

# Study on the TCM Products Descriptions Translation on Cross-border E-commerce Platforms

-- Taking alibaba as an example

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**Abstract:** In recent years, with the vigorous development of the international internet and cross-border logistics, the cross-border e-commerce industry has gained tremendous momentum in China. Traditional Chinese medicine products have also been venturing into foreign markets in large quantities through the cross-border e-commerce platforms. However, the author has noticed that the English copywriting for some traditional Chinese medicine products on cross-border e-commerce platforms is of uneven quality, which harms the overseas sales of these products. Therefore, this article analyzes the characteristics and text types of English copywriting for traditional Chinese medicine products on Alibaba and proposes some translation strategies in accordance with Newmark's text type theory. The author believes that for titles and efficacy descriptions, which have the characteristics of both informational and vocative texts, it is advisable to utilize the domestication translation strategy as possible as we can. However, given the unique roles of product titles and efficacy descriptions, there should be some differences in the translation process. Titles translation should prioritize the use of trending keywords, while translating efficacy descriptions should primarily rely on domestication and paraphrasing strategies.

**Keywords:** Traditional Chinese Medicine; Cross-border E-commerce Platforms; Text Types; Domestication Strategy; Free Translation.

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## 1. Introduction

With the deepening of economic globalization and the continuous improvement of China's international influence, the transmission of Chinese culture to the world is also rapidly developing, and traditional Chinese medicine is a typical example. In recent years, cross-border e-commerce economic platforms have continued to develop. For example, platforms such as Alibaba have grown into cross-border e-commerce platforms with a large number of overseas users. More and more traditional Chinese medicine products are using cross-border e-commerce platforms such as Alibaba to go abroad and are embraced by the rest of the world.

Today's cross-border e-commerce industry competition is in full swing, with numerous enterprises striving to seize market share and compete for advantages. In addition to competition based on company strength, there is also competition in product copywriting among cross-border e-commerce companies. If product copywriting is translated well, it is like having a key to opening up the door of the foreign market. Therefore, if Chinese traditional medicine companies want to take advantage of Alibaba to sell their products around the world, they must attach great importance to the product copywriting translation on this platform.

This article aims to explore how to optimize the translation of traditional Chinese medicine product copywriting on cross-border e-commerce platforms, enhance its attractiveness, and thereby improve product exposure and conversion rates.

## 2. Characteristics and Deficiencies of Alibaba's Chinese Medicine Product Copywriting

The author randomly collected English copywritings for 100 traditional Chinese medicines from multiple suppliers on Alibaba and conducted an analysis, discovering distinctive features in the translation of the titles and efficacy descriptions of these Chinese medicine products.

Firstly, the English copywriting of Chinese medicine product titles on Alibaba shows evident characteristics of standardization. Product titles and main images on e-commerce platforms serve as the facade of the products, significantly impacting their exposure. In addition, the content of titles plays a crucial role in the product's search ranking (in addition to being influenced by factors such as whether Alibaba's paid products like "Foreign Trade Express" are purchased).

Through consultations with Alibaba staff, the author learned that English titles for products on the platform must adhere to certain rules for better exposure effects. For instance, the number of words in the title must be limited to 60 or fewer. It is also recommended to use Alibaba's keyword tool, selecting the most commonly searched keywords by buyers, emphasizing the core selling points of the product and highlighting its advantages. Therefore, there is a high degree of homogenization in the content of English titles for Chinese medicine products, and most of them are correct grammatically.

Next, let's turn to the characteristics of efficacy descriptions for Alibaba's Chinese medicine products.

The content and wording of Chinese medicine efficacy have the following features:

a. Emphasizing the natural and organic nature of Chinese medicinal herbs. In the English copywriting, there is often an emphasis on the herbs coming from nature, simultaneously highlighting that no chemical additives are used in the herbs, using terms like "natural taste and flavor", "wild", and other phrases.

b. Highlighting the therapeutic effects of Chinese medicinal herbs. In English copywriting, there is an emphasis on the therapeutic effects and outcomes of Chinese medicinal herbs for various diseases, such as hypertension, diabetes, cancers, etc. Phrases like "anti-cancer" and "lower blood sugar and cholesterol" are commonly used in efficacy descriptions.

c. Emphasizing the health-promoting effects of Chinese medicinal herbs. In English copywriting, besides emphasizing the therapeutic effects, there is a focus on the health-promoting effects of Chinese medicinal herbs, such as enhancing immunity, slowing aging, improving sleep, etc. Phrases like "improve the immune system" and "anti-aging" are frequently used.

d. Emphasizing the safety and effectiveness of Chinese medicinal herbs. In efficacy English copywriting, there is an emphasis on the safety and effectiveness of Chinese medicinal herbs, ensuring efficacy and quality through strict screening and quality control. Terms like "high quality" and "top quality" are commonly used.

e. Highlighting the cultural characteristics of Chinese medicinal herbs. In English copywriting, there is an emphasis on the cultural characteristics and historical origins of Chinese medicinal herbs, supporting the efficacy and effects of the herbs by referencing ancient medical books and traditional Chinese medical theories.

### 3. Translation Strategies

Renowned British translator and translation theorist Peter Newmark classifies text types into expressive text, informative text, and vocative text and ect.. However, he also pointed out that most texts have two or more functions, and translators should use corresponding translation methods based on the specific functions of the text (Newmark, 2001).

Whether translating Chinese medicine product titles or efficacy, it is essential to accurately convey information while serving a "persuasive" function. Specifically, on cross-border e-commerce platforms, the goal is to evoke customers' desire to make a purchase. Therefore, when translating Chinese medicine product copywritings, we should not only consider transmit the "authentic" traditional Chinese medicine culture abroad as this may cause difficulties for foreign customers to understand the information of the products. Instead, the emphasis should be on using domestication translation strategies, localizing the efficacy of Chinese medicine, targeting English-speaking customers, and employing expressions familiar to English-speaking customers to convey the content of the original texts. This not only does not diminish the content of the original text but also comprehensively conveys the efficacy of Chinese medicine to foreign customers from the rest of the world.

Through analysis, the author believes that Chinese medicine product copywritings on cross-border e-commerce platforms serves both informative and vocative functions. In some cases, the persuasive function may outweigh the informative function, such as in title copywriting. The product title on a cross-border e-commerce platform, like a book cover, needs to attract the attention of readers, encouraging them to

open the book and learn more. Similarly, product titles need to capture customers' attention, enticing them to click on the product item, learn more about it and finally buy it. A good product title should be concise, highlighting product features, attracting attention, and enabling customers to quickly understand the product. In other cases, the informative function may outweigh the vocative function, such as in product efficacy description. If the optimal effect of title copywriting is to catch customers' eyes, the best expectation for product efficacy copywriting is to persuade customers and prompt them to make an immediate purchase.

In summary, the title is the signboard, seeking simplicity to attract attention and used to draw in customers, while efficacy copywriting is the content, aiming for richness and specificity to retain customers. Both are essential to increasing order conversion rates. Therefore, in practical implementation, the translation strategies for title and efficacy copywriting should differ accordingly.

#### 3.1. Translation Strategies for Alibaba Chinese Medicine Titles

High professionalism and visually appealing main images that align with consumer aesthetics are more likely to attract the attention of potential customers, increasing click-through rates. Translations of product titles that are both scientific and searchable play a crucial role in the exposure, click-through rates, ranking, and order conversion rates of the products (Yang Ni, 2020). Although the titles are visibly standardized, optimization can be achieved by ensuring the format meets platform requirements and optimizing the selection of keywords.

Product keywords are not fixed and may change with market trends and consumer preferences (Yang Ni, 2020). Therefore, practitioners in the field of cross-border e-commerce for Chinese medicine should regularly monitor keyword changes in the foreign Chinese medicine domain. This can be done through Google Trends, searching for the popularity of keywords already in use or those intended for use in various countries and regions, or by monitoring the keyword statistics module in the Alibaba national station merchant backend. Additionally, paying attention to Chinese medicine-related terms on social platforms like Facebook and Instagram is essential.

Let's consider an example. There are two translation versions for "Luo Han Guo" (a traditional Chinese medicine): one is "Siraitia grosvenorii", a Latin name, and the other is "Luo Han Gu" in Chinese pinyin. When deciding which version to use, we can refer to global big data. Using a website called Google Trends, we can compare the global search popularity of the two names for "Luo Han Guo". Within three months, the term "Siraitia grosvenorii" has a search popularity ranging from 0 to 100 globally, while the term "Luo Han Guo" has too low a popularity, displaying "Not enough related data to display here" (Data collection period: July 24, 2023, to October 20, 2023). From above, we can see that the Latin name, "Siraitia grosvenorii" is more familiar and better understood by most foreigners than "Luo Han Guo". Therefore, when translating the product title for the very traditional Chinese medicine, we may consider using the term "Siraitia grosvenorii".

Through these methods, we can constantly monitor popular topics and terms related to traditional Chinese medicine worldwide. By selecting keywords in the titles strategically, we can cater to customer preferences, increasing the product's

searchability and exposure.

### 3.2. Translation Strategies for Chinese Medicine Efficacy on Alibaba

Alibaba is a shopping platform, and all product copywritings can be broadly categorized as vocative texts since they aim at persuading customers to purchase products. Since it is vocative text, translators should adopt a domestication strategy, focusing on the reader (customer) at all times by using the language and expressions familiar to the reader for the most relaxed reading experience, allowing them to grasp product information in the shortest time amid the vast sea of product descriptions.

### 3.3. Use of Domestication Strategy or Referring to Western Medicine Descriptions

Although traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and Western medicine belong to different medical systems, the basic structure of the human body is the same, and the majority of symptoms are similar. Therefore, many terms used in TCM can be found directly corresponding to Western medicine terms. In such cases, we can directly borrow vocabulary from Western medicine (Li Zhaoguo, Zhu Zhongbao, 2002). For example, the translation of "推拿" (tuina). It was initially translated as "massage" (a broad term for massage). Due to some societal and cultural factors (such as illegal activities in some entertainment venues under the disguise of "massage"), people started feeling negative evaluation with the term "massage". As a result, the Chinese term "推拿" was phonetically translated as "tuina" or "tuina therapy". However, massage and "tuina" are essentially the same therapies, both applying manual therapy on the human body to achieve health and disease treatment. It's just that different countries use different auxiliary products or techniques when conducting the treatment. As the functionality of Chinese medicine efficacy on e-commerce platforms is primarily for customers' understanding and the secondary function is to spread Chinese culture, when translating a certain Chinese medicine for use in massage, the author suggests translating it as "applied in massage" rather than "applied in Tuina".

In addition, although some terminology in the translation of TCM dietary therapy has gradually become standardized, such as the common translation for "补气安神" (invigorate qi for tranquilization) (Huang Liqin, 2019), in the author's view, the choice of translation depends on the specific context. For example, in a fast-paced cross-border shopping platform like Alibaba, product copywriting should use language expressions familiar to potential customers, allowing them to understand it at a glance without having to leave the platform to search for necessary information. The author believes that "补气安神" can be translated into simple English by using common words like "improve your immunity and relax your mind".

### 3.4. Use of Paraphrasing and Avoiding Transliteration in Efficacy Copywriting

The efficacy description of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) products serves as the online version of a medication manual. For such texts, an appropriate translation method is paraphrasing, especially considering the significance of life and health. The slogan of "respecting traditional Chinese medicine culture" should be temporarily set aside, and

customer-centricity, with understanding as the measure, should take precedence (Ni Yuran, Tianmiao, and so on, 2018). From the perspective of understanding, transliterated terms may cause unclear meanings, requiring context or other means for further interpretation. Additionally, they may not conform to the grammar rules and rules of set-phrases of the target language, leading to comprehension difficulties. Cross-border e-commerce platforms, being efficient online shopping platforms, tend to help customers to quickly grasp product information to avoid eroding their patience and losing them.

Especially for some Chinese-specific terms, although they may be common in domestic or international traditional Chinese medicine circles to some degree, they may not have widely circulated abroad. When translating the efficacy of Chinese medicine on cross-border e-commerce platforms, such terms should be directly abandoned, and a paraphrasing strategy should be adopted. For example, the term "kidney qi," as shown on Google Trends for three months (from September 19, 2023, to October 15, 2023), had zero search popularity for half of the time globally. This indicates that the term is not widely accepted globally. Let's look at a specific example: the efficacy of "补肾壮腰丸" (pills for tonifying kidney and strengthening waist) is translated as "used for soreness and pain of the limbs that caused by the deficiency of kidney qi, impairment and deficiency of the kidney qi." Here, "肾气" is translated as "kidney qi," and "肾气虚证" is translated as "deficiency of kidney qi". From the perspective of transmitting traditional Chinese medicine culture, this translation is indeed good. However, on a cross-border e-commerce platform, the author believes that such transliteration may cause difficulties of understanding for customers with little knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine. In fact, "肾气不足, 机能减弱所引起" can be broadly translated as "caused by decreased renal function".

Of course, some transliterated Chinese-specific terms can be used judiciously if they have been widely disseminated abroad. This not only avoids customer comprehension difficulties but also adds a touch of Chinese color. For example, the term "yin and yang" appeared in Season 2, Episode 12 of the popular Western TV series "Shameless"—"She is the yin to my yang." From Google Trends, we can see that in the past 30 days (from September 18, 2023, to October 14, 2023), the search popularity of "yin yang" is very high, above 80.

Certainly, the use of terms evolves with time, and the popularity of terms is constantly changing. As traditional Chinese medicine continues to spread globally and the well-knownness of Chinese medicine culture enhances abroad, more vocabulary of Chinese characteristics will gradually become popular. We should always pay attention to the popularity and trends of traditional Chinese medical terms. When the day comes that terms like "肾气" (kidney qi) become as deeply ingrained in foreign cultures as "yin yang" and "fengshui," we can confidently using them in the translation of Chinese medicine copywriting on cross-border e-commerce platforms.

### 3.5. Simplify Grammar, Use Short Sentences, and Opt for Small Paragraphs

Alibaba's buyers come from all around the world, with varying levels of English proficiency. Especially for customers from some Latin American countries, their

acquisition rate of English is not high. Therefore, when translating the efficacy of Chinese medicine products, we should avoid lengthy explanations and minimize the use of complex grammar. If the content exceeds four lines, it should be divided into small paragraphs based on internal logic. This approach reduces the reading burden for potential customers, helps them quickly obtain the product information, lowers the dropout rate, and increases the conversion rate for purchases.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, due to the dual nature of Chinese medicine product copywriting, encompassing both informative and vocative text function, the author recommends adopting domestication strategies for translation. Differentiating between product titles and efficacy copywriting is crucial, as this approach attracts and retains customers, ultimately increasing the purchase conversion rate. Nevertheless, considering the vastness and depth of traditional Chinese medicine culture, the author acknowledges the limitations of

this study and hopes for more detailed and targeted guidance for practitioners in the field of Chinese medicine in cross-border e-commerce.

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