

# Study on the Promotion of Traditional Chinese Architecture: a Translator's Perspective

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**Abstract**—Traditional Chinese architecture is an indispensable part of human civilization, and it is also culturally specific. To make it known to people around the world, applicable strategies to convey its messages should be explored. This paper, after a review of relevant translation theories, i.e. Newmark's Typology and Vermeer's Skopostheorie, holds that the messages of traditional Chinese architecture notions are of informative type and its purpose is to introduce and promote Chinese architecture aesthetics. Accordingly, translators or speakers are hoped to try every means to convey Chinese architecture notions clearly and accurately. The paper further discusses some defects or inappropriateness in this area, pointing out that the English version for one same Chinese notion should be consistent in at least one discourse or chapter so as not to confuse or puzzle foreign professionals or visitors. Finally, effective strategies are introduced, especially two new strategies, ideograms and illustrations, are recommended for highly cultural-specific notions.

**Keywords**—traditional Chinese architecture; notions; convey; defects; strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the unfolding of the strategic “Belt and Road” initiative, more and more Chinese building companies go abroad and their construction projects get well underway in many countries along the Silk Road. People in these countries enthusiastically embrace these projects. Meantime, an increasing number of foreigners become interested in China and Chinese people. When they come to China for sightseeing, they are fascinated with the charm and exotic features of classical Chinese buildings such as that in the private gardens south of the Yangtze River and the tranquility pervasive in the ancient temples. Study on how to convey the beauty of these buildings to foreigners and promote Chinese architecture aesthetic notions to the outside world, in this sense, is of great importance.

On the other hand, some professionals in the field of architecture are not competent enough in introducing or elaborating Chinese architecture notions. [1] There exist some defects or inappropriateness in conveying Chinese architecture elements to their foreign counterparts or ordinary visitors, as in the comment “a few vague and dry paragraphs”, [2] given by Eric Nilsson, a correspondent of China Daily, on online English information about Dongyue temple in Beijing. Therefore, it is all the more important to study how to accurately and sufficiently convey the notions of traditional Chinese architecture to people around the world.

In view of the above situation, this paper is dedicated to analysis of traditional Chinese architecture notions and the corresponding strategies in the conveyance of these concepts by first examining relevant translation theories.

## II. INSIGHT FROM TRANSLATION THEORIES

Based on an in-depth understanding of Chinese architecture and contemporary translation studies, it is found that the text types proposed by Peter Newmark and the Skopostheorie proposed by the German Functionalist School are applicable in this field.

### A. Peter Newmark's Typology

Peter Newmark is a distinguished translation theorist. Based on language functions, he grouped all messages into 3 categories as shown in “Fig. 1”:

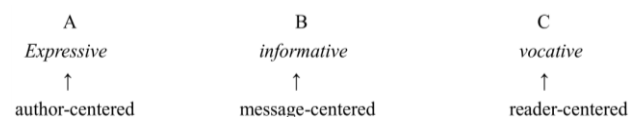


Fig. 1. Peter Newmark's model.

According to Peter Newmark, the core of the expressive function of message is the mind of the speaker, the originator of the utterance. The core of the informative function of

message is the facts of a topic, reality or truth outside of language. The core of the vocative function of message is the reader, or the addressee. [3] Accordingly, he assigned to Type A the texts such as serious imaginative literature, authoritative/official statements (declarations, political speeches, etc.), personal or intimate writings, etc. To Type B, he assigned texts such as journalism, reports, scientific and technical papers, most non-literary texts where messages are more important than the style. To Type C, he assigned popular literature such as best sellers, propaganda (publicity) and those aims to persuade the reader such as advertisements. So type C is seductive and stimulative by nature.

Obviously, type A is author-centered, trying to convey the author's feelings or intention, type B is facts-centered, or information/message-centered. It emphasizes the conveyance of information or message, while type C tries to evoke kind of feelings in their audiences or readers in order to realize its intended functions. Type C is reader-centered.

In the case of promoting traditional Chinese architecture, it certainly involves introducing Chinese architectural notions including building principles, elements, techniques, and Chinese aesthetic orientation. These notions first of all are used to convey information to foreign professionals or ordinary visitors. Therefore, they are informative type. Speakers or translators have to focus on the conveyance of Chinese architectural information, offering accurate and adequate information to people from other countries. To some extent, they are also vocative type because it is hoped that the introduction or descriptions of Chinese architectural notions will appeal to foreign counterparts or visitors who will in turn gain an in-depth understanding of Chinese architecture and further appreciate and love it.

### B. Skopostheorie

"Skopostheorie", also known as "the translation purpose justifies the translation procedures" or "the end justifies the means" [4] (Nord, 2001: 124), was first put forward by German Hans J. Vermeer. He considers translation to be a type of transfer where communicative verbal and nonverbal signs are transferred from one language into another. According to Vermeer, any human action has its purpose. Since any translating can be conceived as a human action, it should have its own aim or purpose (skopos). The theory stresses the interactional, pragmatic aspects of translation, arguing that the shape of translated text should above all be determined by the function or "skopos" (purpose) that it is intended to fulfill in the target context. That is to say, translation strategies and methods are determined by the purpose and the intended function of the signs in the target context. The prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (skopos) of the overall translation action.

Apart from the Skopos rule, the German Functionalist School also puts forward two other rules: the coherence rule and fidelity rule, as complement. Coherence rule means that the target text must be translated in such a way that it is coherent for the target text receivers. Fidelity rule means there must be an inter-textual coherence between the source

texts and target texts. However, the degree and form of the fidelity depend on the aim of the target texts and the translator's comprehension of the source texts. Within the framework of Skopostheorie, the skopos rule is the primary rule for any translation, and the other rules; the coherence rule and fidelity rule, are subordinate to the skopos rule.

In terms of promoting traditional Chinese architecture, the No.1 purpose (the skopos) of course is to publicize and spread Chinese notions and ideas to people around the world in the field of architecture. Therefore, all the introductions or descriptions will have to serve this purpose. In the course of communicating with foreign counterparts or visitors, it's desirable to try every means to get our messages across. Skopostheorie gives us a new perspective to decide which strategy or method will be used in the process of exchange and communication. Our task is to ascertain and then apply the suitable strategies or method to fulfill this purpose.

Nevertheless, there are some defects or inappropriateness with professionals or scholars in conveying Chinese architecture ideas or notions. These defects may get foreigners quite confused or much puzzled with the information they received. And this is not a situation that we hope to see. In the following section, some problems will be discussed and accordingly, applicable strategies or solutions will be suggested.

### III. DEFECTS IN INTRODUCING TRADITIONAL CHINESE ARCHITECTURAL NOTIONS

The architecture of China is as old as Chinese civilization. Over the long period of development, Chinese architecture basically falls into 3 categories based on the general use of the group structures, such as whether they were built for royals, commoners, or the religious.

Those built for royals means the buildings used by emperors and royal families. They usually share special features solely for emperors or their families, to generate an image of imposing magnificence and the absolute authority of the emperors. One of the building principles is to demonstrate the idea of the "divine power" since all the Chinese emperors declare that they are "天子". Unfortunately, there exist defects in elaborating this Chinese notion, as in the following description [5]:

- "The King of Zhou (dynasty), claiming to be the son of Heaven, made the first offer to Heaven 3,000 years ago..."
- "In ancient China, an emperor called himself 'the son of god'. He was so respectful to god that he..."

Attentions should be paid to the fact that in the above description, two versions ("the son of Heaven" and "the son of god") are used for one Chinese term "天子". Likewise, two versions ("Heaven" and "god") are used to indicate one Chinese notion "天". This will definitely confuse foreigners and of course, not in line with the Coherence rule of Skopostheorie: the target version should be coherent for the target language receivers (readers). In addition, attentions should also be paid to the fact that God is typically the most

supreme for westerners, but not for Chinese. In western culture, there is the so-called “Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”. It is widely accepted that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. While Chinese people traditionally take Heaven as the most supreme in their lives. It is pretty weird to foreigners that the Chinese notions “天子” and “天” are interpreted as “the son of god” and “god” respectively. In view of these two facts, it is advisable to interpret the two Chinese terms as “the son of Heaven” and “Heaven” respectively, thus in line with the Coherence rule of Skopostheorie and also with the inheritance of cultural gene.

Temple buildings and the buildings in private gardens south of the Yangtze River are the other two sub-divisions of traditional Chinese architecture. And they are also the two types that foreigners are most interested in. The Chinese belief of “天人合一” serves typically as the design and construction guidelines for these two-category Chinese architecture. In the same book as the case above, this Chinese notion “天人合一” are given three versions: “unity of Heaven and man”, “unity of nature and man” (to introduce the leading principle for private gardens), “harmony of man and nature” (to introduce the layout of the Temple of Heaven). These three different versions are used for one same notion within one chapter. So once again, the English versions will confuse foreigners. It's well known that within the frame of Chinese culture, “天” in the notion “天人合一” refers to nature, not heaven. So it's not appropriate to use the version “unity of Heaven and man”. Another point must be emphasized here is that the word order in the “of structure” with the English versions also varies: “unity of nature and man” and “harmony of man and nature”, creating kind of confusion on the part of foreigners. To give readers or audiences a clear and accurate understanding of the Chinese notion “天人合一”, it is advisable to render the notion as “unity of man and nature”, with “man” being put before “nature”. In accordance with the Coherence rule of Skopostheorie, the suggested version “unity of man and nature” should be used consistently within one discourse or chapter, with no variations creating misunderstanding on foreigners.

There are of course defects with descriptions of other Chinese architecture elements. A case at issue is the version for “三层坛制” and “坛为三层” when it comes to the description of the marble base of the two main buildings in the Temple of Heaven, one of the iconic buildings in Beijing.

- The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests (祈年殿) is a magnificent triple-gabled Circular building ... built on three levels of marble stone base...
- The Circular Mound Altar (圜丘坛) ...is an empty circular platform on three levels of marble stones

In the above two descriptions, the version “three levels of marble stone base” is not good enough to give readers or audiences a clear idea of the stone base for the two main buildings inside the Temple of Heaven. Also it is not language economical. To achieve clarity and accuracy of the information, it'd better be expressed as “three-tiered marble base” or “three-terraced marble base”. Such a version is not

only concise and clear, but also conforms to native speakers' language habits.

Another example of inappropriateness is the English version for “牌楼” or “牌坊”, a pretty important component of Chinese architecture. In Chinese, these two terms are interchangeable, generally referring to a particular structure standing either isolated or in front of a group of buildings. However, it has two English equivalents (“gateway” and “archway”) based on its shape. This building component is on many occasions expressed exclusively as “archway” regardless of its shape and structure, while the actual “牌楼” in fact is a “gateway”, and vice versa on other occasions.

Of course there exist other defects or inappropriateness with the English versions to promote traditional Chinese architecture. Considering the limited length of this paper, other defects are no longer discussed here. Well, how to overcome these defects or inappropriateness? It will be explored in Section IV.

#### IV. STRATEGIES TO CONVEY AND PROMOTE TRADITIONAL CHINESE ARCHITECTURAL NOTIONS

As has discussed in Section III, the nature of promoting Chinese architectural notions is to provide and convey related information. Speakers or translators have to focus on the conveyance of message, offering accurate and adequate information to people from other countries. In light of Skopostheorie, all the efforts will have to serve the purpose: to convey the relevant message of traditional Chinese architecture. No matter it is for translators or for speakers, their primary objective will be to try every means to get messages across to foreign counterparts or visitors.

##### A. Finding and Using the Correspondence to Replace the Source Message in the Target Language

Most people, no matter it be expert or ordinary language learner, believe there is a degree of correspondence between languages. Correspondences are in fact instances of source language and target language matching. The Correspondence relationship does exist between English and Chinese. Basically there are four types of Correspondence: one-to-one, one-to-two/more, one-to-part, and one-to-none. Translators or speakers can find the right expressions based on the correspondence relationship in the two languages.

In terms of one-to-one correspondence, the words or notions have relatively fixed senses in a given field. They are usually context-free and produce only one meaning. For example: 横梁 — beam; 屋顶 — roof; 围墙 — wall; 窗户 — window; 花畦 — flower bed; etc. Many of this type correspondence typically exist in modern architecture design and construction. Translators or speakers need only to find and to establish correspondence between the two languages. That makes things a lot easier, but not quite typically with classical Chinese buildings.

Another type of correspondence is one-to-two/more. There are also terms or words in almost every language which have more than one meaning in one field, as well as in two or more fields. Consequently they have more than one

correspondence in another language. When it comes to architecture, examples at hand include 柱子 — pillar, column, or post; 走廊 — corridor, passage, passageway, arcade, cloister; 门 — door, gate, entrance; 骑楼 — arcade, sotto portico; 塔 — pagoda, tower; 寺庙 — temple, mosque, and monastery; 假山 — artificial hill, artificial mountain; etc. When it comes to this type of Chinese architectural elements or notions, special care should be given to identify the exact correspondence and ascertain the right expression applicable.

A third type of Correspondence is one-to-part, also referred as partial correspondence. Nida (1964) once pointed out “There can be no absolute correspondence between languages.” So a classical Chinese architecture term sometimes can only find a partial correspondence in English, for example, 瓦 — tile; 砖 — brick; 藻井 — caisson; 楼阁 — attic and etc. The translator or speaker then has to compromise, using the partial corresponding word or term to replace the original message in the target language.

To summarize, for the above 3 types of correspondence between two languages, translators' task is to find out and identify the correspondence, and then express the source message or terms by their correspondence in the target language. Generally, it is an easier job for translators in the case of one-to-one type, more challenging in the case of one-to-two/more. While in the case of one-to-part, translators have to compromise, only conveying partly the sense of the source message.

Then what is left is type 4: one-to-none. This is more typical for translating or conveying classical Chinese architectural elements or notions. The above strategy “finding relevant correspondence” is not applicable. New strategies have to be explored.

#### B. Creating Visual Pictures by Way of Ideograms and Illustrations

As is analyzed in the above, correspondence type 4 is one-to-none. That means there is no corresponding word or term in the target language to match a notion or term in the source language, since there doesn't exist such a thing or notion in the target culture. It's new to target language readers or audiences. On such occasions, translators or speakers have to creatively re-produce the source message. Two strategies are recommended:

1) *Using ideograms to convey the source notions:* Ideograms such as “U-shaped (structure)” or “I-shaped (beam)” are commonly used today in technical fields because they are a concise way to communicate a concept to people who speak different languages. Ideograms can transcend languages and make source notions vivid and much easier to understand. Therefore translators and speakers are encouraged to create more ideograms to convey classical Chinese architectural concepts and notions when they are new in the target culture. For example, “fan-shaped window” is used for “扇面空窗” in Humble Administrator's Garden [6], Suzhou; “moon-shaped door” is used for “月亮门”. In the same way, “花瓶门洞”, “海棠花门洞” and “葫芦形门

洞” can be expressed as “vase-shaped door”, “crabapple-shaped door” and “calabash-shaped door” respectively. Likewise, variations for Chinese architectural element “廊”, as the “沿墙廊”, “涉水廊” and “波形廊” can be expressed as “along-the-wall corridor”, “cross-water corridor” and “waveform corridor” respectively. The Chinese “曲桥” and “拱桥” can be rendered as “zigzag bridge” and “arch bridge”. Other expressions like “cone-shaped structures”, “three-tiered flying eaves”, “pavilion-bridge”, “pavilion-like pagodas”, “tiled or thatched roofs” and “honeycombed shrines” vividly depict classical Chinese building elements.

2) *Conveying source Chinese notions by way of illustrations:* For some Chinese cultural-specific architectural elements, speakers and translator need not only to find in the target language a similar general word or term, but also need to provide a sketch, or a picture of the outline or composition of the given Chinese building component, to give a reality-like description of the building element. For example, classical Chinese architecture roofing has basically 6 styles: 硬山式, 悬山式, 庑殿式, 歇山式, 卷棚式 and 攒尖式. There are no equivalents in English or in English cultures for these roofing styles. To transfer the exact Chinese notions and to give accurate representation of Chinese architectural images, practically similar English terms as “hard gable style roof”, “suspended gable style roof”, “hip roof”, “hip and gable roof”, “round-ridge roof”, and “pavilion roof” are given respectively, along with the corresponding sketch or picture to illustrate the exact Chinese roofing styles. Another typically Chinese architecture element is 华表, the marble ornamental pillar engraved with entwisting dragons and auspicious clouds. It's often erected in front of a magnificent building or at the entrance of a square. To give foreign readers or audiences a clear idea of What Chinese 华表 is, a transliteration “Huabiao” is recommended to use, accompanying by a picture of the physical building ornament.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Traditional Chinese architecture, no matter it is the magnificent grand imperial buildings, or it is the tranquilly solemn temple buildings, or the building elements in the poetic private gardens south of the Yangtze River, demonstrates amazingly charm and beauty to the world, conveying the aesthetic pursuit of Chinese people. With the implementation of the “Belt and Road” initiative, more and more foreigners come to China and have developed an increasing interest in these classical buildings, especially in the temple buildings and the elegant private gardens. When communicating with foreign professionals in this field or visitors, translators or speakers are expected to choose flexibly from the strategies recommended above and identify the most applicable strategy to depict classical Chinese architecture notions and the untold beauty exhibited in Chinese buildings.



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