

# Foshan Kung Fu Culture Translation from the Perspective of Ecological Translation Studies

-- Taking "Hongquan" as an Example

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**Abstract:** Foshan is the birthplace of Southern Chinese Kung Fu and the Hongquan style, widely spread in Foshan, is a major representative of Foshan Kung Fu. Taking Hongquan as an example, this paper discusses Foshan Kung Fu Cultural Translation from the Perspective of Ecological Translation Studies. We hope this paper will be applied directly to Foshan Kung Fu cultural translations as a means of aiding Kung Fu enthusiasts as they seek to experience traditional Chinese culture and better understand the lifestyle of ordinary Chinese people, thus promoting deep and authentic cultural exchange. Extensions to other bodies of translation may yield similar results.

**Keywords:** Foshan Kung Fu Culture, Hongquan, Ecological Translation Studies, Cultural Exchange.

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## 1. Introduction

Foshan, as the "hometown of martial arts, is the birthplace of Southern Chinese Kung Fu. Most of the popular styles of Kung Fu in the world, such as Hongquan, Wing Chun, and Choy Li Fut, have been developed in Foshan. In addition, Wang Feihong, a famous martial arts master, Ye Wen, a master of Wing Chun, and Bruce Lee, a world martial arts superstar, all come from Foshan and learned Kung Fu there. Martial arts are a local specialty in Foshan, a cultural card with distinct characteristics. Martial arts entail not only fighting moves, but also Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, health preservation, and ethics. As such they reflect the basic spirit of Chinese culture: Heaven moves healthily, and gentlemen strive for self-improvement; the terrain is vast, and gentlemen carry things with virtue (天行健, 君子以自强不息; 地势坤, 君子以厚德载物). The traditional Chinese understanding of the world is twofold: yin and yang. People need to be both inclusive and strong, and it is precisely in these two aspects that martial arts have techniques. So, martial arts are not just about learning to fight. By learning martial moves, one can also cultivate a tolerant and virtuous character. So, the martial arts are primarily about spreading technique, combining Chinese culture in the process of spreading technique, and allowing people to understand the basic spirit of Chinese culture. In recent years, a number of martial arts themed cultural tourist attractions have emerged in Foshan, attracting tens of thousands of overseas martial arts professionals every year to pay homage to their predecessors and exchange knowledge.

However, when we collected and organized relevant Foshan Kung Fu materials in English, we found that there were many translation problems in these materials, including inconsistent names of professional terms but more importantly, insufficient depth in exploring the connotations of culturally loaded vocabulary. The authors found that the theories of language dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension transformation in ecological translation studies [1] offer a helpful guide the translation of Foshan Kung Fu culturally loaded texts. Hongquan is a major

representative of Southern Shaolin fighting, is widely spread in Guangdong with a developmental history of over 300 years. This article brings the three-dimensional transformation of ecological translation to analysis of English translation of Kung Fu documents, taking the Hongquan style as an example, and explores adaptation of ecological translation to accurately convey both the details and connotations of the source language's culture. We hope thereby to make a modest contribution to the authenticity and depth of cultural exchange in this domain.

## 2. Overview of Ecological Translation Studies

Ecological translation studies were proposed by renowned Chinese scholar, Professor Hu Gengshen. This theory explores the relationship between translators and the translation ecosystem based on Darwin's theory of biological evolution, namely adaptation and selection. [1] Ecological translation studies regard the translation environment as a unitary ecological system with a social context wherein the translator, as the focus of the ecological environment, achieves dynamic equilibrium of the translation ecological environment through three-dimensional transformation. Traditional approaches to translation encounter significant challenges of contradictory influences of culture, environment, and language, often creating imbalanced outcomes. Ecological translation studies, on the other hand, encourage translators maintain a balance between language, culture, and communicative intent to minimize social imbalance. Under the ecological translation studies model, translators explore a text, investigate the ecological environment and conditions of the original text, and integrate these to achieve optimal word selection and nuance of the translation in trans-national social discourse. During this process, greater adaptability in word selection results in higher quality translation.

In the practice of Kung Fu and other culture-heavy translations, translators should target the needs of their intended readers<sup>2</sup> from the perspective of ecological

translation studies, thoroughly considering the differences in thinking and writing styles between the source authors and the intended readers of the material as well as adopting more nuanced strategies for translation. In order to achieve authentic and full communication of the original text, translators must take language and cultural differences into account to ensure accurate and robust communication of the original message.

### 3. Translation of Kung Fu Culture from the Ecological Perspective

While the principles discussed here apply to all genres across all languages, we focus on martial arts texts originating in Chinese and translated to English.

#### 3.1. Application of the Language Dimension in Hongquan Style Texts

In the process of ecological translation, one must first attend to the language dimension, which involves vocabulary, phrases, parts of speech and grammatical structures. This adaptive choice is specifically manifested as the translator fully considers the use of the words of the original text and their counterparts in the foreign language to make the translation more suitable for the target language readers' reading and understanding. [3]

Foshan's martial arts originally spread overseas with Chinese people immigrating to other countries for a variety of reasons. Foshan, a city in Guangdong province – located on the Southeastern coast of China near Hong Kong in the area formerly known as Canton, has engaged in international exchange for centuries, and martial arts skills have naturally been a part of this exchange. Starting with Bruce Lee in the 1970s, Foshan Kung Fu has gone abroad through Hong Kong Kung Fu movies. The pronunciation of many terms used for Kung Fu in the Western world are English transliteration derivations of Cantonese pronunciations. The spellings of many of these words follow the Cantonese Pinyin. However, in the museums of Foshan, and various books, many martial arts terms in the exhibition halls are presented using Hanyu Pinyin. We find that some representative names, routine names, and equipment names of Hongquan are not uniform (as shown in Table 1).

**Table 1.** Variation in Translation Styles

Terms	Foshan Museum <sup>4</sup>	Kung Fu Culture <sup>5</sup>	Hung Kuen Training <sup>6</sup>
工字伏虎拳	Gong Character (I-shaped) Taming the Tiger Fist	I-shaped Tiger Subduing Fist	Gung Gee Fok Fu Kuen
五郎八卦棍	Wulang Eight Diagram Pole	Eight-Diagram Pole Fighting	Yang Family Fifth Son's Eight-Trigram Long pole

Having multiple translations of single term is not conducive to cultural exchange, as it creates ambiguity and makes it difficult for foreign readers to establish the connections necessary for deep understanding. This lack of continuity may lead to misunderstandings and to a loss of interest in further understanding of this culture.

The English translation of culturally loaded words requires

an explanation of their unique cultural connotations (*c.f.*, the interpretive translation method: Pang, 2019 [7]). Kung Fu cultural terms are heavily loaded with cultural nuance, so for Foshan Kung Fu cultural terms, we suggest using Cantonese or Hanyu Pinyin plus English interpretation, which can better solve the problem of different translations of terms. Choosing this translation method not only preserves heterogeneity, but also showcases the cultural connotations behind Foshan Kung Fu. Using this method, the first line from Table 1 would be *Gung Gee Fok Fu Kuen (the Gong Character [I-shaped] Taming the Tiger Fist)*, while the second line would be *Wulang Bagua Gun (Eight-Trigram Long Pole)*.

If a translator blindly pursues complete formal equivalence between the original text and the translated text without considering the differences between languages (Chinese and English, in this case), the resulting translation will violate the reading habits and cultural customs of the target language readers; those who translate word by word often start with loyalty and end with confusion.<sup>8</sup> Chinese tends to employ a great degree of imagery and cultural nuance. In the English genre used for martial arts texts, semantically clear vocabulary, phrases, and sentences which express substantive information are preferred. In the process of translating from Chinese to English, from the perspective of ecological translation studies, translators should endeavor match the style of target language readers, meeting the reading habits and psychological expectations of the target language readers, in order to achieve the purpose of transmitting information.

Here, and later in this paper, we provide examples of original texts and English translations found in various Kung Fu texts originating in Foshan followed by suggested revisions based on the ecological translation model. Targeted elements are underlined for the readers' convenience.

Example 1: 工字伏虎拳，为洪拳的基本拳法，以步进退成“工”字形，故得名。工字伏虎拳腰马稳健，桥手刚劲，法门紧密，进退有规，是学习其他拳术、器械的基础。凡入黄飞鸿门下者，必先习此拳以稳健腰马，坚实桥手，正步法。

Existing Translation: I-shaped Tiger Subduing Fist is a basic skill of Hongquan. It got its name because the forward and backward movements form the letter “I”. It features steady stances, powerful hand movements, close fist approaches, and well-regulated forward and backward movements. It is the basis for learning other martial arts types and weapons. Everyone who wanted to become a student of Huang Feihong's must learn this to steady their stances, consolidate their hand movements and correct their steps. [5]

Most significant in this example are the four parallel chengyu (*idiomatic four-character phrases*) which appear in sequence in the second sentence. Chengyus do not conform to the English language form and cannot be translated directly. They are distinctive expressions in Chinese, highly concise and well-structured. Each chengyu communicates a full sentence with deep meaning in just four characters. For example, “腰马稳健” taken character by character translates to *waist horse stable healthy*. English has no parallel language expression, and literal translation of chengyu often results in syntactic error and, worse, loss of meaning. Therefore, for the translation of this sentence, the translator must paraphrase the chengyu, grasping the essence of the original text, and conveying their meaning in the translation, in order to showcase the cultural characteristics of Foshan Kung Fu and provide accurate cultural information for the readers of the

translation without adding significant length to the text. The book *Martial Arts Culture of Foshan China* translation does well by rendering “腰马稳健” as “steady stances.” Here, the translation smoothly results in coordinated English phrases which take into account the differences in language dimensions between Chinese and English, making the sentence structure of the translation reasonable and in-line with the logic of the target language. Our primary contributions to this example lie in the name of the move and the following of the Hanyu Pinyin standard in the merging of Hongquan vs. Hong Quan.

Suggested Translation: Gung Gee Fok Fu Kuen (the Gong Character [I-shaped] Taming the Tiger Fist) is a basic skill of the Hongquan style. It got its name because its forward and backward movements form the letter “I”. It features steady stances, powerful hand movements, closed fist approaches, and well-regulated forward and backward movements. It is the foundation for learning other martial arts skills and weapon techniques. Everyone who wanted to become a student of the Hongquan master Huang Feihong had to learn this skill to steady their stances, consolidate their hand movements, and correct their steps.

### 3.2. The Application of the Cultural Dimension in Hongquan Style Texts

Language and culture are closely linked, and language translation is not simply a simple transformation of language forms or a reformation of grammatical structures. Authentic translation must also navigate the collision and fusion of cultures. Translation limited to language level transformation will result in superficial, soulless translation. Only by delving deeply into cultural level adaptive transformations can translation achieve its natural goal of meaningfully communicating the nuance of the original text.

Example 2: 洪拳为中国传统拳术中的南拳之一。风格特点：手法丰富，腿法较少。步趋热烈，硬桥硬马，刚劲有力，以气催力，以声助威。

Existing Translation: Hong Quan is a kind of traditional Southern martial arts in China. It features rich hand movements, few leg movements, earnest steps, hard bridge-shaped hand movements and horse stances, strength and vigor, and the use of qi (literally meaning “air” or “breath”) and sound.<sup>5</sup>

In the translation, qi (气) is appropriately transliterated as qi with the helpful addition of (literally meaning “air” or “breath”). We think that it belongs to inadequate translation<sup>8</sup> Qi in martial arts is very important and rich in Chinese nuance which lacking corresponding expression in the English context, resulting in an accurate, but weak translation. Inherently, qi has two traditional concepts: qi sinking in the energy centers enhances the stability of body posture, while qi penetrating the energy centers can enhance striking power. This cultural information is not provided by the translator in Example 2. The uninitiated reader would lack the necessary background information to understand the import of qi in the existing translation. Therefore, when translating, we should make explanations of core cultural concepts to achieve rich, informative translations, provide readers with relevant information necessary to understand the original vocabulary, fill in the need for relevant background knowledge, and fill the cognitive gap of international readers.

Suggested Translation: The Hongquan style is one of several traditional martial arts schools in southern China. It

features rich hand movements, limited leg movements, earnest steps, hard bridge-shaped hand movements and horse stances, strength and vigor, and the use of qi (literally breath, but connoting one’s internal power and homeostasis, Qi in martial arts is very important. It not only can enhance the stability of body posture but can also enhance the hitting power) and sound.

Only through inclusion of inferred cultural information can we hope to provide a translation that will lead international readers to deeply understand Chinese culture in martial arts.

Since the example of qi is fundamental to understanding Kung Fu, many international readers may have already obtained the necessary cultural information to make the connections suggested above. We offer, therefore, an additional example:

Example 3: 黄飞鸿设武馆的同时，也设“宝芝林”医馆。黄飞鸿宅心仁厚，发大慈恻隐之心，精勤不倦，治病救人。所以，他既是一个武者，又是一个有德行的人。

Existing Translation: Huang Feihong set up Bao Zhi Lin clinic along with his martial arts clubs. He was benevolent and merciful, treating the injured and saving the ill all the time. Thus, he was a martial art master and also a virtuous person. [4]

Here the original text mentions an important cultural phenomenon: many historical martial artists with excellent martial arts skills chose not open martial arts schools but instead opened traditional Chinese medicine clinics. They regarded the martial arts as a technique for strengthening the body and protecting the family. Hence opening a clinic offered a more complete contribution with the aim of treating illness and saving people, and serving the community while simultaneously supporting the family’s livelihood. Additional reasons to open a clinic instead of a school traditionally included adopting a covert strategy of hiding one’s strength and masking one’s talents in order to survive in the often-dangerous milieu in which these masters worked and lived.

When introducing Baozhilin, therefore, we should add relevant background information to enhance full understanding by including information that authors of the original Chinese text consider self-evident. This will help foreign readers better understand the national conditions of China at that time.

Suggested Translation: Huang Feihong set up Baozhilin clinic along with his martial arts clubs. He was benevolent and merciful, regularly treating the injured and saving the ill. Thus, he was a martial art master and also a virtuous person (Almost all martial arts masters were familiar with medical treatments and almost all doctors were also familiar with martial arts).

### 3.3. The Application of the Communicative Dimension in Hongquan Style Texts

The third dimension in ecological translation relates to the continuity of communication of the text’s original intention as it shifts between the source language and the target language. This requires the translator to pay close attention to the deep values of the text and intuitively navigate language and cultural differences. The goal is to directly address the expressive demands of each of the languages to promote rich cultural exchange and understanding.

Example 4: 虎鹤双形拳由黄飞鸿传林世荣。虎形练气与力，动作沉雄，声威叱咤，有龙腾虎跃之势；鹤形练精与神，身手灵捷、动作迅速，有气定神闲之妙，故称虎鹤

双形拳，为黄鸿一门之代表拳法。

Existing Translation: Tiger and Crane Double Pattern Set was passed from Huang Feihong to Lin Shirong. The tiger patterns train energy and strength. The movements are steady and strong, accompanied by powerful shouts, just like flying dragons and leaping tigers. The crane patterns train essence and spirit. The movements are agile, fast, calm and restful. The Tiger and Crane Double Pattern Set is the representative of the Huang Feihong Style Martial Arts. [5]

In the original text, we see another chengyu, 龙腾虎跃, which originated from Tang Yancong's Praise Preface to a Famous Official of the Three Kingdoms. Literally translated, it says dragon flies; tiger jumps. The connotation is celebration of vigorous and powerful action. When considered within the cultural context of the source language, this chengyu is loaded with culturally rich national characteristics are lost with a simple, direct translation. One admirable approach to addressing this challenge comes from Hartmann's contrastive textology wherein he suggests translators employ a wide sociological approach which takes background knowledge into account. Here, then, is some insight into cultural differences with regard to dragons (analysis on tiger would reveal similar differences between Eastern and Western cultures).

According to the Oxford Advanced English Chinese Dictionary, dragon has only two meanings, (1) (in stories) a large aggressive animal with wings and a long tail, that can breathe out fire (legendary flamethrower); (2) (disapproving) a woman who has an aggressive and frightening demeanor. From these two definitions, it can be seen that dragon is a derogatory term in English. In Chinese, however, dragon connotes imperial images and is associated with the emperors of the feudal era. The term dragon in Chinese carries with it a lofty, highly respected image. So, the word dragon in English is not semantically equivalent to the word dragon in Chinese and a simple translation of the term cannot be expected to carry the intended meaning of the original text.

Suggested Translation: Huhe Shuangxing Quan (Tiger and Crane Double Fist) was passed on from Huang Feihong to Lin Shirong. The tiger patterns train energy and strength. The movements are steady and strong, accompanied by powerful shouts, just like flying dragons and leaping tigers (in Chinese culture, dragons symbolize royalty and respect while tigers symbolize bravery and strength; put together in this way, they celebrate vigorous and powerful action). The crane patterns train essence and spirit (cranes symbolize longevity and wisdom). The movements are agile, fast, yet calm and restful. The Tiger and Crane Double fist technique is an iconic representative of the Huang Feihong Style.

Amplifying the text in a way that provides information that the original author assumed would be inferred by the reader promotes cultural communication and accurate dissemination of the intended message in a way that simple translation of the original words does not.

## 4. Conclusion

In short, ecological translation scientifically intersects and organically integrates social ecology and translation studies. Building on the correlation, similarity, and isomorphism between translation ecology and natural ecology, translation ecology presents overall/relevance, dynamic/balance, and diversity/unity. The translator is always in a ternary relationship of source text, translator, and translation. Translators must actively manage the various potentials and constraints of the source text, the source language, the target language, and the translation, working to selectively transplant the translated text, clarifying the "what is translated," "how to translate," and "translation's purpose," so that the translation is accepted by readers, serves society, and adapts to the full ecology of the social, cultural, and linguistic environments of the both languages to achieve the ultimate goal of cultural exchange and communication. These are lofty goals which we believe apply to all types of translation. In a narrower focus, we hope this paper will be applied directly to Foshan Kung Fu cultural translations as a means of aiding Kung Fu enthusiasts as they seek to experience traditional Chinese culture and better understand the lifestyle of ordinary Chinese people, thus promoting deep and authentic cultural exchange.

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