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Research on C-E Translation of Texts on Ancient Wharves Along the Gan-Yue Canal from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

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Abstract

The ancient wharves along the Gan-Yue Canal are an important linear cultural heritage, carrying the historical memory of commodity distribution, commercial exchanges, and population migration. At present, its English-language presentation is obviously insufficient, and existing translations suffer from problems such as inadequate information and loss of cultural connotation. Based on the theoretical framework of eco-translatology, this paper selects representative texts from three sites: Guijiaowei Wharf, Wucheng Ancient Town, and Zhuji Ancient Lane for case analysis. It adopts the "three-dimensional transformation" approach to examine translators' adaptive strategy selection from the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. It is found that in the linguistic dimension, translators achieve adaptation between Chinese and English in terms of information density and expressive conventions through syntactic restructuring and logical explicitation. In the cultural dimension, translators adopt a strategy combining functional correspondence with interpretive compensation to strike a balance between comprehensibility and cultural retention. In the communicative dimension, translators enable the translation to achieve communicative effects consistent with the original communicative intention through cognitive preparation and expression adjustment. This study can provide a methodological reference for the English translation of similar aquatic cultural heritage.

Keywords

Eco-translatology; Gan-Yue Canal; ancient wharves; three-dimensional transformations

1. Introduction

The Gan-Yue Canal is a large planned waterway, and it connects the Yangtze River system with the Pearl River system. Along the route of this canal, there are many ancient wharves; these wharves carry the historical memory of commodity distribution, commercial exchange, and population migration, and these wharves also form an important type of linear heritage site. From among these wharves, the translator selects three specific sites as the analysis subjects, namely Guijiaowei Wharf, Wucheng Ancient Town, and Zhuji Ancient Alley; each of these three sites matches one of the historical functions just mentioned, and they also complement one another in thematic terms, so together they provide a useful perspective for understanding the social development and cultural integration that took place along the Gan-Yue Canal.

However, the external display of these heritage sites is still insufficient. Studies have pointed out that the cultural heritage along the Gan-Yue Canal has received limited attention both domestically and internationally (Yang, 2024). Most of the heritage introduction texts are only in Chinese, and English translations are usually unavailable; even if there are English translations, most of them are superficial and difficult to convey the deep cultural connotations of the text.

Against this background, this study draws on eco-translatology and adopts the "three-dimensional transformation" analytical method to explore the translator's adaptive selections in the English translation of ancient wharf texts across the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. The source texts for this study are drawn from on-site explanatory boards, tourism pamphlets, and official websites of the three heritage sites. The following sections first outline the theoretical framework of eco-translatology, and then analyse representative cases in each dimension. This paper seeks to illustrate how the translator strives to achieve a balance between the fidelity of the original text and the acceptability of the translation under the translation eco-environment.

2. Overview of Eco-Translatology

Eco-translatology was proposed as a holistic approach to translation from an ecological perspective (Hu, 2008). In 2011, Hu further established "three-dimensional transformation" as its core translation method, encompassing three dimensions: the linguistic dimension, which involves adjustments of linguistic forms; the cultural dimension, which concerns the transmission and interpretation of cultural connotations; and the communicative dimension, which concerns the realization of communicative intentions (Hu, 2011). In recent years, this theoretical system has been continuously deepened. Eco-translatology was further developed into an "eco-paradigm" based on three core concepts—"translation as text transplantation," "translation as adaptive selection," and "translation as ecological balance"—further expanding its theoretical horizon (Hu & Wang, 2021).

Within this framework, the present study applies the "three-dimensional transformation" method to examine the translator's adaptive choices in the translation of ancient wharf texts. The "translation eco-environment" is the "world" presented by the source text, the source language, and the target language—namely, an interconnected and interactive whole comprising language, communication, culture, society, as well as authors and readers (Hu, 2008). In this study, this environment is manifested as the historical depth of the source texts, regional cultural symbols, and the cognitive gap of target-language readers regarding Chinese canal culture. The translator's task lies in bridging this gap.

Many scholars have examined the English translations of scenic spot introductions from the eco-translatology perspective (Yang & Hu, 2024), and they have also applied this theory to foreign-oriented publicity translation (Zhang, 2020). Such studies indicate that eco-translatology proves applicable for analyzing translations of tourism and cultural materials. However, the English translation of linear cultural heritage has received limited attention; in particular, texts about ancient wharves as water transport sites have drawn relatively little notice. In the following sections, the theoretical framework mentioned above will be applied to analyze some representative translation examples from the three sites, and the three-dimensional transformation strategies will be examined. Through this analysis, the aim is to show how faithfulness to the original source text and acceptability to the target readers are balanced in the translation environment of ancient wharf texts.

3. Eco-Translatology in the C-E Translation of Texts on Ancient Wharves Along the Gan-Yue Canal

In this section, translation examples from the three wharves are examined from the angle of three-dimensional transformations within eco-translatology. The analysis is carried out one dimension at a time: the linguistic dimension deals with changes in form and sentence structure; the cultural dimension looks at how terms with strong cultural meanings are handled; and the communicative dimension explores how sayings are adapted so that they can bring about similar thoughts and feelings in the readers of the target language. These three dimensions are closely connected and work together as a whole; this reflects the overall and integrated character of the translation eco-environment.

3.1 Adaptive Selection in the Linguistic Dimension

Chinese and English have different ways of organizing sentences; Chinese tends to rely on word order to show logical relations, while English uses connectives and clear grammatical structures to make these relations explicit (Lian, 2010). In translation, the logical links that are only implied in Chinese need to be brought out; at the same time, the

loose and layered expressions typical of Chinese must be reorganized into the tighter, more linear patterns that English readers expect.

Example 1
ST: 元代，朝廷更令赣州造战船 600 艘以征日本，从一个侧面印证了此地货物吞吐量之大、造船业之发达。
TT: In the Yuan dynasty, the court also ordered Ganzhou to build 600 warships for an expedition against Japan—a telling sign of the wharf's immense cargo throughput and its advanced shipbuilding industry.

The logic of the source text is not explicitly indicated. The original text first states the historical facts, and then draws a conclusion based on the historical facts. The shipbuilding edict belongs to this kind of historical fact, and the assertions about "huge cargo throughput" and "developed shipbuilding industry" are the conclusions derived from this. There is a lack of explicit connectives between the two parts of the Chinese text. If a literal translation is made without adjustment, English readers will not be able to clarify the logical relationship. To this end, the translator uses the dash to elicit the appositive structure and converts the Chinese expression "从一个侧面印证了" into "a telling sign of..."; the word order of the original text is adjusted so that the fact and evaluation are juxtaposed, which is in line with the information-receiving habits of English readers. Furthermore, the Chinese structures "之大" and "之发达" carry overtones of degree. To bring out these implicit assessments in English, the translator inserts "immense" and "advanced". The finished translation reads concisely and flows well, fitting the stylistic expectations of English-language explanatory texts.

Example 2
ST: 鼎盛时期，吴城形成"六坊八码头九垅十八巷"的格局。
TT: During its heyday, the town developed a layout known as "six neighborhoods, eight piers, nine ridges, and eighteen lanes."

The original text is a juxtaposition of digital progression and four noun phrases to construct a dense spatial structure, reflecting the settlement pattern of Wucheng, which is built along the water and has a clear hierarchy. In Chinese, it is grammatical to juxtapose nouns like this, especially when numbers are placed before quantifiers. This writing method can be compact and concise. However, in English, simply piling up nouns without using conjunctions does not meet the grammatical requirements and will violate the conventional expression rules of the language. In order to solve this problem, the translator adopts the standard enumeration format in the translation, separates the coordinate items with commas, and adds the conjunction "and" before the last one, so that the coordinate components can be clearly presented under the premise of conforming to English syntax. By inserting these explicit structural markers, the translator transforms the paratactic coordination in Chinese into the normative form required by the hypotactic coordination in English. In terms of vocabulary selection, "坊" is translated into "neighborhoods" to convey the residential functional attributes of its Lixiang block; "垅" is translated into "ridges" to reflect its geographical meaning of natural or artificial earthen dykes in the place names of Jiangnan water towns. Numerals correspond to nouns one by one and are preserved under the premise of minimum semantic loss, although the rhythmic compactness of the original text is inevitably weakened.

3.2 Adaptive Selection in the Cultural Dimension

Culturally loaded words in the ancient wharf texts carry specific cultural connotations (Sun & Han, 2021). These include "grain tribute transport," "guild halls," "Ganguan," and "genealogical records"—terms that often lack direct equivalents in English. The translator must therefore make adaptive choices and compensations in the cultural dimension.

Example 3
ST: 谱牒记载，从珠玑巷迁播出去的姓氏达 180 余个（一说 186 个），后裔繁衍至今达 7000 余万人（一说 8000 余万）。
TT: According to genealogical records, the surnames that dispersed from Zhuji Alley number more than 180 (some say 186), and their descendants today exceed 70 million (or even 80 million by some counts).

"谱牒" concerns an important carrier of Chinese clan culture, which is used to record family lineage and migration context. Translating it as "genealogical records" proves effective because it captures the act of record-keeping, and "genealogy" evokes association with ancestral and clan bonds, helping readers understand the concept of kinship ethics. A similar point applies to "迁播". If the translator had chosen "migrated" or "moved", the emphasis would fall only on a change of place; "dispersed" adds the sense of spreading out in various directions, which matches the historical situation in which family lines branched out from Zhuji Alley to other regions. "Descendants" corresponds to "后裔" and links bloodline continuation with the collective identity of these families. For numbers, the translator uses "more than" and "exceed" to express the approximate sense of "达" and "余" in Chinese; the two hedging expressions "some say" and "by some counts" are also varied to produce the cautious tone of English academic writing. This variation is not simply a stylistic choice. It shows that the translator recognizes the uncertainty inherent in historical population data, and scholarly writing generally expects such uncertainty to be acknowledged rather than hidden. Overall, the translation conveys the cultural and semantic content correctly, neither adding nor omitting anything.

Example 4
ST: 明代，赣关初设于龟角尾，负责征收过往商税。
TT: In the Ming dynasty, the Ganguan (a Ming-dynasty inland customs office for the Gan River) was first established at Guijiaowei to levy transit duties on shipping.

"赣关" (Ganguan) refers to an inland customs office in the Ming dynasty, tasked with cargo inspection, tax collection, and oversight of river checkpoints. In the Qing dynasty, it was promoted to one of the twenty-four tax customs directly under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Revenue, which made it play a decisive role in the national financial system. A literal translation such as "the customs house for the Gan River" would convey the office's function and geographic location yet overlook the institutional rank and historical connotations embodied in the character "关" (guan). Since "customs house" in English generally refers to the modern harbor customs agency, the phrase poorly suits an inland river tax agency in the Ming dynasty. To address this discrepancy, the translator employs a supplementary-explanation strategy, rendering the proper noun as "Ganguan (a Ming-dynasty inland customs office for the Gan River)". The transliteration safeguards the name's original cultural identity, whereas the parenthetical note supplies readers with its chronological and administrative context. As Zhang (2020) notes, translators of heritage-related texts ought to furnish contextual background for culturally loaded terms. This technique achieves a balance between readability and cultural preservation, circumventing the erasure of historical identity brought about by rigid literal translation.

3.3 Adaptive Selection in the Communicative Dimension

For sentences with highly condensed cultural information such as proverbs, translators need to make the cognitive and emotional responses of English readers as close as possible to those of Chinese readers. This excerpt shows that the translator guides the readers to prepare for cognition and helps the reader fully understand the communicative intention of the text by providing relevant background context before the proverb.

Example 5
ST: 民间素有"装不尽的吴城，卸不尽的汉口"之誉。
TT: A local saying vividly captures the town's commercial vitality: "There is no end to loading at Wucheng, nor to unloading at Hankou."

The original text contains a pair of contrasting phrases—"no end to loading" and "no end to unloading"—which highlight the large volume of trade between Wucheng and Hankou. Chinese readers intuitively link loading and unloading to port commerce and grasp that "no end to loading" describes steady incoming cargo. English-speaking audiences, however, lack this contextual background to the text. If proverbs are translated literally without any guidance, it is difficult for them to achieve an understanding comparable to that of readers of the source texts. Therefore, the translator adds a guiding sentence before the proverb: "A local saying vividly captures the town's commercial vitality." This sentence prompts readers in advance that the proverb is intended to describe the commercial prosperity, so they can establish a corresponding understanding framework before reading the proverb itself. Subsequently, the

proverb is translated as "There is no end to loading at Wucheng, nor to unloading at Hankou," which not only retains the contrast structure of the original text, but also creates a rhythm comparable to the original text in English through the parallel repetition of "no end to". As Zhang (2020) points out, translating such proverbs requires flexible adaptation to the cognitive habits of the target language readers in order to achieve adaptive selection and transformation in the communicative dimension.

4. Conclusion

Based on the theory of eco-translatology, this study focuses on the translator's adaptive selection in the three dimensions of language, culture and communication. The analysis cases are taken from three heritage sites along the Gan-Yue Canal. The findings indicate that, at the linguistic level, the explicitation of implicit causality and the adjustment of parallel structure patterns can transform information-intensive Chinese expressions into logical and clear English sentences. In the cultural dimension, the translator adopts functional equivalence and annotation to deal with culturally loaded words, so as to take into account the readability of the text and the transmission of cultural connotation. In the communicative dimension, the use of guiding and paving means in the translation of proverbs enables English readers to obtain reading reactions as close as possible to Chinese readers at the level of understanding and emotion. Therefore, it can be seen that eco-translatology is applicable to the translation of cultural heritage texts, and can also provide a practical reference for the translation practice of similar water transport heritage texts.

However, this study is limited to three representative cases and mainly relies on qualitative analysis, which may restrict the objectivity of the conclusion. Future studies should be extended to a wider range of heritage text types and integrate quantitative methods to build a more comprehensive assessment framework. For site managers and translators, English translation should not stay at the level of literal transformation, but should include explicit logical markers, cultural annotations, and cognitive bedding to enhance the readability and cultural depth of scenic texts.

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