

Review and Insight on English Translation of Chinese Medical Classics *Shang Han Lun*

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Abstract: The English edition of classics of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is a vital carrier of disseminating traditional Chinese medicine culture. This article summarizes the difficulties and problems with respect to the English translation of *Shang Han Lun* by reviewing its translation history and by analyzing different translation editions, and holds that the difficulties are caused by unique linguistic characteristics of *Shang Han Lun*, lack of standardization in TCM terms and vacant counterpart of culture-loaded words in the target language, the problems arising from frequently used western medicine terms and the translator's subjectivity. The authors holds the idea that considerable attention should be paid to translators' knowledge of TCM and normalization of TCM terms for the sake of accurately understanding and elucidating the medical culture in *Shang Han Lun*.

1. Introduction

The translation of ancient Chinese medical literature can be dated back to the publishing of the English edition of *A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-tartar, Together with the Kingdoms of Korea, and Tibet: Containing the Geography and History (natural as well as civil) of those Countries* in the mid of 18th century. In 1735, a French edition of *Shang Han Lun* compiled by Jean Baptiste Du Halde published in France, which was known as one of the three greatest masterpieces of Chinese studies in Europe in the 18th century, also a vital document for Europeans to understand China and monumental book for Europeans to learn TCM. While in 1738, the publisher Cave translated it into English, known as Cave's edition, in which four categories about TCM are contained: pulse-taking, herbal medicine, prescriptions and hygiene, and these four parts include three TCM classics of *Maijue (A Pithy formula of Pulse-taking)* by Gao Yangsheng, *Compendium of Materia Medica* by Li Shizhen and a life preservation work of Taoist by an unknown author. Additionally, the above three parts in this book are the earliest records on the English translation of TCM.

2. Reviewing of English Translation of *Shang Han Lun*

Since the publication of the first English edition of *Shang Han Lun* in the 1980th, over 30 years has passed by, with 11 more translation editions coming out. Based on the general process from brief translation of the original work to disseminate basic knowledge of TCM and to spread the TCM culture, the translation of it from Chinese to English can be summarized into the following three phases [1]:

The first phase is from 1981 to 1991. During this period, normalization of TCM terms had not been set up, nor did the selection of translation terms and policies reach a consensus. Taking the translation of the title of *Shang Han Lun* as an example, four translation editions have three different ways of translation: *Shang Han Lun*, *Exogenous Febrile Disease*, *Treatise on Febrile Diseases Caused by Cold*. Additionally, four editions are translated by Hongyen Hsu, Luo Xiwen, Dean C. Epler and JR as well as the Paul Lins. During this time span, the frequently-adopted translation policies were literal translation and reader-oriented domestic translation [3] together with brief translation due to the fact that TCM is in peripheral state in the target language and even merely known in target countries, and the fact that factors such as proficiency of translation set

limitation for translation. English literature of *Shang Han Lun* played a key role to let people in the western country know Chinese medical culture, and to spread the basic idea of TCM.

The second phase is from 1992 to 2007. Several programs concerning standardization of TCM terminology and of TCM translation from Chinese to English were initiated and gained primary success. WHO Western Pacific Regional Office issued *WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Medicine in the Western Pacific Region*, and World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies issued *International Standard Chinese-English Basic Nomenclature of Chinese Medicine*. Four translation editions published during this phase, translated by Luo Xiwen in 1993, Luo Xiwen in 2007, Nigel Wiseman and Huang Hai respectively. On the basis of literal translation, methods such as free translation, transliteration and paraphrasing were employed. Nevertheless, foreignizing translation with source-language orientation [2] was the most frequently adopted policy. These translations focus on original text and are generally complete translation with the main function of highlighting their medical value. Additionally, bilingual layout was initially adopted during this period.

The third phase is from 2008 up to the present day. The translation of *Shang Han Lun* from Chinese to English had become even more mature along with the establishment of standard Chinese-English basic nomenclature of Chinese medicine. Fundamental English publication were editions translated by Greta Young Jie De, Liu Guohui, and Luo Xiwen (2016). The translation policy adopted is mostly clinic-oriented [2]. Furthermore, accompanied with refinement in translation proficiency, initial attention is paid to culture and connotation interpretation on the basis of conveying meaning of the original text.

3. Difficulties and Problems with Respect to the Translation of *Shang Han Lun*

On the ground of characteristics of disparate English editions mentioned above, the difficulties and challenges encountering during translating *Shang Han Lun* could be proposed as follows.

3.1 Difficulties in Translating *Shang Han Lun*

1) **Unique linguistic characteristics in *Shang Han Lun*:** obscure but succinct in the use of words. It fully demonstrates literariness, abstractness and fuzziness of ancient Chinese culture, applying a great deal of rhetorical devices and abstract concepts and terms, meanwhile, it has its own distinct feature. The renowned master on *Shang Han Lun*, Chen Yiren, summarizes in his work *Practical Treatise on Febrile Diseases* that *Shang Han Lun* has five features [3], aka, variation, differentiation, strictness, flexibility and simplicity. More concretely, variation means that attention is focused on variations of diseases rather than normal cases in *Shang Han Lun*, namely, to reveal the rule and method to diagnose a disease through discussion of atypical and suspected complex symptoms. Differentiation refers to the application of pattern differentiation and treatment throughout the process, during which both the differentiation of the location, condition and nature of a certain kind of disease, and the differentiation of simple or complex suspected symptoms are required. Strictness stands for accurateness in drug use and preciseness in medicine compatibility. Flexibility stands for specific analysis of specific issues, and means that treating clinical cases with gloves and altering treating principles once changes occur. Simplicity means that the language is succinct but not that easy to understand, i.e, the language is obscure and deep. When translating, its unique linguistic characteristic is always a great challenge for translators. Normally, in the original text, some items are purely kinds of pulse manifestations or else symptoms, subsequently, when translating, the addition of implicit or omitted message is needed so as to correctly convey the meaning of the source text, otherwise readers will be baffled, which requires translators with sufficient knowledge of basics of TCM and comprehensive ability.

2) **Lack of standardization of nomenclature of Chinese medicine:** Terms of TCM are sometimes indefinite, and polysemy and denotation are commonly seen. Taking “re” (热, “hot in temperature”) for an instance, in the original text[4], “re” could be diversified as heat effusion, hot sensation, fever and so on. Consequently, when translating, different cases should not lump together, and translation should be based on different denotations for the convenience of readers’ distinction.

3) Vacant counterparts of some culture-loaded words: *Shang Han Lun*, deeply influenced by ancient culture and philosophy of China and being a representative of TCM culture, includes a large quantity of culture-loaded words and is profound in culture and humanistic connotation. For example, the name of diseases in TCM such as 奔豚 (Bentun, the sensation of qi surging upward from the lesser abdomen into the chest and heart), 蛔厥 (Huijue, syncope with ascarids), 脾约 (Piyues, spleen's function of secreting body fluid is restricted by stomach, 结胸(Jiexiong, blocked-up chest caused by pathogens, 阴阳易(Yin yang pattern, recurrence of disease due to sexual intercourse), which lack counterparts in the target language. Consequently, when it comes to translating, in order to precisely convey the original text and to maintain national features and unique concepts, the translators should have a basic knowledge of TCM and give consideration to the acceptability of target readers and their culture environment, and maintain the culture connotation in the original text as much as possible. Subsequently, the translators can borrow some western medical terms if appropriate, and utilize corresponding policies such as free translation, transliteration and annotation.

3.2 The Difficulties that Challenging the English Translation of *Shang Han Lun*

1) Frequent usage of western medical terms: TCM, being a traditional medicine of China, is markedly different from western medicine. They belong to two distinct medical systems, and have disparate views on physiology and pathology. Although some terms are the same, the concrete connotation differs. Due to lack of counterparts, the translation of some terms in TCM is resorted to western terms. For instance, in Luo Xiwen's version[5] 心下悸 and 心动悸 were both translated as palpitate; 喘家 and 喘 as asthma; 痿 as paralyzed. It causes the loss of TCM connotation in the process. Additionally, many western medical terms do not have relevance and connotation as Chinese medicine does. As a result, the application of western terms adds the difficulty of comprehending the original text when reading the translation edition and sometimes even bewilders readers.

2) Translators' subjectivity: Academic and cultural backgrounds of translators as well as their comprehensive understanding toward TCM theories will exert an effect on the English translation of *Shang Han Lun*. More succinctly, the selection of master piece, translation principle and method as well as varied layout is influenced by translators' subjectivity. For instance, in the original text of *Shang Han Lun*[4], a sentence goes like this: "When a blocked-up chest is of a cold nature without symptoms of Heat, Decoction of Lesser Xianxiong with three drugs can be adopted. Small white powder of three drugs will also be a remedy." Concerning Small white powder of three drugs here, Luo Xiwen, graduating from an English specialty, employed literal translation and translated it as "Baisan Powder"[5], whereas, Huanghai, graduating from a TCM specialty, adopted addition policy and translated it as "Small white powder of three drugs"[6], which is far more visualized and easy to grasp prescription names and medicine components, from the perspective of target readers, however, the former "Baisan powder" can hardly achieve such an effect. To wrap up, with respect to translation of TCM classics, being strong in specialty, individual translators are confined as to language proficiency and area specialty, subsequently, translators should step up exchanges and cooperation, and furthermore, unified standard for TCM terms should be set up as well.

4. Summary

As time progresses, the translation principles and methods change accordingly as for the translation of *Shang Han Lun* from Chinese to English. Because of the fact that TCM is a peripheral area of knowledge in the target country in initial stage, abridged, aka, brief translation is mostly adopted and the main purpose is to spread the basics of TCM. With the communication and development of TCM internationally, in addition to foreigners' demands of further understanding of TCM, the translation of *Shang Han Lun* in this phase turns to medical value and culture communication orientation. In the wake of maturation of diversified English editions, scholars initiate in comparative study toward different English editions to interpret translation principles and methods

from different perspectives based on different translation principles. The authors of this paper, after collating different editions and relevant studies, summarize the difficulties and problems as to translating. The authors maintain that unique linguistic characteristics, lack of standard in translation and vacant counterpart of some culture-loaded words account for the difficulty of translation, meanwhile, frequent utility of western medical terms, lack of counterparts as to some culture-loaded words and subjectivity of translators lead to problems when translating. The current study is meant to provide suggestions for further study toward research on the English translation of *Shang Han Lun*.

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