. Therefore, I prefer using semantic translation, a strategic choice in cases where direct equivalence may leave the reader confused or misinformed about the significance of certain term or concepts. For example: the "blood" can be translated into "life-sustaining substances" or "blood flow" within the body.

2.2 Oblique translation in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) translation

Oblique translation (OT) refers to the translator's interpretation, elaboration or summary of the source text, like free translation, dynamic equivalence, transposition, and adaptation [1].

2.2.1 Challenges with free translation in term of Yin-Yang theory

The term Yin and Yang originates from ancient Chinese philosophy and is fundamental to the theory of traditional Chinese medicine. Currently, the transliteration "Yin and Yang" is widely accepted by scholars and translators both domestically and internationally. However, when Yin and Yang are considered as a unified concept, particularly in the context of Yin-Yang theory, a free translation strategy is employed to explain the term [4]. This approach is demonstrated in the following tables, Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3. The free translation method for the term "阴阳失调" in Yin-Yang theory

Source Language	Target Language	Translation Strategy
阴阳失调	TT1: imbalance or disorder of Yin and Yang	Free Translation
	TT2: incoordination between Yin and Yang	Free Translation

Semantically, the term "imbalance", "incoordination" and "disorder" can all correspond to "失调". However, in translation, "imbalance" and "disorder" are generally preferable to "incoordination". For example, "Yin Yang imbalance" accurately conveys a general state of imbalance, while "disorder" is more precise and appropriate in a pathological context, as it suggests a more severe disruption in the body's systems. Therefore, in medical texts discussing pathological conditions,

"Yin Yang disorder" might be a more accurate translation. The translation problems of free translation in term of Yin-Yang theory are complex and multifaceted.

Table 4. The free translation method for the term "阴阳自和" in Yin-Yang theory

Source Language	Target Language	Translation Strategy
阴阳自和	TT1: reestablishment of equilibrium between Yin and Yang	Free Translation
	TT2: automatic balance between Yin and Yang	Free Translation
	TT3: natural balance between Yin and Yang	Free Translation

"阴阳自和" refers to the process where, under pathological conditions, the balance between Yin and Yang is disrupted. Through appropriate treatment, this imbalance is corrected, and Yin and Yang are brought back towards equilibrium. Clearly, translations implying "automatic" or "natural" balance are unsuitable here. The translation "reestablishment between Yin and Yang" accurately captures the concept, though it has been streamlined for brevity.

2.2.2 The translation problems of free translation in the TCM term "liver qi stagnation"

"肝郁 (liver qi stagnation)" is a concept in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) theory, primarily associated with emotional states and the flow of qi. It lacks a direct equivalent in Western medicine. Therefore, translating this term requires careful consideration of cultural differences and medical contexts. Appropriate strategies, such as amplification, simplification, and correspondence, should be employed to ensure that readers of the target language can accurately understand the original meaning.

Problems: Additionally, the TCM term "肝郁" (liver qi stagnation) encompasses both emotional and physiological aspects, but there is no direct equivalent concept in Western medicine. Directly translating it as "liver depression" can be misleading, as "depression" in Western medicine primarily refers to a psychological condition. Furthermore, the cultural and medical contexts behind TCM term are difficult to find direct counterparts in Western medicine, leading to potential information loss or distortion during translation. Inaccurate translations can result in patients misunderstanding TCM diagnoses and treatments, thereby affecting treatment outcomes and patient trust.

Table 5. Problems in translating the TCM term "肝郁" (phrase with no literal equivalence)

Source Text	Incorrect target text
肝郁	Liver Depression

Procedures: The first translation procedure is "amplification". "肝气郁结" is translated as "liver qi stagnation (a TCM condition where emotional stress disrupts liver function)". This condition involves emotional stress leading to qi stagnation that affects liver function, manifesting as emotional fluctuations, abdominal discomfort, and fatigue. To aid understanding, additional explanatory notes have been included to elaborate on the cultural and medical background. For instance, it is clarified how TCM theory describes the influence of emotional stress on liver qi and its implications on overall health. Terms like "qi" are defined at their first occurrence to ensure clarity for readers unfamiliar with TCM.

The second translation procedure is "reduction". The term "肝郁" in traditional Chinese medicine, which includes both emotional and physiological aspects, has been translated as "liver dysfunction with emotional disturbances". This adaptation helps avoid the confusion that might arise from using "liver depression", a term that in Western medicine refers specifically to psychological issues. By using "liver dysfunction", which is a recognized medical term in Western medicine, supplemented with the descriptor "emotional disturbances", the translation accurately reflects the complexity of the TCM concept, which encompasses both emotional and physiological dysfunctions. An explanatory note has also been added to

highlight that "肝郁" traditionally involves an interplay of emotional and physical symptoms, providing a clearer understanding of the term's full scope in TCM.

The third translation procedure is "correspondence". The Chinese medical term "肝郁" is translated as "stress-related liver dysregulation". This translation not only emphasizes the liver's response to mental stress, aligning with Western medical concepts but also broadens the understanding to include both emotional and physiological manifestations. By describing it as "dysregulation", the translation avoids the severity implied by "dysfunction" and better reflects the functional disturbances typical in TCM. A supplementary note explains that, in TCM, "肝郁" indicates how mental and emotional stress can disrupt liver function, enhancing clarity for readers less familiar with traditional practices. This ensures a comprehensive understanding of the term's medical and cultural dimensions.

2.2.3 Handling polysemous words in TCM translations

Problems: British TCM translator Nigel Wiseman once said, "Chinese medicine is difficult to translate, and there are few people able—and even fewer people willing—to do it." This statement underscores a widely recognized fact: translating traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) into English is challenging. But what exactly makes it so difficult? First, the language of TCM itself is profound and complex, characterized by phenomena such as polysemy and overlapping concepts. Two specific examples of such polysemous phrases are provided in Table 6. Additionally, the cultural and philosophical depth inherent in TCM adds another layer of complexity to its translation, requiring a deep understanding not only of the language but also of the cultural context from which it originates.

Table 6. Problems in traditional Chinese medicine polysemous words

Source Text	Translation Strategy	Strategy Description
气虚	Amplification	In traditional Chinese medicine, "气虚 (qi xu)" is characterized by a deficiency of qi, or vital energy, within the body. It typically presents with symptoms such as fatigue, shortness of breath, and general weakness.
	Reduction	This condition represents a lack of energy, leading to symptoms like fatigue and weakness.
	Correspondence	"气虚 (qi xu)", this state is characterized by insufficient internal energy, similar to the concept of "energy" in Western medicine, which manifests as fatigue and weakness.

Procedures: The first procedure is amplification. "Qi deficiency" refers to a state in traditional Chinese medicine, where there is an insufficiency of "qi", or life energy, within the body. This condition often leads to symptoms like fatigue, shortness of breath, and general weakness. To help clarify, "qi" can be thought of as the battery that powers bodily functions; a deficiency in "qi" is akin to a battery running low, resulting in decreased energy and diminished physical functions. Appropriate explanation and cultural adjustment are the keys to ensuring the effectiveness of translation. At the same time, it also enhances the acceptability and educational effect of term in the new cultural environment [7].

The second procedure is reduction. "Low vital energy" refers to a state characterized by a deficiency in the body's energy levels. This condition can manifest in various ways, including fatigue, weakness, and a general feeling of exhaustion. The core concept of low vital energy focuses on the depletion of the body's energy reserves, without delving into the complex theoretical background of traditional Chinese medicine. This simplified description aims to make the concept more accessible to readers with a Western medical background, allowing them to better understand the state of low energy levels without being overwhelmed by the intricacies of TCM theory.

The third procedure is correspondence. "Energy deficiency", also known as "qi deficiency" in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), refers to a state characterized by a lack of vital energy in the body. This concept is closely related to the Western medical concept of energy deficiency, which emphasizes the insufficiency of bodily energy. By employing a corresponding strategy, the translation ensures that the concept of "qi deficiency" is more accessible and understandable across different cultural and medical backgrounds, ensuring accurate communication and understanding. According to Baker, appropriate translation strategies are crucial for the success of cross-cultural communication, especially when dealing with complex and specialized terminology[9] [11].

2.2.4 Challenges of no-correspondence in English translations of TCM

Non-correspondence in translation refers to cases where the target language lacks both complete and partial equivalents for lexical units in the source language. In Chinese-English translation, non-correspondence typically pertains to three major areas: firstly, proper nouns such as geographic names, institutions, and the names of media outlets; secondly, cultural-specific items or concepts such as Chinese recipes, unique Chinese musical instruments, and specialized term in Chinese opera; and thirdly, lexical gaps, exemplified by the Chinese term "万" (ten thousand) and "亿" (hundred million), which are translated into English simply as "ten thousand" and "a hundred million", respectively.

In the context of translating traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), non-correspondence is particularly evident in several respects. Key examples include the multifaceted concept of "qi", which encompasses a range of meanings that are not directly translatable into English, and specific term for herbs or medicinal practices that have no direct English equivalents. Addressing these challenges requires a deep understanding of both the language and cultural nuances, often necessitating the use of expanded descriptions, analogies, or explanatory notes to convey the full meaning effectively. This approach not only aids in translation accuracy but also enhances the reader's comprehension of complex TCM concepts.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), there are distinctive anatomical concepts such as "Ming Men" (Life Gate) and "San Jiao" (Triple Burner) that do not correspond directly to any concepts in Western medicine. This poses a significant challenge for translators, especially when borrowing strategies are ineffective due to the unique nature of these terms. Historically, translators have typically adopted one of three approaches to translate such term: literal translation, which maintains the original term but may add explanatory notes; conceptual equivalence, where the translator finds a Western concept that conveys a similar meaning; and descriptive translation, where the function or theory behind the TCM concept is explained rather than the term itself being translated. This approach helps maintain the cultural integrity of the term while making them accessible to readers unfamiliar with TCM.

Table 7. Early translation methods for the TCM term "命门"

Source Language	Target Language	Translation Strategy
命门	Life Gate	Literal Translation
	Vital Portal	Free Translation
	Mingmen	Transliteration

Table 8. Early translation methods for the TCM term "三焦"

Source Language	Target Language	Translation Strategy
三焦	Triple Burner	Literal Translation
	Triple energizer	Free Translation
	Sanjiao	Transliteration

2.2.5 Dynamic equivalence in traditional Chinese medicine translation

Table 9. Dynamic equivalence in traditional Chinese medicine

Source Text	Target Text	Translation strategy
促气血运行	Promote qi and blood flow	Transliteration and adaptation

Dynamic equivalence (or functional equivalence) focuses on conveying the meaning and function of the original text rather than a direct, word-for-word translation [6]. This approach aims to preserve the intended effect of the source text on the target audience, often requiring adjustments in structure and consistency with cultural and contextual understandings[1].

In the target text, "血" is not directly translated as "blood", which is translated as "flow" because it emphasizes the circulation of blood. According to the knowledge of TCM, its relation is not literally juxtaposition, but inclusion. TCM emphasizes that blood is the mother of qi, and the two are integrated and flow in the pulse.

And "促" is translated into "promote", which can accurately reflect the active stimulation, and is a common goal in TCM, especially in treatments designed to invigorate and move energy through the body. By prioritizing the functional and contextual meaning over the literal translation, the TT maintains the ST's intent and relevance to the target audience.

2.2.6 Adaptation in traditional Chinese medicine translation

Adaptation in translation entails the deliberate modification of source text to align with the cultural, social, and contextual demands of the target audience. This process may include the modification, addition, or exclusion of content to enhance relevance and comprehension for new readers or viewers [14].

2.2.7 Hawkes' translation strategies in TCM

Hawkes' translation strategies in TCM translation focuses on linguistic, cultural, and communicative aspects, with examples from symptom and diagnosis translations. Through the lens of eco-translatology, it demonstrates that Hawkes effectively adapted to the translation environment and skillfully adjusted across three aspects to communicate TCM culture to Western audiences [14].

The first translation procedure is communication aspect. This is a communicative process where translators understand the source text and accurately express it in another language. Medical translators can choose appropriate methods like addition, omission, or substitution.

The second translation procedure is substitution. For example, "肝火旺" is translated into "liver fire excess" instead of "liver fire strong".

The third translation procedure is annotation. An added explanation clarifies that it involves a major increase in liver energy, leading to symptoms such as irritability and headaches.

2.2.8 Examples of adaptive translation

Table 10. Adaptive translation in traditional Chinese medicine

Source Text	Target Text	Translation Strategy
推拿	Tuina or Chinese massage	Transliteration and adaptation

In contemporary traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), "massage" is typically translated as "Tuina" or "Chinese massage" rather than "massage" due to the latter's recreational connotations in entertainment venues, which may imply non-medical uses and detract from its health-related significance.

To avoid these associations and better reflect its cultural and medical context, the term is transliterated as "Tuina", ensuring it maintains its professional integrity globally.

Thus, adaptive translation helps bridge the gap between Chinese and English in the context of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) by facilitating cross-cultural communication [5].

3 Conclusion

The problems faced in translating the source text can be summarized as: 1) phrases with no equivalence in the TT; 2) polysemous words; 3) TCM term, and 4) abstract concepts in traditional Chinese medicine.

Transliteration, literal translation, and free translation are the most common procedure in the translation of traditional Chinese Medicine. This is supported by the findings of Ruyi Song and Ya Liu [3]. However, the above translation procedures may result in awkward and unnatural translations. Hence, a variety of translation procedures can be used. For example, amplification, reduction, correspondence and transposition can be used to make the TT more comprehensible to TT readers, and also maintain the authenticity and sense of language of the translation.

In a practical case, a patient receiving traditional Chinese medicine treatment tried to explain the impact of "liver depression" on his health. Without proper translation, the patient's misunderstanding of this concept may lead to distrust or discontinuation of treatment. Therefore, the translation of traditional Chinese medicine into English is a challenging task that requires not only linguistic conversion but also a deep understanding and sensitivity to cultural backgrounds [3].

Last but not least, although these translation examples are limited in number, the translations and analyses can be valuable for medical translators and interpreters by actively employing these translation procedures [2]. Therefore, finding solutions to translation problems can enhance translators' capacity for better theorizing and producing high-quality translations, leading to improved outcomes in the translation process [10]. Finally, constant learning and modification of these tactics will help to develop the discipline by ensuring that complex medical concepts are communicated accurately and effectively across languages and cultures.

The fact is that just a small number of samples were translated and examined. For further validation and generalization of the findings, more translations and analysis of traditional Chinese medicine should be compared and analyzed. This method not only helps to improve the accuracy of translation but also facilitates the globalization of traditional Chinese medicine, enabling the world to better understand and accept it.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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