

A Study on the Translation of Ceramic Exhibit Names in Museums

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Abstract: As globalization progresses, museums have become indispensable platforms for cultural dialogue, making the translation of exhibit materials crucial for global understanding. Chinese ceramics, with their rich history and artistic value, stand out as a cornerstone of China's cultural heritage. The accurate translation of these artifacts into English is not just a linguistic task but a cultural imperative. It ensures that the narratives and significance of these pottery pieces are effectively communicated to an international audience, thereby influencing their overall perception of Chinese ceramic art. This paper, therefore, aims to delve into the principles of translating the names of ceramic exhibits in museums. It explores the theoretical frameworks and practical considerations that should underpin such translations and scrutinizes the common pitfalls and obstacles that translators and curators face. By doing so, it seeks to offer tangible solutions that can aid in overcoming these challenges. The ultimate goal of this paper is to enhance cross-cultural appreciation and foster a deeper understanding of the historical and artistic significance of Chinese ceramics on a global scale.

Keywords: Museums; Ceramic Exhibits; Translation Principles; Cultural Exchange

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage are increasingly valued. Museums, as significant showcases of culture, have their exhibit English name directly impacting the transmission and reception of culture. Ceramic art, as a treasure of the Chinese nation, with its unique artistic charm and profound cultural depth, has drawn the attention of countless domestic and international visitors. However, the translation of museum ceramic exhibit still faces many issues, affecting the international audience's understanding and appreciation of ceramic culture.

This scholarly work will delve into the intricate world of translation, focusing specifically on the nuances of translating museum ceramic exhibit names. It will commence by examining the foundational principles that underpin the art of translation, which are essential for conveying the true essence and cultural significance of the exhibits. The paper will then proceed to integrate examples, drawing from a diverse array of museum collections and exhibits to illustrate the complexities and challenges that translators face. By analyzing these practical cases, the paper will identify and discuss various translation strategies and methods that have been employed or could be utilized to translate the names of ceramic exhibits. The ultimate goal of this research is to contribute to the enhancement of the quality and depth of international cultural exchange. By providing a comprehensive understanding of the translation process for museum ceramic exhibit names, the paper seeks to facilitate more effective communication and appreciation of cultural heritage across linguistic and geographical boundaries. This will not only enrich the visitor experience in museums worldwide but also foster a greater understanding and respect for the diverse histories and artistic traditions that these exhibits represent.

2. Characteristics of Ceramic Exhibition Names in Museums

The translation of ceramic exhibit names plays a pivotal role in the museum experience, as it offers visitors a wealth of essential information. These names are not merely labels; they encapsulate a summary of the historical and cultural significance of the artifacts on display. They provide a window into the past, allowing visitors to gain insights into the era and culture from which the ceramics originated.

Drawing from Reiss's classification of text types[1], the textual descriptions of ceramic cultural relics are categorized as informational texts. This classification is significant because it underscores the primary function of such texts, which is to communicate factual information and knowledge. These texts are characterized by a robust logical structure, with language that is precise and clear, designed to convey the message with minimal ambiguity. The focus of informational texts is on the substance of the content rather than the stylistic flourishes of the language. This emphasis on content is crucial for the translation process, as it directs the translator's efforts towards accurately reproducing the original message. The goal is to ensure that the translated text retains the integrity of the original, allowing the historical and cultural information to be accurately transmitted to an audience that may not share the same linguistic background.

From the structural analysis of the Chinese names of ceramic artifacts, the names are mainly composed of two parts: the generic name and the attribute name. The generic name refers to the part of the name that directly indicates the type of the ware, such as "bowl", "plate", "bottle", "pot", etc., which correspond directly to the different forms and uses. The attribute name, on the other hand, is used within the porcelain name to further describe and define the specific characteristics or attributes of the porcelain. These characteristics may include aspects such as the material, color, decoration, and craftsmanship of the porcelain, such as "blue and white vessel designed with fishes and weeds," "famille rose incense-holder in shape of figure sculpture on green ground", "contrasting colors vase designed with lotus scrolls and beast-shaped ears", etc. As an important basic piece of information on museum exhibit labels, the name of a cultural relic is a comprehensive description of the cultural characteristics and conceptual notions of the relic, composed of factors such as the age, material, signature, author, pattern, color, and shape.[2] For instance, consider a beautifully crafted porcelain pillow that bears the name "The Song Ding Kiln Child Porcelain Pillow". This name encapsulates several essential details about the piece (as seen in Table 1): it was crafted during the illustrious Song Dynasty, renowned for its advancements in ceramic artistry; it originated from the prestigious Ding Kiln, known for producing exquisite white porcelain with a translucent glaze; its pattern, described as "child-like", evokes a sense of innocence and charm, adding a playful touch to the design; and lastly, it is a porcelain pillow, highlighting its functional use as well as its status as a work of art. Together, these elements combine to create a unique and valuable piece of historical and cultural heritage.

Table 1: Detail classification of the name "The Song Ding Kiln Child Porcelain Pillow"

Attribute Name			Generic Name
Dynasty	Production places	Shape	Type of the ware
Song	Ding Kiln	Child	Porcelain Pillow

3. Translation Principles for the Names of Ceramic Exhibits in Museums

In the vast cosmos of Chinese culture, ceramic art is undoubtedly one of the most dazzling stars, bearing the sediment of a thousand years of history and serving as a unique bridge between the past and the future with its distinctive ethnic charm and artistic allure. As a direct manifestation of this cultural heritage, the names of ceramic exhibits are not merely simple identifiers of the exhibits' attributes; they are also artistic symbols imbued with profound cultural connotations and aesthetic value. Translators, acting as cultural messengers, carry the significant responsibility of conveying the unique charm and profound significance of Chinese ceramic art to the world. Therefore, the translation work must not only accurately convey the basic information of the exhibits, such as material, craftsmanship, and age, but also deeply understand and grasp the cultural connotations and national emotions behind the exhibits. This ensures that the translation retains the ethnic characteristics of Chinese culture while effectively communicating with an international audience.

3.1 Ethnicity Principle

The ethnicity principle[3], a cornerstone in the realm of translation, underscores the paramount importance of safeguarding the ethnic identity and rich cultural nuances embedded within the original text. This principle is particularly relevant when translating cultural artifacts, such as the names of ceramic exhibits, which serve as living testaments to the depth and breadth of traditional Chinese culture. These names often function as portals, inviting the beholder into a world of intricate histories, philosophical underpinnings, and artistic expressions unique to the Chinese civilization.

In the context of ceramic art, where each piece is imbued with stories spanning centuries, the

translation process necessitates a delicate balance between fidelity to the original and accessibility for the target audience. It is imperative that the translator strives to retain the essence of the names, capturing not just their literal meanings but also the layers of symbolism, metaphor, and historical references that give them their distinctiveness. This endeavor allows foreign audiences, who may be unfamiliar with the intricacies of Chinese culture, to gain a glimpse into the vibrant tapestry of Chinese ceramic heritage and appreciate its unparalleled beauty and complexity.

Table 2: Literal translation vs transliteration with annotations in ceramic pattern translation

Chinese Name	Literal Translation	Transliteration with Annotations
Lian Hua Wen	Lotus Pattern	Lian Hua Pattern(a pattern of lotus flowers, symbolizing purity and rebirth in Chinese culture)
Ba Bao Wen	Eight Treasure Pattern	Ba Bao Pattern (a pattern consisting of eight Buddhist symbols, each representing good fortune and protection)

However, recognizing the cultural gap that often exists between the source and target cultures, a purely literal translation may fall short of conveying the full weight and significance of the original. This is where transliteration, coupled with explanatory notes or annotations, becomes invaluable. Transliteration involves retaining the original characters or sounds of the name in the target language, often in a phonetic form, while the accompanying explanations provide the necessary context and cultural insights. For instance, when translating the names of ceramic patterns or artifacts that carry specific cultural symbolic meanings, such as the dragon and phoenix motifs commonly found in Chinese ceramics, transliteration can be used to preserve the iconic nature of these symbols, while detailed explanations elucidate their roles in Chinese mythology, symbolism, and the cultural values they embody. Other two detailed examples are shown in Table 2. By adopting this approach, translators not only bridge the linguistic divide but also foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Foreign audiences are thus enabled to traverse the boundaries of their own cultural experiences and immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of Chinese ceramic culture, experiencing firsthand its unique charm and profound historical significance.

3.2 Informational Principle

The translation of exhibit names, as a form of public signage, is inherently bound to the informational principle in translation, which prioritizes the conveyance of clear and accessible information to the audience. This principle is not just about transferring words from one language to another, but about ensuring that the translated text serves its purpose within the cultural and communicative context of the target audience.

In the translation of exhibit names, the informational principle is paramount, as highlighted by the need for translations that are highly readable and informative. This aligns with the broader understanding of translation as a means to communicate messages across linguistic and cultural barriers effectively. The work of Hatim and Mason, as discussed in "After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation", emphasizes the importance of considering the pragmatics of translation, which includes the social context and the intended audience's expectations.[4]

Moreover, the translation of exhibit names must be concise and designed for quick reading and comprehension, as per the informational principle. This is in line with the findings in "Translating informative and persuasive texts": the temporariness of information and the need for translations that are accessible and easily digestible.[5] The translation should be complete yet succinct, capturing the attention of the viewer and providing them with a clear understanding of the exhibit's significance. For instance, in order to directly reflect its key characteristics, the Chinese Ceramics Museum displays the age of the exhibits separately, as seen in Table 3, reducing the amount of information per line for visitors and allowing them to quickly absorb the effective information about the exhibits during their browsing process.[6]

Table 3: Example of the signboard in the China Ceramic Museum

Name of cultural relic	The signboard of China Ceramic Museum
Contrasting colors designed plate with figures	Contrasting colors designed plate with figures Dynasty: Wanli Reign of Ming Dynasty

3.3 Standardization Principle

Achieving a high level of consistency and precision in translation is paramount for ensuring that the meaning and intent of the original text are accurately conveyed to the target audience. This requires a meticulous approach to terminology and expression, where the use of standardized terms and phrases is essential for maintaining clarity and coherence throughout the translation. To accomplish this, it is vital to establish a glossary of terms that will be used uniformly across all translations. This glossary acts as a reference point, ensuring that each concept is represented by a single, agreed-upon term. This practice not only prevents confusion among readers but also helps to create a seamless and unified reading experience, as they can rely on the consistency of terminology to understand the content accurately. For instance, the same English terminology should be used for specific glaze colors or patterns to avoid confusion. Terms like “bai you” should be consistently translated as “white-glazed” instead of using different terms for the same characteristic across various exhibits.

Furthermore, the translation must be mindful of the target language’s lexical and grammatical norms. This involves selecting words and phrases that are not only accurate in meaning but also natural and idiomatic within the context of the target language. The translator must possess a deep understanding of the linguistic and cultural subtleties of both the source and target languages to make informed decisions about the most appropriate lexical choices. In addition, Translation guidelines and standards for ceramic exhibit names issued by relevant industry associations, research institutions, or government departments provide specific guidance for the uniformity and accuracy of the translations. Given the ongoing advancements in scholarly research and the incessant emergence of novel findings, it is vital to periodically revise and perfect translation benchmarks to guarantee the currency of the translations.

Translation guidelines and standards for ceramic exhibit names, as issued by relevant industry associations, research institutions, or government departments, are designed to provide a blueprint for the uniformity and precision of translations. These guidelines are crucial for maintaining the integrity of the cultural heritage represented by the exhibits and ensuring that the translations are accessible and comprehensible to a diverse audience. For instance, the research of “Study on the English Translation of the Names of Ceramic Artifacts in Museums” by Li Lusheng emphasizes the need to standardize the translation of ceramic artifact names to enhance international tourists' appreciation and awareness of the museum’s porcelain collection.[7] This underscores the importance of having a consistent and accurate translation practice that can effectively communicate the cultural significance of the artifacts.

4. Conclusion

Currently, there are still some problems in the translation of ceramic exhibit names, such as the loss of cultural connotations, inconsistent translation styles, and inaccuracies in professional terminology. Given that the quality of the translation of ceramic exhibit names directly affects the effectiveness of their cross-cultural communication and international exchange, we should translate the names under the guidance of the principles of ethnicity, information, and standardization to avoid existing problems. The translation of ceramic exhibit names stands as a nuanced and intricate endeavor within the realm of cross-cultural communication. It necessitates a harmonious blend of linguistic prowess, where translators must possess a robust foundation in multiple languages to accurately convey the essence of each piece’s title. Beyond linguistic abilities, an extensive knowledge of ceramics and their historical context is indispensable, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the artifact's significance. Additionally, a profound appreciation and respect for cultural nuances is paramount, ensuring that the translation not only captures the factual information but also resonates with the emotional and symbolic value inherent in each exhibit's name. To achieve this, we anticipate a growing number of translators to embark on this noble pursuit, armed with a heightened sense of rigor, precision, and artistry. Together, they will contribute to the international dissemination and vibrant exchange of China’s rich ceramic culture, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation for this timeless art form across borders.

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