

# Translation Strategies of the Titles of Ancient Chinese Books: A Case Study of *The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook*

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Received: May 2, 2022

Accepted: June 15, 2022

Published: September 30, 2022

**To cite this article:** GAO Wanwan. (2022). Translation Strategies of the Titles of Ancient Chinese Books: A Case Study of *The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook*. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(3), 058–066, DOI: [10.53789/j.1653-0465.2022.0203.007](https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2022.0203.007). p

**To Link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2022.0203.007>. p

*This article is one of research results of the project entitled “English Translation and Dissemination of Chinese Sci-tech Classics Under the Perspective of Poly-system Theory: A Case Study of The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook (2020KY13004)” sponsored by the Department of Education of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China.*

**Abstract:** Ancient Chinese books envelope Chinese culture and wisdom, and the titles of them serve as a window for readers to have a glimpse of their essence. A good title provides information like the topic or theme of a book along with aesthetic reading experience. In cross-culture exchanges, to intrigue the interest of readers or give a clue of the ancient books as to what they are looking for, the good translation of titles of ancient Chinese books finds its significance in this respect. This paper focuses on the translation strategies of the titles of ancient Chinese books from Chinese to English. The paper figures out the definition of ancient Chinese books from the perspective of history before it goes further to explore the classification and features of their titles. Given that the case studies are based on the examples from the complete English version of *The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook* by Wang Hong, this paper briefly introduces the book and its author, followed by the translation principles and strategies of the titles of ancient Chinese books. Semantic and communicative translation strategies are to be discussed with specific translation methods respectively. It is hoped that this paper could help readers realize the importance of title translation and provides some suggestions on the translation strategies of titles of ancient Chinese books in order to be accepted by target readers.

**Keywords:** Title translation strategies; ancient Chinese books; cross-culture communication; *The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook*

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past five thousand years, the Chinese culture has stood the test of time and still remains exuberant in vitality today, embodying itself as a miracle in the long history of human civilization. Undoubtedly, the consistent inheritance of ancient classics has made great contribution to the development of Chinese culture. Ancient Chinese books are precious cultural heritage for both China and the world. The translations of Ancient Chinese books are of significance in introducing the world to learn better about China and Chinese culture. Chinese ancient classics, as one of the important parts of Chinese culture, will facilitate readers of different countries to have a better understanding of Chinese people.

Just as a saying goes, the eyes are the window of the mind. A title is the eye of a book, a chapter or an essay. Titles gives readers a glimpse of the topic of a whole book or a whole piece, some of which may offer the main ideas or attitudes of writers. With such clues, readers may decide whether they are interested in reading further. If their interest is intrigued, they can read the full piece and if not, they could save the time to find something else. In this way, titles function as a guidance for generalizing main ideas, and providing important information as well. The translation of titles of ancient Chinese classics is supposed to provide the critical message of main ideas, genres or purposes for foreigner readers, who have less or limited knowledge about Chinese culture and intend to find something interesting them.

## 2. Definition of Ancient Chinese Books

Ancient Chinese books refer to the various codes and records of Chinese civilization in ancient times compiled or reprinted by later generations. Noteworthy, ancient Chinese books are alternatively named *dianji* that means all kinds of literature, but *dianji* doesn't necessarily indicate ancient books.

When *dianji* appeared remains unknown due to the long ages. As early as the Shang period (17 BC–11 BC), there was *dianji* in the form of records of decrees and regulations already. Historically, in the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC–476 BC), Confucius (551 BC–479 BC) reorganized the works written in remote antiquity and compiled them into six books (*The Book of Songs*, *The Book of History*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Book of Music* and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*) for education. In the Warring States Period (475 BC–221 BC), the transformation of slavery society to feudal society witnessed an impressive social phenomenon that all schools of thoughts contended for attention. However, the terminal time of the ancient Chinese books are controversial in three definitions. Some hold that the terminal time should be 1840, when the First Opium War (1840–1842) moved China into modern history; some regard it as 1911, when the Revolution of 1911 overthrew the rule of the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), while others argue for 1919, when the May 4th Movement brought China into a country fighting for freedom and democracy.

### 3. The Classification of Chinese Ancient Books

Ancient Chinese books are remarkably numerous and various in medium. The *Comprehensive Catalogue of Chinese Ancient Classics*, the most inclusive content of ancient Chinese books that was officially sponsored in 1994 and published between 2009 and 2013, has concluded a nearly total 200,000 types of ancient classics. Statistically, there are more than 50,000,000 ancient Chinese books stored in over 3000 libraries in China, according to an official census in 2017.

As for versions, ancient Chinese books could be found in manuscript, hand-copied book, manuscript copy, color hand-painted book, blocks-printed edition, movable type, movable clay sheet printed book, official seal, stone plate, chinaware sheet printed book, copper sheet printed book, photolithographic edition, stereotype, revised edition, augmented edition and so on.

In terms of content and subjects, ancient Chinese books could be classified as Confucian classics, historical records, philosophical writings, and literary collections. Specifically, they consist of literature, art, law, medicine, agriculture, history, calendar, music, engineering, geography, biography, religion, chemistry, diplomacy, politics, military science, technology, finance and so on. Confucian classics as an independent category is attributed to the political and academical orthodoxy of Confucianism in China's feudal society, mainly including *The Four Books* (*The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Confucian Analects*, and *The Works of Mencius*) and *The Five Classics* (*The Book of Songs*, *The Book of History*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Book of Rites* and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*), as well as books about music and philology. Historical records are abundant in quantity and complex in genre. They are made of a wide range of historical books, such as official history, unofficial history, annals, chronicles, official biography, unofficial biography, laws and regulations, and historical anecdotes, in addition to geography books and bibliography books. Philosophical writings are related to the works of various schools of thought and their exponents before pre-Qin times (before 221 BC), especially in time of the Warring States, like Taoism, Mohism and the Legalism and so on. Literary collections mean classical literature here, including poetry, lyrics, novels, essays and literary commentary and so on.

### 4. Features of Titles of Ancient Chinese Books

For one thing, the titles of ancient Chinese books are diverse in style. Some are clear and concise, constitutive of names, event, object, season, place, scenery or time and other concrete concepts. Some are ambiguous and obscure, which usually reflect the author's feelings and emotions, or their attitudes and perspectives, and frequently adopt rhetorical means like metaphor, pun, euphemism, and irony. From this respect, it's understandable to find irrelevance of titles with content.

For another, the titles in ancient Chinese books reveal clearly their genres, which indicates that to name a book is to categorize it. For a long time, Chinese people have employed the Four-part Categorization, a book classification system that divides ancient Chinese books into four categorizations, namely, Confucian classics, historical records, philosophical writings and literary collections. Thanks to long practice, some words become

established as well-recognized diction that suggests specific genre. For instance, philosophical writings are used to “X+子 (“子”, master in some field)”, historical records “史” (history) or “典” (historical book), like *History of the Song Dynasty*, «宋史» in Chinese, and *History of Liang Dynasty*, «梁典» in Chinese. Confucian works “經 (classic)” or “書 (book)” like *The Classic of Filial Piety*, «孝經» in Chinese, one of the 13 Confucian classics, and literary collections “集” (collection), such as *The Collection of Wang Linchuan*, «王臨川集» in Chinese, is a collection of poetry, essays and articles. Noticeably, some well-recognized words in one category may differ in another category in terms of meaning.

What’s more, duplication in titles can be seen in some cases. Take historical records for example. To emphasize their orthodoxy and authority, compilers in ancient China were inclined to choose spontaneously certain words that were well-recognized with legitimacy. Especially, when it comes to title the historical book of a dynasty that is a duplicate with previous one, there will be a definite confusion for readers. The same is true with the personal names.

In addition, a title followed with the number of passages or volumes is a popular combination in some way. Ancient scholars before Qin Dynasty (221 BC–207 BC) weren’t accustomed to adding titles for books and in some works, even there was no title for a piece of writing. The later generations gave the title for an article based on the first two characters. During the late Warring States Period to the early Han Dynasty (201 BC–220), writings generally possessed titles, but their compilation had no name.

## 5. Brief Introduction to *The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook (Mengxi Bitan)*

*The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook (Mengxi Bitan)* was authored by Shen Kuo, a prominent polymathic statesman in the Northern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) when he was dismissed from office at the age of 58. He spent his late years in Mengxi Garden and threw himself heart and soul into writing *The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook*, which envelopes his lifetime scientific and academic achievements. *The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook* has total 609 recollections and observations that are divided into 17 parts, covering a wide area official decrees and regulations, finance, military affairs, diplomacy, history, archeology, literature, art and science and technology (Wang 2011). Joseph Needham, a British authority on the history of Chinese science, acclaimed the work as “a landmark in the history of science in China”. By and large, the book presents the level of scientific advancement of the Northern Song Dynasty and Shen Kuo’s scientific reflections.

The first complete English translation of *The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook* was accomplished by Wang Hong and Zhao Zheng, and published by Paths International Ltd. in 2011. Wang Hong is a professor at Soochow University, doctoral supervisor, specializing in the translation practice and theoretical research of ancient Chinese Books. The translation examples mentioned in this paper will base on Professor Wang’s English version.

## 6. Translation Principles of Titles of Ancient Chinese Books

Professor PanWenguo, a famous linguist and senior translator in China, proposed the guiding translation principles of “understandability, readability and succinctness” (Pan 1998: 394). By understandability, it means



that translation should be easily understandable for ordinary readers. As for readability, it means that translation should be smooth and natural expressive. If the source language is too hard to represent its syntactic structure, translator could deal flexibly with it and try their best to convey meanings in fluent expressions for unmistakable understanding. About succinctness, it means translation by expressing semantic and connotative sufficiency in an economical way, which refuses expressive redundancy. Professor Wang Rongpei, a translation master in ancient Chinese classics, put forward the principle of “vividness on the basis of expressiveness” or “vivid expressiveness” (Wang 2009: 9). Expressiveness is the starting point in the translation of Chinese classics, and translators are supposed to produce accurate interpretation about the original text. Vividness requires translators to convey not only the form of the original language, but also its connotation, including contextual background, implicit meaning and tone.

As mentioned above, to decide the translation principles of ancient Chinese books, translators must take into consideration the cultural and social background, the purpose of translation, the expectations of readers, in addition to the content, style and text type of the source language, and the intention of the author, so as to achieve expressiveness and vividness as well as succinctness if possible.

When it comes to the translation of titles of ancient Chinese books, considering the textual features of diverse style, informative density and dominant nominalization in structure as well as the functions to imply or indicate main ideas and attract attention of potential readers, translators ought to take the principles of expressiveness and vividness, informativeness and succinctness.

## **7. Translation Strategies of Titles of Ancient Chinese Books**

Translation strategies refer either to a general mode of text transfer or to the transfer operation performed on a particular structure, item or idea found in the source text. In a broad sense, Jääskeläine defines translation strategies as “a set of (loosely formulated) rules or principles which a translator uses to reach the goals determined by the translating situation in the most effective way” (1993: 116). Narrowly speaking, Chesterman relates a translation strategy to procedure or method used to solve a particular kind of problem posed by the text to be translated or linked to the translation task (1997: 92). This paper regards translation strategy as a set of plans to deal with a specific translation problem from the perspectives of text type, language and culture.

The Chinese language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family while the English language is part of the Indo-European family, which suggests great difference between the two languages. According to Eugene A. Nida, “Translation consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style” (1969: 12). Specifically speaking, the closest natural equivalence in translation is up to a wide range of dimensions. The interlingual transformation between the Chinese language and the English language depends on their equivalence in semantics, form, context, style, image and cultural connotation and other meaning indexes.

Based on the different level of equivalence in these indexes above, there are full equivalence, partial equivalence and none equivalence. Full equivalence means the source language could find same semantic and syntactic counterpart in the target language. Partial equivalence is attributed to lexical polysemy and vagueness in addition to syntactic structure differences that lead to limited overlapping region in semantic field. What's more,

the context, readability and collocations exert an impressive influence on semantic stability. In this case, we need flexible methods to compensate the blank region caused by the partial equivalence. Zero equivalence indicates no counterpart between the target language and the source language. In another word, zero equivalence has to deal with semantic or syntactic vacancy.

In the translation of the titles of ancient Chinese books into English, given that the textual features of the titles of ancient Chinese books and the distinctive language family between Chinese language and English language, semantic translation and communicative translation are advocated as two general translation strategies to deal with different equivalence in the two languages. Semantic translation and communicative translation are proposed by Peter Newmark (1981) to emphasize the role of target-text readers.

### 7.1 *Semantic Translation*

Semantic translation “attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original” (Newmark 1981: 39), which emphasizes the authority of the source language author.

#### 7.1.1 *Literal Translation*

Literal translation is a translation strategy or technique involving a choice of target language equivalents that stay close to the form of the original while ensuring grammaticality in the target language.

No matter what language we speak, we must share some experiences, which serve as the common ground for the zero misunderstanding in either semantic translation or communicative translation. When the source language could find its full equivalence in the target language in terms of form, meaning and cultural context, without any semantic or communicative ambiguity, we adopt semantic translation to convey information to the target readers while try to maintain the sound, form and meaning of the source language.

In some ancient Chinese books, the titles are composed of topic + category. If the topic could find full equivalence in English, then literal translation could be employed.

Example 1《木經》: *Timberwork Manual*

The *Timberwork Manual* is a work on house building methods, and it is also the first wooden structure building manual in the history of China. “木” here refers to wooden structure building instead of wood itself, “經” in this case means a guide or operational procedures. Both Chinese characters could find their English Counterpart, and considering the conciseness of titles, we have 《木經》translated into *Timberwork Manual*.

《齊民要術》: *Manual of Important Arts for the People’s Welfare*

Example 2《夢溪筆談校證》: *The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook: A Variorum Edition*

*The Brush Talks from the Dream Brook* is the masterpiece of Shen Kuo. In his thirties, Shen repeated dreaming about a beautiful garden with a brook flowed with rich susurrus and he fancied it so much. Coincidentally, he happened to find such a place a dozen years later and bought it as his residency. When he finished the book in the garden, he gave his sketch book the name “夢溪” or dream brook literally. In consideration of the historical background of the work, it is more reasonable to literally translated “夢溪” into Dream Brook. “筆談” means brush talks in denotation. Ancient Chinese used brush pen for written communication. “校證” here indicates a text with notes. Given the above, the denotations of comprised phrases in the title could represent the original meaning and form, so literal translation is adopted.

Likewise, «新校證夢溪筆談» is corresponded to *The Newly-Edited Brush Talks from the Dream Brook*. There are some other examples such as «夢溪筆談全譯» (*A Complete Translation of the Brush Talks from the Dream Brook*), «夢溪筆談選註本» (*Selected Readings from the Brush Talks from the Dream Brook*), «續筆談» (*Sequel to Brush Talks from Dream Brook*), and «補筆談» (*Supplement to the Brush Talks from the Dream Brook*).

### 7.1.2 Transliteration

Transliteration is the act, process, or result of writing letters or words using the corresponding characters of another alphabet or writing system.

As we all know, besides denotation, words or phrases have connotation that has root in the characteristic way of thinking and social traditions of a nation, where the source language finds cultural or lexical vacancy in the target language. The world is supposed to respect the cultural particularity of every nation, for the sake of cultural diversity and justice. What's more, target readers look forwards to some foreignness or an exotic touch in a foreign land to expand their horizon. Thus, transliteration is a way to deal with zero equivalence and show respect to the authority of the source language author, which are usually seen in titles with names, like the name of characters or real persons including family name, given name, style name, the name of places, buildings, ages and dynasties and so on.

Example 3 «莊子»: *Zhuangzi*

*Zhuangzi* is a Taoist classic, a compiled collection of Taoist doctrines put forward by Zhuangzi (369 BC–286 BC), a representative Taoist philosopher in the Warring States, and his disciples. Zhuangzi as a name is composed of Zhuang, the family name of Zhuang Zhou, and zi, the respectful address. In ancient China, people added zi to the name of figures who had a great social influence and credibility. *Zhuangzi* as a book title, takes the name of a Taoist master to refer to both the author's name and his thoughts. In this situation, transliteration is appropriate for name translation for the sake of clearness, conciseness and exotic experience for readers.

### 7.1.3 Literal Translation Plus Transliteration

If we have name + genre mode of titles, we can use literal transliteration plus transliteration to deal with.

Example 4 «趙飛燕外傳»: *Stories about Zhao Feiyan*

Zhao Feiyan is the beloved empress of Emperor Cheng of Han Dynasty, famous for her charming dance, attractive beauty and slim figure. “外傳” means an unofficial biography or stories.

Similarly, «王莽傳» is translated into *The Biography of Wang Mang*.

王莽 or Wang Mang is the founder of Xin Dynasty (9 AD –23 AD) after his usurpation of the throne of the Western Han Dynasty. 傳 means official biography or history books written in biographical style, different from a story-oriented biography in authority.

Example 5 «金瓶梅»: *Jin Ping Mei, Plum in the Golden Vase*

«金瓶梅» or *Jin Ping Mei* is regarded as the fifth Great Classical Novel in Chinese Literature and one of the Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel. It used to be despised due to its vivid erotic depiction. The author, Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, literally Scoffing Scholar of Lanling, talks about the romance and lust between a dissolute merchant Ximen Qing with his wife and six beautiful concubines against a corrupted and immortal age. The secularization-featured novel gives impressive depiction on the three of the six concubines, Pan Jinlian, Li Ping-er and Pang Chunmei. *Jin Ping Mei* is a blending term from the names of the three women. Jin means Pan

Jinlian, literally “golden lotus”, Li Ping-er, literally vase, and Pang Chunmei, literally spring plum.

Since international readers lack of cultural background of the novel or the names of the three women, they find no semantic meaning in a mere blending name. To improve the understanding and communicative effects, literal translation along with the transliteration is recommended.

## 7.2 *Communicative Translation*

Communicative translation “attempts to produce on its readers the effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original” (Newmark 1981: 39), which attaches great importance to the target language readers’ needs.

### 7.2.1 *Adding*

Adding means supply necessary words in translation, making the version grammatically correct, semantically clear, rhetorically sound, logically acceptable and culturally appropriate. (LianShuneng 2006: 130)

Example 6«東京賦»: *Ode to the Capital City Luoyang*

“東京” today is inclined to refer to Tokyo, the capital city of Japan, while in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220), “東京” refers to Luoyang, the capital and the author Zhang Heng meant Luoyang in the title. Therefore, in order to avoid misunderstanding of its ancient denotation and present denotation, the background information is necessary to add. “賦” is an descriptive prose interspersed with verse. To be concluded, «東京賦» is translated into *Ode to the Capital City Luoyang* and the Capital City is added to make clear understanding for readers.

Example 7«嘉祐本草»: *Herbal Medicine Compiled in Jiayou Period*

“嘉祐” or Jiayou is one of reign titles of Emperor Renzong of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127). Jiayou is a reigning period that lasted from 1056 to 1063. Therefore, in translation, we need add the category word “period” to the transliteration of Jiayou to show readers the general meaning of Jiayou.

Similarly, we may translate«開寶本草» into *Herbal Medicine Compiled in Kaibao Period*.

### 7.2.2 *Interpreting*

Interpreting means annotating the translatable “obstacles” in the source language with interpretive target language, to achieve smooth understanding for readers, which is a common compensating method in bilingual or multilingual transformation.

Example 8«外臺秘要»: *Magic Prescriptions*

«外臺秘要» (*Waitai Miyao*) was compiled by Wang Tao in the middle of Tang Dynasty (618–907). It is a comprehensive medical compilation composed of 40 volumes, with 1104 medical fields and more than 6000 prescriptions that had existed before the Tang Dynasty. As for the title, 外臺 (*Waitai*) has two popular explanations. First of all, 外臺 is understood as a local official position, based on the fact that the author started to compile the book when he was sent to be a local official who had been an official of the central government. The other explanation believes 外臺 share the same meaning with 蘭臺 (*Lantai*), a general reference to the imperial library, because Wang Tao had worked for over 20 years in Hongwen Library, the imperial library then, where his abundant readings in medicine offered a great chance for him to make such great compilation. “秘要” means major and essential ideas.

However, the conciseness of titles won’t allow rich and lengthy background information. In addition, besides the different medical theories, in this medical symposium, prescriptions are the dominated composition.



On account of the above reasons, «外臺秘要» is interpreted as *Magic Prescriptions* to give readers a gist of the works.

## 8. Conclusion

As an “eye” to a book, a title plays a significant role in attracting the attention of readers by providing the essential information of a book. The titles of Ancient Chinese books have developed their own distinctive characteristics and naming system thanks to the long history. To translate well the titles of ancient Chinese books, translators are supposed to analyze carefully their features and find out the most appropriate principles to guide their translation. As a cross-culture social activity, the translation of titles of ancient Chinese books has to take readers’ reaction and need into serious consideration, which requires translators to try every way to help their readers get through the cultural blocks between the source language and the target language.

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(Editors: MI Yaoge & LENG Xueyuan)