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English Translation of TCM Medicated Diet Names—A Case Study of *Chinese Medicated Diet*

Siyan Li

Liaoning University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Shenyang 110847, Liaoning, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Siyan Li, Liaoning University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Shenyang 110847, Liaoning, China.

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Abstract

This study, within the context of the international communication of TCM culture, guided by the theory of medio-translatology, and based on a qualitative case study of *Chinese Medicated Diet*, conducts a systematic analysis of the challenges in the outward English translation of TCM medicated diet names. In response to these challenges, the study proposes a solution: the translator should adhere to the translation principles of terminological consistency and functional transparency, adopt a domestication-oriented and foreignization-supplemented strategy, employ methods such as literal translation, free translation, and transliteration with annotation in accordance with the characteristics of the content, audience, and channel, and apply the amplification technique where appropriate, so as to optimize the reception of medicated diet names and thereby facilitate the broader internationalization of TCM.

Keywords

Medio-translatology; English Translation of TCM; Medicated Diet Names; International Communication of TCM Culture

1. Characteristics of TCM Medicated Diet Names

Under the guidance of TCM theories, TCM medicated diet refers to a special dietary form that combines different medicinal and food ingredients through proper formulation, and is prepared using both traditional and modern techniques, resulting in unique color, aroma, taste, form, and efficacy, with effects in maintaining health, preventing disease, and treating illness. It not only satisfies the needs for satiety and palatability but also plays important roles in maintaining human health, regulating physiological functions, enhancing physical fitness, preventing diseases, assisting in disease treatment, and promoting recovery (Xie & Zhu, 2016). TCM medicated diet originates from the concept of "homology of medicine and food" and has developed alongside TCM since its origins, constituting an important component of Chinese medicine (Zheng & Zhang, 2022). Some medicated diet names embody profound TCM theories and cultural connotations, and their translation faces practical difficulties such as cultural differences, professional barriers, abstract concepts, and the absence of equivalents. Simple transliteration or crude literal translation often leads to information distortion and fails to accurately and completely convey the intended meaning to non-professionals and non-native Chinese speakers. In the process of outward translation and dissemination, TCM medicated diet names often fall into the predicament of mistranslation or undertranslation, with consequences ranging from ineffective communication to, in severe cases, misleading consumption and adverse health effects.

2. Current Status of English Translation of TCM Medicated Diet Names

In 2022, the WHO international standard terminologies on traditional Chinese medicine were released, providing Chinese-English names and English definitions for TCM terminology (World Health Organization, 2022). In 2024, the draft for comments of the local standard, Medicated diet terminology for traditional Chinese medicine, was released, defining the basic theories, principles, and methods of TCM medicated diets (Liaoning Provincial Health Commission, 2024). In 2026, Basic theory vocabulary of traditional Chinese medicine was issued, defining terminology in general theory, yin and yang, five elements, visceral manifestation, qi, blood, fluid and liquid, essence, meridian and collateral, constitution, pathogenic factor, pathogenesis, health preservation and prevention, therapeutic principle, and five circuits and six qi (National Technical Committee on Traditional Chinese Medicine Standardization, 2026). However, there is currently no terminological standard for the English names of specific medicated diets. A review of relevant studies by Chinese scholars has shown that both domestication and foreignization strategies, as well as various translation methods including transliteration, literal translation, free translation, amplification, omission, and paraphrase, have been applied to the translation practice of medicated diet names (Tan, 2022). An analysis of relevant studies by international scholars has shown that they tend to apply foreignization strategies, adopt transliteration with annotation, and emphasize pharmacological efficacy explanations when translating the names of medicinal ingredients in TCM medicated diets, making the terms easily understood and accepted by the local audience, and promoting cultural exchange and mutual learning (Lo, 2022).

3. English Translation of TCM Medicated Diet Names from the Perspective of Medio-translatology

The international dissemination of TCM culture is an important pathway for showcasing the unique charm of Chinese culture and enhancing China's voice in international discourse, bearing on the global recognition of the intrinsic value of Chinese culture (Wang, 2018). At present, the international dissemination of TCM culture should focus on global issues such as health maintenance, disease prevention, and quality of life improvement, translating TCM concepts of "prevention of disease" and "correspondence between humans and nature" into universally understandable health solutions (Yang & Bai, 2025). To break through language barriers and successfully "go global", scientific translatological theories are urgently needed as guidance. Based on the cultural backgrounds and cognitive patterns of overseas audiences, TCM culture should be integrated into cultural contexts with which they are familiar, enhancing the affinity, acceptability, and effectiveness of the international communication of TCM culture.

Medio-translatology is a theoretical system constructed by Chinese scholars at the end of the 20th century, rooted in the contemporary Chinese cultural context and addressing China's translation and cultural realities. Its founder, Xie Tianzhen, defined medio-translatology as "encompassing both the study of 'translation' and the study of 'mediation', that is, the cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and cross-national dissemination and reception of literary and cultural works" (Xie, 2020). Medio-translatology has proposed a number of concepts and propositions with Chinese characteristics and international vision that have received relatively little or no attention from Chinese and overseas scholars, such as translation direction and translation needs, which have significant reference value for understanding and explaining the problems of Chinese cultural translation and provide an effective theoretical model for analyzing the globalization of Chinese literary culture (He & Li, 2023).

4. A Case Study of *Chinese Medicated Diet*

To address the challenges in the outward translation of TCM medicated diet names, this study adopts medio-translatology as its theoretical framework and selects typical TCM medicated diet names from *Chinese Medicated Diet* as the research object, namely the translated content. Published in the 1990s, *Chinese Medicated Diet* is an early authoritative work that systematically introduced TCM medicated diet culture to the world in a bilingual Chinese-English format (Zhang, 1990). The book comprises four chapters, covering a wide range of medicated diets with health-promoting functions, such as those for nourishing five zang, those for nourishing qi, blood, yin and yang, and those for promoting longevity and vitality (Wang, Qu, & Li, 2021). To avoid confusion among translations of similar medicated diet names, pinyin has been appended to each English translation. This study aims to optimize the translational reception of medicated diet names and does not discuss the transliteration method that uses only pinyin.

4.1 Medicated Diet Names Directly Presenting Ingredients and Efficacy

For medicated diet names that directly present ingredients, efficacy, dosage forms, and preparation methods, with straightforward and clear semantics, literal translation can be employed to describe their composition and efficacy. For example, “当归生姜羊肉汤” can be translated as “Mutton Soup with Chinese Angelica Root and Fresh Ginger”. For those whose efficacy is embedded in TCM theories, the translation principles of terminological consistency and functional transparency should be followed, and a domestication-oriented, foreignization-supplemented strategy should be adopted. For instance, “乌龟解郁汤” is a classic formula used in TCM to regulate qi and alleviate stagnation; “解郁” is not literally translated as “Relieving Depression” but rather as “Regulating Qi”. For names that are insufficiently clear due to omitted information, where literal translation may cause ambiguity, free translation or transliteration with annotation is adopted. For example, “双耳汤”, whose ingredients are white fungus and black edible fungus, is translated as “Soup of Tremella and Black Edible Fungus”.

4.2 Medicated Diet Names Containing Culturally Loaded Words and Employing Rhetorical Devices

For medicated diet names that contain culturally loaded words such as idioms, historical allusions, mythological and religious references, or that employ rhetorical devices such as metaphor, hyperbole, and metonymy, whose meanings may differ significantly from Western cognitive systems and medical concepts, free translation or interpretive translation should be applied to elucidate their mechanisms of action and highlight their therapeutic value. This enables audiences to form an initial understanding of the medicated diet upon first encounter with the translation, while simultaneously helping them comprehend TCM theory and projecting a positive image of Chinese culture. Given the multitude of medicated diet names, distinctive identifiers such as numbers in the source language should be retained as far as possible to avoid confusion. For example, if “五神汤” is rendered as “Five-Ingredient Decoction for Dispelling Wind and Expelling Cold” or “Five-Ingredient Decoction for Inducing Sweat and Relieving Fever”, the main characteristics and effects of this medicated diet can be directly communicated to the audience. “神仙粥”, whose main ingredients are fresh ginger and glutinous rice, is applicable to wind-cold type common colds. “神仙” implies remarkable efficacy; “Wind-Dispelling and Cold-Expelling Congee” achieves functional equivalence while corresponding in both form and spirit to the Chinese name. If “八珍糕” is rendered as “Eight-Ingredient Cake for Invigorating Spleen and Qi”, its functional positioning of strengthening the spleen and benefiting qi can be clearly established. “釜底抽薪蜜” is translated as “Honey for Reducing Excess Fire by Purgation”. The idiom “釜底抽薪” literally refers to removing the firewood from under the cauldron, and metaphorically means addressing the root cause. The main ingredient of this medicated diet, rhubarb, is a purgative, and the term “Purgation” serves as a clear indicator. The efficacy of this medicated diet is to unblock the bowels and clear heat, for patients with excess fire, corresponding to “Reducing Excess Fire”.

4.3 Solutions to the Problems in the Outward Translation Practice

4.3.1 Overall Approach

A single translation method is sometimes inadequate to achieve an optimal translational reception, necessitating a balance between conveying the original information and retaining source language features. Given the current state of international standardization of TCM terminology, the translation of medicated diet names should adhere to the principles of terminological consistency and functional transparency. Terminological consistency requires referring to existing terminology standards for medicinal ingredient names and TCM theories, while functional transparency focuses on highlighting the therapeutic value of medicated diets through annotations, interpretive translation, or other means. For medicated diet names not covered by existing terminology, full consideration should be given to the cultural backgrounds and linguistic habits of the target audience, and a domestication-oriented, foreignization-supplemented translation strategy should be adopted. In accordance with the specific characteristics of the translated content, target audience, and channel of communication, methods such as literal translation, free translation, and transliteration with annotation should be employed, with the translation technique of amplification applied where appropriate to preserve cultural characteristics. On the basis of ensuring translation accuracy, the comprehensiveness of information should be enhanced, while the conciseness of the translation should also be taken into account, to improve the reliability and validity of information transmission, and to achieve a translational reception accessible and impressive to the audience.

4.3.2 Structural Optimization

Consistency in internal translation methods within medicated diet names should be maintained and the symmetry of parallel structures should be optimized. In “二陈二仁粥”, “二陈” refers to tangerine peel and pinellia tuber, while “二仁” refers to coix seed and shelled wax gourd seed. The original translation, “Gruel of Two ‘Chen’ and Two Kinds of Seeds”, is a mix of transliteration and free translation, lacking stylistic consistency and structural symmetry, with quotation marks adding abruptness and redundancy. In accordance with the principle of functional transparency, the domestication strategy and the amplification technique should be adopted, so the name can be rendered as “Phlegm-Resolving Congee with Two Herbs and Two Seeds”. If specific ingredients need to be introduced and source-language cultural imagery preserved, the method of transliteration with annotation may be employed.

The grammatical structure of translations should be concise, compact, natural and fluid, avoiding ambiguity. In the original translation of “复方银菊茶”, “Drink of Honeysuckle Flower and Chrysanthemum Flower with Additions”, the word “Flower” appears repeatedly, and “with Additions” is vague in meaning, potentially causing ambiguity. It can be rendered as “Compound Honeysuckle and Chrysanthemum Drink”. The original translation of “利水鲤鱼汤” is “Soup of Carp Inducing Diuresis”, where the participial phrase used as a postpositive attributive tends to modify the nearest noun. To avoid ambiguity, the name should be rendered as “Carp Soup for Inducing Diuresis”.

For medicated diet names with similar grammatical structures, the grammatical structures of their translations should be kept as consistent as possible. “乌龟解郁汤” and “利水鲤鱼汤” comprise the same elements: ingredient, efficacy, and dosage form; thus, “Decoction of Tortoise for Regulating Qi” is better rendered as “Tortoise Decoction for Regulating Qi”. When a modifier consists of multiple words, it is usually placed as a postpositive attributive, for example, as in the original translations of “海藻昆布汤 (Soup of Seaweed and Laminaria)” and “莲子茯苓膏 (Pudding of Lotus Seed Powder and Poria)”.

4.3.3 Cautious Word Choice

Attention should be paid to the semantic connotations of words to achieve functional equivalence. For example, the original translation of “行气健胃粥” is “Gruel Activating Qi and Promoting Digestion”. However, the word “Gruel” is commonly found in 19th-century British workhouse recipes, denoting a thin, coarse liquid food, which contradicts the thick and refined characteristics of this medicated diet. Moreover, in historical contexts, the term is closely associated with the diets of the impoverished, and its negative connotations are inconsistent with the efficacy of this medicated diet in supplementing the middle qi, nourishing yin and moistening the lung, as well as strengthening the spleen and stimulating appetite. The name should therefore be rendered as “Congee for Activating Qi and Promoting Digestion”.

A soft communication approach should be adopted, with due respect for cultural differences and religious taboos. For example, the original translation of “二蛟汤” is “Two-Dragon Soup”, which fails to effectively convey information about this medicated diet and may cause confusion or misunderstanding. “蛟” is neither an ingredient of this medicated diet nor directly related to its efficacy; moreover, the word “dragon” still carries significantly different cultural connotations between Chinese and Western cultures. The translator should consider free translation or transliteration with annotation. The name should therefore be rendered as “Decoction of Red Bean and Pokeberry Root for Expelling Dampness and Clearing Heat” or “Erjiao Tang (a decoction made from red bean and pokeberry root for expelling dampness and clearing heat)”. The former directly presents the main ingredients, red bean and pokeberry root, and their therapeutic efficacy in expelling dampness and clearing heat, introducing the medical theories and cultural connotations embedded in the medicated diet name. The latter conforms to terminological standards, retains the Chinese cultural imagery of the medicated diet name, and highlights its distinctive charm.

Scientific rigor and professionalism should be enhanced to avoid triggering cognitive biases such as “Oriental mysticism”. For example, in the original translation of “仙人粥” as “Celestial Gruel”, the word “Celestial” is imaginative and creative: it undoubtedly arouses audience curiosity and willingness to try, but it may undermine credibility and audience acceptance to some extent. This medicated diet is a nourishing congee made from fleece-flower root, round-grained rice, Chinese dates, and brown sugar, suitable for deficiency of liver-yin, kidney-yin, essence, and blood. Appropriate translation methods should be flexibly employed according to the communication channel and the audience: in popular science publishing and social media communication, the translator may render it through free translation as “Congee for Nourishing the Liver and Kidney”; in academic publishing, expositions and fairs, where detailed presentation of ingredients and efficacy is required, transliteration with annotation should be employed,

as “Xianren Zhou (a congee made from fleece-flower root, round-grained rice, Chinese dates and brown sugar, applicable to deficiency of liver-yin, kidney-yin, essence and blood)”. In “珠玉二宝粥”, “珠玉” refers to Chinese yam and coix seed, with the effects of clearing and supplementing the spleen and the lung, as well as nourishing yin and moistening dryness. The original translation “Gruel of ‘Pearl and Jade’” uses quotation marks to avoid ambiguity, but fails to convey the ingredient characteristics and medicinal value. The name can be rendered as “Congee of Chinese Yam and Coix Seed”, which is clear and accessible; if “for Replenishing the Spleen and the Lung” is added at the end, functional equivalence may be achieved.

5. Conclusion

In the outward translation practice of TCM medicated diet names, the translator should adhere to the translation principles of terminological consistency and functional transparency, adopt a domestication-oriented and foreignization-supplemented translation strategy, employ methods such as literal translation, free translation, and transliteration with annotation in accordance with the specific characteristics of the translated content, target audience, and channel of communication, and apply the amplification technique where appropriate, so as to optimize the translational reception of medicated diet names and thereby facilitate the broader internationalization of TCM.

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