

# A Study of the Legal Translation of Chinese Medical Terminology

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## ABSTRACT

As a cultural treasure of China and an integral part of traditional Chinese cultural confidence, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) deserves both our appreciation and proper global dissemination. To better promote TCM on the international stage, we must first value it ourselves and ensure its accurate transmission. This study aims to explore ways to improve the accuracy of French translations of TCM-related content, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the effective dissemination of TCM culture across French-speaking regions worldwide.

## KEYWORDS

Terminology of Traditional Chinese Medicine; Traditional Chinese Medicine Translation; Translation from Chinese to English

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) played a significant role during the COVID-19 pandemic. The official website of the World Health Organization (WHO) published the *Report of the WHO Expert Meeting on the Evaluation of Chinese Medicine for the Treatment of COVID-19*, which affirmed the safety and effectiveness of TCM in treating the disease. The report also fully recognized TCM's contribution to the global fight against the COVID-19 and to safeguarding public health worldwide. In France, the cultural transmission of Chinese medicine has long history and continues to gain popularity among the French population [1] (Liu Yuying, Jin Quanyou, 2009:238). However, French translations of TCM texts remain a niche category, with limited economic and social impact. Furthermore, due to misunderstandings and interpretive biases by some foreign translators, inaccuracies are often found in French versions of classical TCM literature [2] (Rao Hongmei, Zhang Wei, Hu Weiguo, 2020:05). Therefore, it is crucial to improve the accuracy and consistency of these translations. This study aims to contribute to the development of a more standardized French translation system for TCM, supporting the broader dissemination of Chinese medicine in France and other French-speaking regions. Ultimately, it seeks to promote the genuine internationalization of TCM.

## 2. SKOPOSTHEORIE

Skopostheorie, developed by the German Functionalist School, is currently one of the most influential and representative translation theory in Germany. It is built upon three core principles: purpose, coherence and fidelity. The primary principle is purposefulness, which emphasizes that the translation should serve its intended function within the target context. The coherence principle requires that translated text be fluent, coherent, and acceptable to the target audience [3] (Wang Jun, Chen Shiyue, 2017: 102). The fidelity principle stresses the importance of remaining faithful to the original

text, aiming for both accuracy and naturalness in the target language [4] (Zhang Peiji, 2005:9). To meet the demands of both fidelity and coherence, a translator must possess a precise understanding of the source text and be able to convey that understanding accurately in the target language. In Skopostheorie, the fidelity principle is subordinate to the coherence principle, and both are ultimately subordinate to the overarching purpose of the translation [5] (Wang Jun, Chen Shiyue, 2017:102).

### **3. THE DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSLATION TCM IN FRENCH**

#### **3.1. Specialized Vocabulary Lacking Direct Equivalents**

There are numerous terms in both French and Chinese that lack exact equivalents, particularly in terms of cultural connotation and imagery. While some words may share the same literal meaning, they can convey entirely different implications. For example, killing a chicken to warn a monkey could be translated, following the three principles of Skopostheorie, as “Tuer un poulet pour que le singe regarde à côté”. However, the equivalent French expresses “Battre le chien devant le lion”, which reflects the culturally adapted version of this proverb. This kind of divergence is even more pronounced in the field of TCM, which is deeply rooted classical Chinese philosophy and cultural concepts. Even native Chinese speakers without formal training in TCM may struggle to fully grasp certain ideas, let alone non-Chinese speakers. Many key TCM concepts are abstract and intangible, making it difficult to summarize their meanings with just a few words. For example, “yin and yang” and “qigong” have no ready-made French equivalents. Additionally, translating organs such as the lungs or heart based on TCM theory cannot be equated directly with their anatomical or physiological counterparts in Western medicine. Therefore, in the translation process, it is especially important to adhere to the “principle of purpose” and select the most contextually appropriate translation strategies to ensure both accuracy and cultural relevance.

#### **3.2. Cultural Differences Leading to Low Acceptance of TCM**

According to historical records, in the 13th century, Marco Polo was the first to bring the knowledge of Chinese medicine to Europe [6] (Bonnie F. Gu, Xinyang Song, 2019:07). In the 17th century a large number of writings about TCM began to spread in France, and missionaries played a large role in this. Nowadays in France, although the French scientific community has doubts about the scientific nature of Chinese medicine, it does not seem to have affected people's belief in the efficacy of acupuncture, which has gained widespread trust in France, but for other aspects, such as other therapies such as traditional Chinese medicine, the acceptance of the therapy in France is not high. Although acupuncture in TCM is recognized by the French, acupuncture is also only used as a complementary medicine, and TCM is still considered a marginal medicine [7] (Zhang Guobin, 2016), and there is still a long way to go for the future promotion of TCM in France and even in various French-speaking regions.

In this context, the accuracy of translation is particularly important, due to the cultural differences between Chinese and Western cultures, there is a huge difference in the way of thinking, habits of expression, accuracy and cultural connection is crucial, the more important of the two is the accuracy of translation, how to clearly translate the contents related to traditional Chinese medicine, which is an urgent need to solve the problem.

#### **3.3. Geographical Differences**

Geographical location has a significant impact on climate, which in turn affects the growth and properties of medicinal plants. For example, Monaco, located along the Mediterranean coast, experiences a subtropical Mediterranean climate characterized by dry, cool summers and wet, mild winters. In contrast, Quebec, Canada, shows strong climatic polarization: the south has a humid

continental climate, while the far north falls under polar and sub-polar zones. Most of France experiences a temperate oceanic climate with mild and humid conditions year-round. China, located in East Asia, spans a vast territory with complex topography and diverse climatic zones[8] (Cao, Xue, 2008:196). These geographical and climatic differences mean that even when plants share the same across region, they may refer to different species or exhibit altered properties due to environmental influences. Even when the same plant species grows in different regions, its medicinal properties may vary because of differences in soil, temperature, humidity, and altitude.

For instance, the sycamore(in this context referring to a fern-like medicinal plant native to China) has been introduced to Europe and the Americas. However,due to differing growing conditions, the plant's characteristics have diverged. In China, sycamore thrives in warm, sunny environments and is sensitive to cold and waterlogging. In contrast, the French sycamore prefers a humid, temperate climate and exhibits greater cold tolerance.

Another example is the stone pine, an important genus of medicinal plants. According to Commonly Used Folk Herbs in Zhejiang, stone pine has effects such as relaxing tendons and reducing inflammation. It is widely distributed across China, excluding the northeast and north, and typically grows in forest understories,slopes, and rocky areas at altitudes ranging from 100 to 3300 meters. It is characterized by multi-branched,spirally arranged leaves [9] (Zhang Libing, Kong Xiannian, 2000:266-275.). There are many species within the stone pine group. For example, the Himalayan stone pine, long mistaken for the European stone pine, differs by its fully bipinnate branching and terete (cylindrical) leaves. In China, it is found in central and western regions. Meanwhile, the alpine flat-branched stone pine, another variant, grows exclusively in northeast and northern China, in alpine meadows and tundra zones at altitudes of 2000-2200 meters. This species is also marked by multiple bifurcated branches and is locally known as the “alpine Flat-branched Stone Pine”.

These examples illustrate the challenges of applying TCM knowledge across regions. Accurate botanical identification and localization are essential in translation and clinical application, and geographical context must be considered to ensure safe and effective use of medicinal plants.

## **4. APPLYING SKOPOSTHEORIE TO ADDRESS TRANSLATION CHALLENGES**

### **4.1. Translating TCM Terms Using the Principle of Purposefulness**

Take the example of the term Qigong. Qigong is a traditional Chinese practice that improves the flow of Qi (vital energy) through the meridians. It is believed to enhance physical health and gradually reduce muscular and emotional tension. Qigong exercises typically include body postures, stretches, and breathing techniques,with movements that are slow and calm to facilitate concentration.

Example Translation:

Qigong(Qi signifie “souffle” et “énergie”, et gong signifie“travail”). Le Qigong améliore la circulation du Qi (énergie vitale) dans les méridiens. La santé ira mieux, les tensions musculaires et émotionnelles diminueront progressivement. Les exercices de Qigong comprennent des postures corporelles, des étirements et des techniques de respiration. Les mouvements sont longs et calmes pour faciliter la concentration.

In this translation, it is essential to first grasp the concept of Qigong accurately and then convey it clearly in French. In line with the principle of purposefulness from Skopostheorie, the translation should serve the function of introducing and explaining the concept to a French-speaking audience unfamiliar with traditional Chinese practices. Therefore, a phonetic transliteration——rendering the term as Qigong——is appropriate, paired with an explanatory translation that defines its meaning.

This dual approach, often called transliteration with annotation, helps bridge the cultural and linguistic gap caused by the absence of direct equivalents in the target language.

This method also aligns with the principle of faithfulness, ensuring that the essence of original term is preserved while making it comprehensible to the target audience. However, the effectiveness of this strategy depends heavily on the translator's competence—not only in the French language but also in their understanding of TCM concepts. Currently, there is a shortage of such qualified translators in China. To address this gap, it is advisable to establish specialized programs in universities of TCM that integrate both French language education and TCM studies. This would help cultivate a new generation of bilingual professionals capable of producing accurate and culturally appropriate translations of TCM materials.

#### **4.2. Translating of Chinese Medicine Terms Based on the Principle of Coherence**

Consider the following excerpt from *Treatise on Cold Damage* by Zhang Zhongjing

“In a person who is already unwell, the illness is called typhoid fever. This is because those who labor excessively and accumulate internal heat during spring and summer may become ill after being exposed to cold in winter. The cause is not the ‘qi of the time’, but rather the cold itself.” [10] (Zhang Zhongjing, 2016)

French Translation:

La maladie qui survient immédiatement après un rhume est appelée la fièvre typhoïde. Par conséquent, les personnes fatiguées du travail souffrent souvent de la maladie fébrile due à la chaleur. C'est à cause de la froideur de l'hiver que le poison froid s'accumule dans la santé et pas affecté par les changements anormaux du climat à cette époque.

In this case, the principle of coherence from Skopostheorie is particularly relevant. This principle requires the translation to be understandable, culturally appropriate, and meaningful to the target audience. Therefore, while translating traditional terms like The energy of The Times (shi xing zhi qi), a literal translation such as “la mode de l'époque” would be misleading or incomprehensible to French readers unfamiliar with TCM.

Historically, The energy of The Times—often shorted to Time and energy or times—refers to epidemic or infectious diseases arising from abnormal seasonal and climatic changes. A more coherent and culturally appropriate translation would be and “les changements anormaux du climat à cette époque”. This not only ensures fluency and clarity for the reader but also preserves the original meaning in a way that is accessible and relevant within the target culture. This approach, known as interpretive or explanatory translation aligns with the principle of coherence by prioritizing readability and conceptual clarity over rigid word-for-word fidelity. It also takes into account the ecological, linguistic, religious, and social-cultural differences between Chinese and French societies, ensuring that the translated text can be correctly understood in its new cultural context [7] (Wu Jian, 2012:04).

#### **4.3. Translation of Some Chinese Medicine Terms Following the Principle of Fidelity**

Examples: Shinan

Translation: Bruyères (Shi nan)

When translating the names of traditional Chinese medicines herbs, challenges often arise due to geographical differences and botanical discrepancies. A plant with the same name in Chinese may not have an exact equivalent in French or may refer to a completely different species. In such cases, it is essential to adhere to the principle of fidelity. This means the translation should first strive to accurately reflect the original meaning and botanical identity. If there is no direct equivalent in the target language, a combination of semantic translation and phonetic transcription can be used. For

instance, after identifying “Shinan” as referring to a general category of heather-like plants, one may translate it as Bruyères, and then retain the original Chinese name pinyin—shí nán—in parentheses to preserve the cultural and terminological specificity. This dual approach respects both the scientific accuracy and the cultural uniqueness of TCM. It ensures the translated term is both faithful to the source and informative to the target audience, particularly when dealing with terms lack exact counterparts in the target language.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Traditional Chinese medicine is not only a form of traditional healthcare unique to China, but also a cultural treasure of Chinese civilization. Therefore, the accuracy of TCM terminology translation plays a crucial role in its effective communication to the world. One of the key challenges lies in how to translate the specialized knowledge of TCM in a precise and culturally appropriate manner, enabling France and other French-speaking countries to gradually gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Chinese medicine. To improve the accuracy and effectiveness of future French translations of TCM, it is essential to apply the three core principles of Skopostheorie—purposefulness, coherence, and fidelity—in a flexible and context-sensitive way. Beyond the oretical considerations, another critical issue is the establishment of a more unified and standardized system for translating TCM terminology, one that can be widely recognized and accepted in French-speaking regions. It is hoped that this study will offer valuable insights and serve as a meaningful reference for future efforts in translating and promoting traditional Chinese medicine across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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