

# An Analysis of the English Translation of a Text with Chinese Characteristics Based on Perspectives of Translation Variation Theory

## — Using an article of the 32nd Han Suyin International Translation Contest (Chinese-English)

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### ABSTRACT

As Chinese culture becomes more globalized, a lot of Chinese articles with distinctive Chinese characteristics are exported and thus require proper translation in order to make cultural exchanges more effective. The Translation Variation Theory, proposed by Zhonglian Huang, is one of the representative linguistic theories rooted in China. The present study analyzes an article from the 32nd Han Suyin International Translation Contest (Chinese-English), which addresses the overseas influence of the Chinese Spring Festival. This article is full of expressions of special Chinese cultural characteristics, which presents a major challenge for its proper translation into English. This paper analyzes the application of Huang's Translation Variation Theory in the translated text by focusing on the amplification, narration, and combination aspects of the theory. This analysis framework provides valuable insights for understanding and improving the Chinese-English translation techniques.

**Keywords:** Chinese, Cultural linguistics, Translation, Translation Variation Theory

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Rooted in the traditional Chinese culture, expressions with Chinese characteristics can be seen as the epitomes of Chinese social and cultural life. These culturally unique expressions reflect the important ideology of that culture during a specific era or historical period. Not only employed in the context of cultural exchange, but expressions with Chinese characteristics are also widely used in political fields such as foreign policy and international diplomacy.

The topic of the 32nd Han Suyin International Translation Contest (Chinese-English) article focuses on the Chinese Spring Festival, which showcases a significant influence of the Chinese culture across the whole world. The article begins with unique activities taking place during the Spring Festival such as temple festivals and dragon and lion dance organized in different regions of the world. Then it paraphrases some of the symbolic meanings of these festival events and elaborates on the associated cultural expressions from

lifestyle to a spiritual pursuit. Finally, the article further explores the underlying reasons for the increasing popularity of Chinese culture, which is a combination of China's rich cultural tradition and a recent initiative to purposely promote the Chinese culture to achieve global influence.

The concept of Translation Variation was first proposed by Zhonglian Huang in 1998. The translation variation phenomena can be traced back to the original Buddhist scriptures translation, which was popular during the flourishing period of Tang dynasty, late Ming and early Qing dynasties as well as around the May 4th Movement. [1] Yan Fu also employed similar methods throughout his translation of *Evolution and Ethics*, which contained similar strategies like amplification, omission, modification, etc. [2] Expressiveness is the most prominent method of Yan's translation technique as well as the core of the Translation Variation Theory. Expressiveness is developed and evolved from variation to coherence, and then coherence to expressiveness. [3] While the theory was widely used for demonstration and

practice, it was not compiled into a complete theoretical framework, nor produced strong influence until 2007. [4] In recent years, research on Translation Variation Theory has gained increased population and gradually involved various techniques and experiments. [5]

Translation Variation Theory originates in China and aims to break the habitual procedure of translation to produce a more flexible translation texts that meet the needs of target audiences. The theory has been widely used to analyze the translation strategies of literature works, movie subtitles as well as tourism and political texts, but its implications on texts with Chinese characters are very limited. As a theory originates in China, it is applicable to analyze special Chinese expressions effectively. Consequently, this paper is motivated to utilize the Translation Variation methods to examine the translated text from the 32nd Han Suyin International Translation Contest (Chinese-English), by focusing on three of the seven theoretical aspects -- amplification, combination and narration.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Translation Variation Theory

The Translation Variation is a theory different from the complete translation technique. Complete translation aims to produce translated text as close to the source text in meaning and keep the form consistent with the original author. By contrast, Translation Variation seeks to meet the readers' needs instead of being entirely loyal to the original meaning. There has been a great emphasis on complete translation to preserve text originality, and this emphasis results in fewer research in studying the Translation Variation techniques. [6] Yet complete translation has major limitations when readers have a limited knowledge understanding the context of the original text, especially due to cultural barriers

Huang defined Translation Variation as a translation activity where the translator uses variation methods such as amplification, omission, edition, narration, condensation, combination, rewriting, etc. to assimilate the content of the original text according to the specific needs of specific readers under specific conditions. [7] Corresponding to the translation variation practice, translation variation theory is a scientific principle and ideological system generalized from it and the theory studies the characteristics and rules of it. The appropriate implementation of this method can help readers better understand the context they are not familiar with.

### 2.2. Seven Methods of Translation Variation

The overall Translation Variation Theory consists of seven variation methods including amplification, omission, edition, narration, condensation, combination

and rewriting, which will be explained more detailed below.

Amplification, a method to add information based on the original work, contains three main steps: interpretation, comment and depiction. Omission refers to removing unnecessary content in the translation for the target readers so that useful information can stand out. Edition makes the original content more structured and organized so that the text becomes more readable. Narration refers to rewriting or paraphrasing the original work using one's own words, thus the wording of the original work and the format might be altered. Condensation is to compress the original information and shorten the text, thus redirecting the readers' attention to the remaining texts. Combination is a flexible technique to combine two or more parts of the original work with logical relationships in succession together. Rewriting is a straight forward step that might involve changes in specific details or forms, adapting to another writing genre, or adjusting the original texts to meet specific requirements. [8]

## 3. TRANSLATION VARIATION STRATEGIES APPLIED IN THE ANALYZED TEXT

This paper will examine the applications of three of the seven effective Translation Variation methods in the text for analysis, which are amplification, combination and narration.

### 3.1 Amplification

#### 3.1.1. Case Study

Example :

ST: 喝一碗腊八粥，体验“过了腊八就是年”；穿一身红衣，讨个红红火火的好彩头；逛一场庙会，感受中国春节热闹的氛围。

TT: Having a bowl of *Laba* porridge on the eighth day of the last or the twelfth Chinese lunar month, they have come to understand a saying from a ballad: “The Spring Festival is around the corner soon after *Laba*.” Wearing red outfits, they bestow auspicious blessings to others in return for good luck. Pottering around a temple fair, they enjoy a jolly air of festivity.

For non-Chinese reader, the meaning of *Lada* (腊八) can be difficult to understand, so the translator added a data following *Laba* to emphasize the special timing of the *Laba* porridge custom. “The Spring Festival is around the corner soon after *Laba*” is a very familiar saying to Chinese readers, yet English readers may confused about where this proverb comes from so the translation added “a saying from a ballad” to explain the source of the proverb. The above two additions to the

original texts are combined to illustrate the cultural traditions and the significance of *Laba* to the Spring Festival.

Moreover, the significance of red is only self-explanatory to native Chinese speakers. So, the translator added “they bestow auspicious blessings to others” between “red outfits” and “good luck”, which connected the sentence more logically and explained the reason why people wear in red and why red outfits could bring good luck.

### 3.1.2. Function of Amplification

In addition to providing supplemental contextual information, amplification method also serves functional purpose to promote culturally relevant information and assist in readers’ reading comprehension. For example, the original text contains some expressions in Chinese characters that create a strong cultural atmosphere of the Chinese Spring Festival. If these sentences are translated literally to present the meanings only, foreign readers may not be able to feel the impact and atmosphere of this cultural festival. Amplification helps readers have a compassionate reading experience by understanding the cultural connotations. Appropriate amplification tells the relevant background knowledge in specific fields so that it helps target readers understand the meaning better as well as to promote cultural exchanges.

## 3.2. Combination

### 3.2.1. Case Study

Example 1:

ST: 世界对中国充满兴趣、对中华文化更加认同，这其中既有文明交往的需求，可能也不乏经济的联系、市场的驱动，但从根本上说，还是因为中国综合国力的不断增强、中华文化影响力的不断提升。

TT: The worldwide interest in and growing recognition of Chinese culture are attributable not only to the need for communication between civilizations but also probably to their economic ties and market stimuli. However, this rests fundamentally on China’s enhanced comprehensive national strength and cultural influence.

In Chinese writing, there is a strong emphasis on structure and organization, even if repetition is needed. English, by contrast, aims for simplicity and clarity. This English translation prioritizes this characteristic of English by combining “the enhanced China’s comprehensive national strength” and “the promoted Chinese cultural influence” into “China’s enhanced comprehensive national strength and cultural influence.” In this way, the translated text became more concise as

well as eliminated redundancy, making it easier for English readers to digest.

Example 2:

ST: 而中国图书“越洋”、影视节目“出海”以及各种海外公益与志愿服务，也与春节文化相得益彰，让“走出去”的中国故事、中国文化更加鲜活生动，为国外民众呈现一个更加立体、更加全面、更加丰富的中国。

TT: The exports of Chinese books, movies, TV programs, as well as various public welfare and voluntary services, are all cultural complements to China’s Spring Festival. All these efforts have made Chinese stories and culture more vivid, unfolding to the world a more prismatic China with different dimensions.

In the source text, the author used the expressions “going over the ocean”, “going out to the sea” and “overseas” to refer to the exportation of Chinese books, movies, TV programs, and public welfare and voluntary services abroad. These expressions can be used exchangeable to convey the same meaning, which showed the diversity and versatility of Chinese expressions. Yet these expressions, when translated word by word, cannot be interpret in English to convey the correct meaning. In order to avoid misunderstandings without the cultural context, the translation combined these three expressions into one word “exports” to make it clearer and avoid repetition.

### 3.2.2. Function of Combination

Due to the differences in cultural context and ways of expression, there can be much non-equivalence in Chinese-English translation. Parallel and repeated expressions are frequently used in Chinese to achieve a balanced sentence structure, while in English, expressions are often more concise and clearer. The combination method can be effectively applied in translation to reconcile the differences in language characteristics, which ultimately make the translated text adaptive to the reading experiences of the target readers.

## 3.3. Narration

### 3.3.1. Case Study

Example 1:

ST: 春联、窗花、爆竹，年夜饭、守岁酒、拜年送福，这些带着强烈仪式感的习俗，寄寓着中国人对美好生活的希冀、对家庭价值的坚守、对团圆共享的追求。

TT: Many rituals and ceremonial customs—such as pastings spring couplets onto door frames and

paper-cuts for window decoration, setting off firecrackers, enjoying reunion dinners, staying up to drink alcohol, visiting kith and kin and presenting them with an artistically written Chinese character “福” (fú, fortune)—embody the Chinese people’s desire for a good life, adherence to family values, and pursuit of shared reunion.

The translation first converts the listed nouns into actions, which makes the translated texts more dynamic and vivid. Then the translator takes on personal interpretation in order to make the original texts more illustrative. Foreign readers may find it difficult to depict the meaning of “spring couplets” without encountering previously. By adding a narration of “pasting onto door frames”, foreign readers can immediately visualize and grasp the functions of *chunlian* (春联). Similarly, by using literal translation, English readers cannot understand how the spring couplets carry a fortune message. So the translation gives a narration of “presenting them with an artistically written Chinese character “福” (fú, fortune)” to further describe the activity in details, allowing the readers to better comprehend the text.

Example 2:

ST: 从“道法自然”“天人合一”的发展理念，到“协和万邦”“讲信修睦”的世界想象，再到“同舟共济”“休戚与共”的命运共同体意识，这些由中华优秀传统文化不断滋养润泽的伦理品质，在世界各地激发更多共鸣，为解决人类共同面临的问题提供了“新的可能”。

TT: Elemental Chinese culture has constantly nurtured many ethical qualities. From the development concepts of “Tao following the law of nature” and “heaven and man being united as one,” to the global ideals of “all nations coexisting in harmony” and “seeking mutual trust and amity with all nations,” and finally to the awareness that a community with a shared future should “pull together in times of trouble” and “share weal and woe,” these ideas and values have resonated with people around the world. In doing so, they are providing new possibilities for solving the problems facing all mankind.

Four-character idioms are succinct and elegant expressions that condense rich information down to four Chinese characters. It is nearly impossible to find direct matches of these idioms in English, so in this example, narration is an especially useful technique to help explain the core meaning of the above six idioms rather than just keep the surface meaning. By adding narration and supplementary explanation, the target readers can grasp the underlying meaning of the text better.

### 3.3.2. Function of Narration

The foreign readers always have difficulty understanding phrases that contain linguistic features and special expressions with a specific cultural background, let alone appreciating the deeper cultural connotations behind them. In this case, narration is necessary in order to provide some explanations in a more acceptable manner regardless of the original text form.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Translation Variation Theory has been applied to a variety of translated texts including literature works, movie subtitles, tourism texts, as well as political texts. Literature artworks that contain background information and local customs can benefit from Translation Variation in order to be more understandable by foreign readers. In the translation of movie subtitles, condensation is used most often to communicate a short and clear message due to the physical limitation of the scene space. Tourism texts contain a lot of historical allusions and myths, so translation under the guidance of Translation Variation could provide a simple and plain version. The translation techniques are widely implemented in tourism promotional films that combine the above two text features. Political texts such as Government Work Reports and Government Press Conferences contain plenty of complex sentences with proper nouns and special phrases, and the proper application of the Translation Variation Theory can effectively avoid ambiguity and potential harm to the national image.

This paper analyzes the uses of Translation Variation Theory techniques in the translation of the article from the 32nd Han Suyin International Translation Contest. The original text involves several expressions rich in Chinese characteristics, reflecting the profound Chinese cultural heritages, but it also brings major challenges into proper translation into English. Getting the messages in the original text across in English properly and completely is the major challenge of the translation process.

By reading and analyzing the original text and the translation version, this paper examines various Translation Variation strategies employed in the translation, especially for culturally loaded words and unique expressions in China such as four-character idioms and sayings. In addition to being more readable and acceptable for target readers, Translation Variation strategies also convey the original meaning to the greatest extent, so this theory influenced the translation process greatly. Through this analysis process, the paper provide useful insights for performing culturally competent translation based on the Translation Variation Theory framework.

However, limited by the length and content of the original work, the present study focuses on three main methods in Translation Variation Theory. Further analysis might benefit from a more comprehensive examination of all techniques on other texts with strong Chinese cultural connotations. Last but not least, as a domestic theory, Translation Variation Theory is becoming perfected and its research should be given high priority strengthen cultural exchanges, which is also in line with China's overseas promotion of its culture and national image.

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