

Research on English Translation of Silk Patterns under the Guidance of Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract: In the contemporary era, as global interactions continue to intensify, the significance of China's cultural outreach has become increasingly paramount. Chinese silk patterns constitute an integral facet of Chinese culture, and their translation serves as a crucial conduit for intercultural exchange. The explication of silk patterns typically encompasses profound connotations, distinctive stylistic elements, and an abundance of cultural imagery. Nevertheless, the current body of research on silk pattern translation remains somewhat inadequate. While research perspectives have diversified, there are still notable deficiencies in its advancement. This study, guided by the functional equivalence theory and informed by translation practice, endeavors to consolidate the principles and translation strategies that ought to be adhered to during the process of rendering Chinese silk patterns into English. By doing so, it aims to provide valuable insights for the English translation of Chinese silk patterns, thereby contributing to the dissemination of Chinese culture on the international stage.

Keywords: Chinese Silk Patterns, Functional Equivalence Theory, Translation Strategies.

1. Introduction

Silk, an ancient Chinese invention, has a history of over five millennia. Chinese ancestors skillfully used silkworms' threads to create beautiful brocades, incorporating printing and embroidery techniques to produce intricate patterns. These patterns, infused with auspicious symbolism, reflect the Chinese people's desire for a harmonious and prosperous life throughout history. They are a unique cultural expression that showcases China's rich heritage. Therefore, accurate translations of Chinese silk patterns are crucial in promoting Chinese culture globally. This research aims to examine translation methods for silk patterns, guided by functional equivalence theory, to facilitate the dissemination of Chinese culture.

2. A Literature Review of the Research on Silk Pattern Translation

In comparison to the translation of other pragmatic texts, the translation of silk patterns exhibits a distinctive ethnic character and cultural significance. Numerous scholars have embarked on explorations and reflections on the translation of these patterns from diverse theoretical perspectives. Previous research has predominantly concentrated on the English translation of traditional attire, primarily due to the specific terminologies associated with Chinese silk patterns. However, there has been a dearth of dedicated research specifically focused on the English translation of Chinese silk patterns. In current researches, the examination of silk pattern primarily revolves around renowned literary works, artifacts showcased in museums, and ethnic garments. Chen (2018) analyzed the content of clothing culture in Lin Yutang's English novel *Moment in Peking* through various translation methods, including literal translation, free translation, and transliteration. They provided specific examples from clothing, jewelry, accessories, and makeup. Zhang and Xu (2014) employed a comparative research method, comparing the translations of clothing colors, materials, and styles in *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Yang Xianyi and David

Hawkes. Lu and Feng (2019) conducted a systematic analysis of the English translation of ancient Chinese clothing in major museums in Beijing. They categorized the translation patterns of clothing names and put forward a formula for clothing translation. Wang (2012), in the context of globalization, utilized the German functionalist translation theory to empirically study the introduction of collections and their corresponding English translations in the China Silk Museum, proposing more effective translation methods. Zhang (2019) focused on a specific chapter from the book *Chinese Ethnic Costume Art - Manchu Volume* as an example to explore the application of semantic compensation in translating characteristic vocabulary from the perspective of translation compensation theory. This article will adopt the functional equivalence theory as a starting point, discuss the translation of silk patterns, analyze the strategies and principles to be followed for specific pattern translation issues based on practical experience, and provide novel insights for silk patterns translation.

3. The Introduction of Functional Equivalence Theory

In the 1960s, Eugene Nida introduced the concept of dynamic equivalence in his seminal work *Theory and Practice of Translation*. This approach involved comparing the responses of readers in the source language and the target language, with the aim of faithfully capturing the source language author's understanding and aesthetic sensibilities in the translated text (Nida, 1969). Subsequently, in the 1980s, Nida replaced dynamic equivalence with the concept of functional equivalence in his book *From One Language to Another*. According to Nida, translation entails reproducing the most closely corresponding natural equivalent in the target language, primarily in terms of meaning and secondarily in terms of style (Nida & Taber, 1969:12). In his work *Language and Culture: Contexts in Translating*, Nida proposed two levels of translation equivalence. The lower level, known as minimal equivalence, refers to the ability of the reader of the translation to envision how the original text reader would

comprehend and appreciate the source text. The higher level, referred to as maximal equivalence, denotes a level of understanding and appreciation of the translation by the reader that closely aligns with that of the original text reader. Nida considered maximal equivalence to be the ideal objective in translation, albeit challenging to attain in practice.

4. Case Analysis of Silk Pattern from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

4.1. Lexical Level

Lexical units serve as the fundamental building blocks of sentence construction. Translators are expected to possess a comprehensive comprehension and dissection of the lexical characteristics inherent in the source text, employing apt vocabulary and phrases to ensure that the resultant translation not only facilitates foreign readers' understanding of the intended meaning but also preserves the original expression unscathed. The intricate designs found in silk patterns often encapsulate profound cultural symbolism, serving as a testament to the diverse artistic styles and aesthetic principles prevalent throughout various historical epochs. Consequently, translators are tasked with employing meticulous strategies to ensure the attainment of cultural equivalence between the source language and the target language.

4.1.1. The Silk Patterns Adorned with Concrete Imagery

When the names of pattern designs in silk achieve a fundamental alignment between conceptual and associative meanings, the author often chooses to present the specific visual imagery of the patterns through a literal translation approach. This method aims to retain the conceptual significance of the patterns and effectively convey the cultural information embedded in the source text.

Example 1 方胜: Overlapping Diamonds

Example 2 宜男: Tawny Daylily

Example 3 天下乐: Lanterns Adorned with Tassels and Bees

The use of literal translation is a commonly employed strategy in the translation of silk patterns. In the aforementioned example, the translation faithfully conveys the original denotative and connotative meanings, while also achieving both formal and functional equivalence. However, it is important to note that the translation of “天下乐” may potentially cause confusion, as it does not depict a peaceful scene in the lives of ordinary people. Instead, “天下乐” refers to a distinctive Shu brocade pattern from the Song Dynasty, featuring lanterns adorned with tassels and bees, symbolizing the abundant harvest of the five grains, from which its name originates.

4.1.2. Silk Patterns Adorned with Chinese Characters

The patterns of silk fabric are characterized by their rich content, encompassing a particular type of textual pattern where words are directly incorporated as decorative elements. These patterns possess a distinctive artistic style that does not align with the corresponding style and imagery of the Chinese language expression. Employing a literal translation approach may result in incongruent information, impeding the comprehension of the pattern's intended meaning by the target language readers. To address this peculiarity of textual patterns, a free translation method that combines both semantic accuracy and vivid imagery is recommended, ensuring the precise conveyance of cultural information while

vividly portraying the specific visual representation of the pattern.

Example 4 雷纹: S-shaped Pattern

Example 5 王字纹: Wing-shaped Pattern

Example 6 回纹: Lozenge Pattern

The term “回纹” refers to a decorative pattern characterized by interlocking loops formed by intersecting short lines, resembling the Chinese character “回” (meaning “to return” or “to loop back”). Employing a literal translation or Transliteration would introduce comprehension difficulties, while the inclusion of annotations would result in excessively lengthy translations, compromising the aesthetic appeal of the sentence. Given that the visual representation of the “回纹” pattern resembles a diamond shape, the author has opted for an idiomatic translation, rendering it as the “lozenge pattern,” thereby achieving a functional equivalence in conveying the intended meaning.

4.2. Sentence Level

Syntactic equivalence pertains to the translation methods employed by translators when dealing with the structural aspects of language in a text, such as subject-verb agreement, clauses, tense, and singular/plural forms. The objective is to adjust sentence structures in accordance with the original text, ensuring both fidelity to the source and conformity to the conventions of the target language. The introduction of silk patterns not only necessitates the conveyance of information but also aims to captivate foreign language readers, engaging their interest. Consequently, translators should select different translation strategies, methods, and techniques based on the distinctive syntactic features involved.

4.2.1. The Translation of Sentences without subjects

In Chinese, sentences lacking a subject but featuring a verb-object structure are commonly referred to as subjectless sentences, frequently employed to describe actions, changes, and other circumstances. Conversely, English is a language that places significant emphasis on subjects, with sentence structures mandating the inclusion of all constituent elements. Therefore, when translating subjectless sentences from English to Chinese, translators should consider the disparities in syntactic structures between the two languages and employ appropriate translation methods to ensure both fidelity to the source and adherence to English expression.

Example 7: 法国吉美博物馆藏发现于敦煌的花卉对蝶团花绶, 其中的对蝶与辽宋对蝶佩形式相类, 却是晚唐至五代的物品。

The flower medallion ghatpot with paired butterflies found in Dunhuang was collected in Musée Guimet in France, which is similar to that in Liao and Song Dynasties, but it is an item from the late Tang Dynasty to the Five Dynasties.

Although subjectless sentences in Chinese lack an explicit subject and do not indicate the agent in a formal sense, the action and the recipient are often clear. Translators can convert the object of a subjectless sentence into the subject of a passive voice sentence in English, thereby rendering the subjectless sentence in Chinese into a passive structure in English. In the given example, the identity of the agent carrying out the action is not crucial; what matters is the information about the unearthed cultural relics. Therefore, in translation, it is necessary to transform the object in the original text into the subject. This approach highlights the information about the unearthed cultural relics in the translation, creating a clear hierarchical structure. Moreover,

the use of the passive voice aligns with the stylistic feature of objectively describing facts in the original text.

4.2.2. The Translation of Run-on Sentences

English sentences emphasize the subject-predicate mechanism, with the main clause serving as the trunk and other components often attaching to the subject-predicate structure through rich relational words, presenting a hierarchical tree-like structure. In contrast, Chinese sentence structures do not distinguish between main and subordinate clauses, and there are no explicit logical markers between different levels. In order to convey meaning, Chinese sentences often rely on verbs to gradually unfold the information in a sequential or logical order, layer by layer.

Example 8: 纹样整体为圆形团花的造型，从圆形的边缘发出两组形式相同的纹饰，向圆心回旋，从而在圆团状纹饰中虚拟出一条“S”形结构线，此线荡气回环地穿越圆心，将团花平分成两部分。

The pattern as a whole is the shape of flower medallion. Two groups of patterns with the same form are sent out from the edge of the circle and rotate to the center of the circle, so as to create an S-shaped structural line in the round patterns. This line passes through the center of the circle in a circle and divides the flowers into two parts.

When dealing with complex sentences, it is essential to adhere to Nida's Three-Step Translation System, which entails the sequential process of analysis, restructuring, and transformation to effectively carry out the translation task. Initially, the semantic and logical relationships between the subclauses in Chinese are carefully examined. Subsequently, the subclauses are reorganized using appropriate expressions that align with the target language. Finally, a concise sentence structure is generated, ensuring optimal readability and comprehension.

5. Conclusion

Chinese silk patterns boast a rich historical legacy and profound cultural significance, which has evolved and

deepened over time. Consequently, there is a pressing need to provide high-quality English translations of Chinese silk patterns to cater to foreign readers. Given this practical demand, the translation endeavors pertaining to silk-themed texts hold paramount importance in facilitating the exchange and dissemination of Chinese culture. Embracing a novel research perspective, the theory of functional equivalence emphasizes that translators should meticulously consider the linguistic attributes of the text and adeptly employ translation methods to enable target language readers to comprehend and appreciate the artistic essence of Chinese silk patterns.

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