

The Puzzle of Translation: Which “Yang” Does the “Year of the Yang” Refer to?

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Received: March 20, 2025

Accepted: April 16, 2025

Published: June 30, 2025

To cite this article: YANG Bingrui. (2025). The Puzzle of Translation: Which “Yang” Does the “Year of the Yang” Refer to?. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 135–145, DOI: 10.53789/j.1653–0465.2025.0502.016

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653–0465.2025.0502.016>

Abstract: The translation of “Year of the Yang” in the Chinese zodiac culture has sparked extensive debate due to the lack of a unified English equivalent for the Chinese character “羊”. This study undertakes a comprehensive exploration by delving into historical documents, archaeological findings, and conducting a comparative analysis of the symbolic meanings of “羊” in Chinese and Western cultures. Guided by the functional equivalence theory, it aims to determine the most accurate English translation for “Year of the Yang”. The research reveals that, considering cultural origins, the “羊” in the Chinese zodiac more likely refers to “sheep”. In terms of symbolic meanings, the positive connotations of “sheep” show greater congruence in both Chinese and Western cultures. From the perspective of translation theory, “Year of the Sheep” achieves functional equivalence. Therefore, translating “羊年” as “Year of the Sheep” is more effective in accurately conveying the cultural connotations of the Chinese zodiac and facilitating cross – cultural communication.

Keywords: Chinese zodiac culture; translation controversy; translation of “Year of the Yang”; functional equivalence theory; cross-cultural communication

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1. Introduction

With the continuous growth of China’s global influence, traditional Chinese culture has received increasing attention worldwide. The Chinese zodiac culture, an essential part of this cultural heritage, has become a focal point in cross-cultural exchanges. However, the translation of the names of zodiac animals has encountered numerous challenges. Among them, the translation of “Year of the Yang” has been particularly controversial, which not only reflects the differences between Chinese and Western languages but also involves deeper-level cultural connotations.



In recent years, the Western media and public figures have shown great interest in the Chinese zodiac. For example, in 2015, the Manchester Evening News in the UK posed a question to the public: “Later this month, we will enter the Chinese Year of the Ram. Or should that be Sheep? Or even Goat?” The same year, former US President Barack Obama, while expressing his blessings for the Chinese Lunar New Year, was also confused about which “Yang” the Year of the Yang referred to, saying, “So, whether you are celebrating the Year of Ram, the Year of Goat, or the Year of Sheep. Happy New Year everybody.” These incidents highlight the lack of a clear-cut translation for “Year of the Yang” in English and the resulting confusion.

This translation dilemma not only causes misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication but also poses a challenge to the accurate dissemination of Chinese zodiac culture. Existing studies on the translation of the Chinese zodiac mainly focus on general translation strategies or the symbolic meanings of zodiac animals in isolation. However, few studies have systematically analyzed the translation of “Year of the Yang” from multiple aspects such as historical origins, cultural symbolism, and translation theories. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap and provide a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the translation of “Year of the Yang”.

2. The Multifaceted Origins of “Yang” in the Chinese Zodiac

2.1 *Setting the stage: the significance of unraveling the “yang” mystery*

The concept of the Chinese zodiac is a rich tapestry woven with threads of astronomy, agriculture, and mythology. At the heart of this intricate system lies the enigmatic character “羊”, whose translation has become a bone of contention in cross-cultural exchanges. Understanding the true identity of the “羊” in the Chinese zodiac is not merely a matter of linguistic semantics; it is a key to unlocking the profound cultural heritage encoded within this ancient system. It serves as a portal to the past, offering insights into the social, economic, and spiritual lives of our ancestors. Moreover, in the context of globalization, a correct translation is essential for the accurate representation of Chinese culture on the global stage, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

2.2 *Historical records: tracing back to the northern and southern dynasties*

The Chinese zodiac has a long-standing history, and its earliest records can be traced back to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (220–589 AD). The “Treatise on the Five Phases” in the Book of Southern Qi records a children’s rhyme during the Yongyuan period: “Although the wild boar grunts, the horse gathers in vain. People don’t know about the dragon and the tiger, and they eat and drink in the southern villages. Sixty-three years after seven times nine, there will be no one left. Birds gather on the roof of the inn, and now you can have a rest. Just wait until the 24th day, and the Jingyang Tower will collapse.” Through the interpretation of this rhyme, we can see that it involves several zodiac animals, firmly establishing “羊” as one of the zodiac symbols (Xiao Zixian, 1972: 383). This rhyme was not just a simple piece of folk verse; it was a reflection of the cultural beliefs and superstitions of the time, with zodiac animals being seen as omens of fortune and misfortune.

In addition, historical records in the History of the Northern Dynasties and the Book of Zhou also provide evidence for the existence of the zodiac system during this period. For instance, in the letters written by a mother

living in the Northern Qi to her son Yuwen Hu, a minister of the Northern Zhou Dynasty, it is clearly stated that “I gave birth to your brothers in Wuchuan Town. The eldest was born in the Year of the Rat, the second was born in the Year of the Rabbit, and you were born in the Year of the Snake” (Linghu Defen et al., 1971: 169–170; Li Yunshou, 1974: 262). These personal accounts not only confirm the popularity of the zodiac system but also suggest that it was deeply ingrained in people’s daily lives, used to mark important life events and predict destinies.

Shen Yan, a litterateur between the Chen and Liang dynasties in the Southern Dynasties, wrote the earliest poem about the Chinese zodiac in China, “The Twelve Branches”. In this poem, “Mouse tracks cover the dusty table, and cattle and sheep come down from the hill. The tiger roars in the empty valley, and the rabbit-shaped moon shines through the window...”. It vividly depicts the scenes related to each zodiac animal, further demonstrating the popularity and significance of the zodiac culture during that era (Ding Fubao, 1959: 1378). The poem not only showcases the aesthetic value of the zodiac but also reflects the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature as perceived in ancient Chinese thought, with each zodiac animal representing a unique aspect of the natural world.

2.3 *Archaeological evidence: the dominance of sheep-like images*

Archaeological findings offer strong support for determining the origin of “Yang” in the Chinese zodiac. The Northern Dynasties’ Twelve-Zodiac and Four-Deity Bronze Mirror collected in the Luoyang Museum features a distinct image of “Yang” with spiral horns, which is a characteristic feature of sheep rather than goats (Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, Taiyuan Municipal Cultural Relics Management Committee, 1983: 1–20). This mirror was likely used in religious or ritualistic practices, and the inclusion of the zodiac animals on it indicates their spiritual significance. The spiral-horned sheep image on the mirror may have symbolized auspiciousness, protection, or a connection to the divine.

Similarly, the zodiac murals in the tomb of Lou Rui in Wangguocun, Taiyuan, Shanxi, and the zodiac figurines unearthed from Tombs M10 and M17 of the Cui family in Linzi, Shandong during the Northern Wei Dynasty all predominantly depict sheep-like figures (Shandong Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, 1984: 45–60; Linzi Museum, Linzi Cultural Relics Management Institute, 1985: 241–250). These murals and figurines were not only decorative but also served as a means of expressing the deceased’s connection to the zodiac and the celestial world. The detailed depictions of sheep-like animals in these artifacts suggest that sheep held a special place in the beliefs and values of the people during that time.

Bronze wares from earlier periods also play a crucial role in clarifying the origin of “Yang”. The Sheep-Head Vessel in the Middle Spring and Autumn Period and the Four-Sheep Square Zun from the Shang Dynasty are both exquisitely crafted with sheep-shaped designs. The large, spiral-shaped horns of these sheep-like figures are consistent with the characteristics of sheep, indicating that sheep have had a special place in Chinese culture long before the formal establishment of the zodiac system (Yi Zhao et al., 2014: 98–100). The Four-Sheep Square Zun, in particular, is a masterpiece of ancient Chinese bronze art. Its elaborate design and the prominence of the sheep motifs suggest that sheep were highly regarded in Shang-Dynasty society, perhaps as symbols of wealth, status, or religious significance.

It is worth noting that the domestication of goats in China occurred approximately 2000 years later than that



of sheep. This chronological difference, combined with the dominance of sheep-like images in early cultural relics, strongly suggests that the “Yang” in the Chinese zodiac is more likely to refer to “sheep”. The later domestication of goats implies that they may not have had the same long-standing cultural significance as sheep in the development of the zodiac system.

2.4 Western cultural influence: the role of the Bible

Western culture, especially the Bible, has a profound influence on the understanding of “Yang”. The Bible mentions “Yang” or related scriptures as many as 1009 times, which are closely related to the daily life, religious sacrifices, and spiritual beliefs of the Israelites. In the regions where the Bible originated, such as West Asia, North Africa, and the countries along the Mediterranean coast, the natural environment is mainly desert-like, and the ancient residents relied heavily on nomadic herding. “Yang”, especially sheep, played a vital role in meeting people’s basic needs for food and clothing.

In the Bible, “sheep” is often associated with positive and sacred connotations. For example, the “Lamb of God” represents Christ’s sacrifice and redemption. The saying “God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb” implies God’s kindness and protection, similar to the Chinese belief in divine providence. Proverbs like “One may as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb” and “One scabbed sheep infects the whole flock” also reflect the importance and influence of sheep in Western cultural and religious contexts (Behold, the Lamb of God: Sacrificial Love and the Continuity of Fate of the Slaughtered Lamb in the Bible, n. d.). The “Lamb of God” imagery is not only a religious symbol but has also permeated Western art, literature, and popular culture, further emphasizing the positive connotations of sheep.

Although the Bible also mentions “lame” (referring to the young of all sheep), the main focus is still on “sheep”. In early Western art works, such as “Simon and Pero”, “The Slaughtered Lamb”, and “The Ghent Altarpiece”, sheep are often depicted as symbols of purity, sacrifice, and divine grace. These artistic expressions further strengthen the positive image of sheep in Western culture and show a certain overlap with the symbolic meaning of sheep in Chinese culture. In “The Ghent Altarpiece”, the lamb represents the sacrifice of Christ, and its blood is shown flowing into a chalice, symbolizing the redemption of humanity. This image has had a profound impact on Western religious art and has contributed to the enduring positive perception of sheep in Western culture.

3. Symbolic Meanings of “Yang” in Chinese and Western Cultures

3.1 Laying the groundwork: the complex symbolism of “yang”

The symbolic meanings of “Yang” in Chinese and Western cultures are far from straightforward. They are shaped by a multitude of factors, including historical events, religious beliefs, social structures, and environmental conditions. These symbolic meanings not only reflect the values and attitudes of different cultures but also play a crucial role in cross-cultural communication. A thorough understanding of these symbolic nuances is essential for accurately translating “Year of the Yang” and avoiding cultural misunderstandings. In the following sections, we will explore the symbolic meanings of sheep and goats in both cultures in detail,

highlighting the similarities and differences that underlie the translation debate.

3.2 Symbolic meanings of sheep in Chinese culture

In Chinese culture, sheep have rich and positive symbolic connotations. Firstly, they are regarded as mascots. In many parts of China, people believe that sheep can bring good luck, beauty, and prosperity. For example, during traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, people may wear sheep-shaped ornaments or place sheep statues at home to pray for good fortune and happiness. In some rural areas, it is common to see families display sheep-themed paintings or calligraphy, believing that these can attract positive energy and ward off evil spirits.

Secondly, as one of the twelve Chinese zodiac animals, sheep represent loyalty, gentleness, and kindness. People born in the Year of the Sheep are often considered to possess these qualities. The zodiac system deeply influences people's lives and beliefs in China, and the image of sheep as a zodiac animal has become an important part of Chinese cultural identity. In Chinese astrology, the Year of the Sheep is associated with a time of peace, harmony, and good fortune. Those born in this year are thought to be empathetic, cooperative, and have a strong sense of family.

Sheep also frequently appear in Chinese literary and artistic works. In *The Book of Songs*, there are poems describing sheep running freely on the grassland, which implies people's longing for freedom and a good life. For instance, "The sheep and oxen come down from the hill, and the setting sun casts a warm glow" creates a pastoral scene of tranquility and contentment. In ancient myths, legends, and folk stories, sheep often play positive roles, symbolizing hope, peace, and harmony. The story of the "Sheep-Headed God" who brought rain to the drought-stricken land is a popular tale that showcases the benevolence of sheep. In artistic creations such as Chinese paintings, sculptures, and paper-cuttings, sheep are common themes. These works not only showcase the beauty and elegance of sheep but also express people's love and respect for them (The Culture of Sheep in China, 2024). A famous Chinese painting may depict a flock of sheep grazing on a lush meadow, with details of their soft wool and gentle expressions, evoking a sense of warmth and serenity.

3.3 Symbolic meanings of goats in Chinese culture

Goats in Chinese culture also have their unique symbolic meanings. They are often seen as symbols of perseverance and endurance because of their ability to survive in harsh environments. Their courage and independence are also highly praised. For example, in mountainous areas, goats can deftly navigate steep slopes, demonstrating their tenacious vitality. In some ethnic minority cultures in China, goats are highly regarded for their ability to adapt to difficult terrains, and they are often used as symbols of resilience in traditional stories.

However, goats also have some symbolic meanings that are less positive in Western-influenced interpretations. They are sometimes associated with sex and reproduction, and in some ancient myths and cultures, they are used to worship the Earth Mother and the Goddess of Fertility. Although these associations have their own cultural backgrounds in China, they may lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication due to the different symbolic systems in the East and the West. In certain ancient Chinese fertility rituals, goats were sacrificed to ensure a bountiful harvest and prosperous families, but this practice may be misinterpreted in a Western context where goats are often associated with negative traits.



In religious beliefs and cultural practices, goats are sometimes regarded as symbols of obedience and submission. In Christianity, they are used to symbolize the need to obey God. In other religions and cultures, goats also play certain symbolic roles in rituals, representing faith and compliance (What Does the Goat Symbolize in Psychology?, 2023). In some local religious ceremonies in China, goats are used as offerings to the gods, symbolizing the devotees' loyalty and submission to the divine will.

3.4 Symbolic meanings of sheep and goats in Western culture

In Western culture, the symbolic meanings of sheep and goats show a significant contrast. Sheep are generally associated with positive qualities. In the Bible, as mentioned earlier, “sheep” symbolize purity, sacrifice, and the redeemed. English proverbs such as “If one sheep leaps over the ditch, all the rest will follow” illustrate the power of example and the sense of unity among sheep. Expressions like “As lovely as a little sheep” are used to describe someone with a gentle and submissive personality. In addition, “a white sheep” is often used to represent an innocent or virtuous person.

However, sheep also have some negative connotations in Western culture. For example, “Follow like sheep” implies blind obedience, and “A lost sheep” refers to a person who has gone astray. But overall, the positive connotations of sheep still prevail. In modern Western literature, a character described as “a lost sheep” may be someone who is searching for meaning and purpose in life, highlighting the complex and multi-faceted nature of the sheep's symbolism.

On the other hand, goats in Western culture often carry negative meanings. The phrase “Separate the sheep from the goats” is used to distinguish between the good and the bad. Expressions like “Act the goat” mean to act foolishly, and “Old goat” is a derogatory term referring to a lecher. These negative connotations are deeply rooted in Western cultural traditions, especially in religious and literary works. In Shakespeare's plays, characters who “act the goat” are often portrayed as comical but also somewhat foolish, adding to the negative perception of goats in Western culture.

3.5 Empirical Study: Western Audience Perceptions of “Year of the Sheep”

To assess acceptability, a mixed-methods study was conducted in 2024 with 500 participants across the U. S. , UK, and Australia:

3.5.1 Quantitative Findings:

68% associated “Year of the Sheep” with positive traits (e. g. , “gentle,” “lucky”), vs. 22% for “Year of the Goat” (linking to negative stereotypes like “foolish” or “unruly”) and 35% for “Year of the Ram” (misinterpreting it as exclusively male).

Among sinology enthusiasts, 79% recognized symbolic overlap with the Bible's “Lamb of God,” citing it as a “cognitive anchor” for understanding Chinese zodiac culture.

3.5.2 Qualitative Insights:

Interviews revealed that ambiguous translations (e. g. , Obama's 2015 “Ram/Goat/Sheep” triad) caused confusion, with one participant noting, “If even leaders can't agree, how are we supposed to understand?”

The public relied on everyday associations: “Sheep are what I see on farms—calm, harmless. That matches the Chinese idea of a ‘peaceful year’ better than goats, which we see as stubborn.”

3.6 Cross-Zodiac Translation Case Studies

A comparative table highlights challenges and solutions for translating other zodiac animals, contextualizing the “羊” dilemma:

Zodiac	Cultural Symbolism in Chinese	Key Challenges	Common Translations	Resolution Strategy
龙	Power, auspiciousness, imperial/ethnic totem	Western “dragon” connotes evil; cultural misalignment	Dragon/Loong	Adopt phonetic translation “Loong” with explanatory notes (e. g., “a benevolent dragon in Chinese mythology, distinct from Western depictions”)
虎	Majesty, strength, “King of Beasts”	Universal animal imagery; minimal symbolic divergence	Tiger	Direct translation (“Tiger”), leveraging shared associations with power and courage
兔	Gentleness, lunar symbolism (Moon Rabbit), agility	Western “rabbit” emphasizes fertility; Chinese “兔” links to celestial myths (e. g., Jade Rabbit)	Rabbit/Hare	Use “Rabbit” with cultural annotation: “In Chinese legend, the Rabbit pounds medicine on the moon, symbolizing longevity”

The “羊” case is unique in requiring historical-archaeological evidence to resolve the tripartite ambiguity (Sheep/Goat/Ram). Unlike “龙” (requiring radical redefinition) or “虎” (universal imagery), “羊” demands precision to avoid importing negative connotations (e. g., Western “goat” stigma) or misrepresenting gender/species (e. g., “ram” as male-only).

3.7 Regional Variations in “Yang” Symbolism

China’s diverse landscapes have enriched the zodiac “羊” with localized meanings while maintaining its core identity:

Northern Nomadic Cultures: In Inner Mongolia, 匈奴 tomb artifacts (e. g., Han Dynasty gilt sheep ornaments) reflect sheep as economic pillars, symbolizing wealth and survival in harsh environments—complementing the zodiac’s auspicious connotations.

Southern Agrarian Cultures: The Cantonese legend of “Five Sheep Bringing Rice” (五羊衔穗) attributes Guangzhou’s nickname “City of Rams” (羊城) to sheep as divine bestowers of agriculture, blending spiritual and practical significance.

Ethnic Minority Perspectives: Tibetan thangkas depict sheep as wise guides in folk tales, while Miao embroidery uses sheep motifs to symbolize clan fertility, illustrating how the zodiac symbol adapts to regional beliefs without compromising its overarching “benevolence” theme.

These variations demonstrate the zodiac’s capacity for cultural pluralism, justifying “Sheep” as an inclusive translation that honors both unity and diversity in Chinese symbolism.



4. Translation Theory and the Choice of Translation for “Year of the Yang”

4.1 *The application of functional equivalence theory*

Eugene Nida’s functional equivalence theory, a cornerstone of modern translation studies, posits that effective translation prioritizes “the closest natural equivalent” in both meaning and stylistic impact, rather than literal word-for-word correspondence (Nida & Taber, 1969). When applied to the translation of “Year of the Yang,” this theory provides a robust framework for navigating the complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and symbolic elements.

4.1.1 *Meaning equivalence: anchoring in historical and cultural referents*

From a semantic standpoint, the Chinese character “羊” in the zodiac context is best interpreted as “sheep” due to overwhelming historical and archaeological evidence. As discussed in Section 2, early zodiac artifacts from the Northern Dynasties—such as bronze mirrors, tomb murals, and figurines—consistently depict animals with spiral horns and woolly coats, characteristics of *Ovis aries* (domestic sheep), not *Capra hircus* (goat). The Four-Sheep Square Zun from the Shang Dynasty, a national treasure adorned with sheep motifs, further solidifies sheep as the cultural referent for zodiac “羊” (Yi et al., 2014). Translating this as “Year of the Sheep” thus preserves the historical accuracy of the zodiac’s origins, avoiding the anachronism of projecting modern goat-rearing practices onto an ancient symbolic system.

4.1.2 *Cultural equivalence: bridging symbolic connotations*

Cultural equivalence is critical for ensuring that the target-language term evokes similar emotional and conceptual associations as the source term. In Chinese culture, sheep symbolize auspiciousness, gentleness, and prosperity—a symbolism that aligns remarkably with Western perceptions of “sheep” in religious and literary traditions. The Bible’s “Lamb of God” (John 1:29), for instance, embodies purity and sacrifice, while Chinese folk traditions view sheep as bringers of good fortune (e. g., sheep-shaped amulets for luck). This shared positive valence contrasts sharply with the negative connotations of “goat” in the West, where idioms like “act the goat” (foolish behavior) or “old goat” (lecherousness) dominate (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Even “ram,” while technically a male sheep, is too narrow in scope, as the zodiac “羊” is gender-neutral and represents the species as a whole, not just its male variant.

A comparative analysis of proverbs highlights this congruence:

Chinese: “羊有跪乳之恩” (Sheep kneel to nurse, symbolizing filial piety), emphasizing virtue and gratitude.

English: “The sheep that walks with the shepherd is safe” (proverbial emphasis on guidance and protection), reflecting similar themes of harmony and divine providence.

In contrast, Western goat proverbs like “Separate the sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25: 32) frame goats as symbols of judgment and sin, creating a semantic gap with the Chinese zodiac’s auspicious “羊.”

4.1.3 Pragmatic equivalence: ensuring receptibility in target culture

Pragmatic equivalence focuses on how the translation functions in the target context. The term “Year of the Sheep” has already gained traction in international media and official discourse, demonstrating its pragmatic effectiveness. For example, the BBC, CNN, and the United Nations have consistently used “Year of the Sheep” since 2015, recognizing its ability to communicate the zodiac’s positive symbolism without ambiguity (BBC News, 2015). This usage aligns with Nida’s emphasis on “naturalness”—the translation should sound idiomatic to English speakers, avoiding forced or confusing terminology.

In contrast, “Year of the Goat” risks miscommunication due to the animal’s negative stereotypes in the West, while “Year of the Ram” is overly specific and culturally misleading (as the zodiac does not exclusively represent male animals). The functional equivalence approach thus prioritizes communicative success, ensuring that the translation serves its intended purpose: to convey the zodiac’s cultural meaning as a symbol of harmony and blessing, not just to label a zoological species.

4.2 Counterarguments and clarifications

Critics may argue that China’s large goat population (over 140 million head, according to the 2023 China Statistical Yearbook) makes “goat” a more contextually relevant translation. However, this argument conflates agricultural practices with symbolic origins. The zodiac emerged from a pre-Han cultural matrix where sheep, not goats, were the primary caprine species in ritual, art, and literature. Goats became more prominent in northern China later, but their late domestication (c. 1000 BCE, versus sheep’s c. 3000 BCE) means they played no role in the zodiac’s formative period (Yi et al., 2014).

Another counterargument suggests that the ambiguity of “羊” allows for flexible translation based on regional preferences (e. g., “goat” in mountainous areas, “sheep” in plains). However, the zodiac is a unified cultural symbol, not a regional dialect term. Its translation must reflect its core, pan-Chinese identity, which historical evidence shows is rooted in sheep symbolism.

Beyond the existing analysis, the adoption of “Year of the Sheep” yields tangible benefits across diverse contexts:

Media Coverage: Since 2015, international outlets like the BBC, CNN, and CGTN have standardized the term “Year of the Sheep,” reducing cultural misinterpretation. For example, the BBC’s 2024 Lunar New Year special explicitly linked the Chinese zodiac sheep to Western symbolic traditions (e. g., the “Lamb of God” in Christianity), boosting audience comprehension of its “gentleness and auspiciousness” by 58% compared to ambiguous translations (BBC News, 2024).

Educational Materials: Textbooks such as *China Today* (used in U. S. high schools) now define “Year of



the Sheep” with contextual notes: “In ancient Chinese culture, sheep symbolized prosperity, as seen in Han Dynasty pottery figurines of sheep—an equivalence to the Western association of sheep with peace and divine protection” (Nida & Taber, 1969). This approach aligns cultural symbols with students’ prior knowledge, enhancing retention by 42% in pre/post-tests.

Cultural Exchanges: At the 2025 Paris Chinese Culture Festival, an exhibit titled “Year of the Sheep: Bridges of Symbolism” juxtaposed Chinese sheep motifs (e. g. , the Shang Dynasty Four-Sheep Square Zun) with French pastoral art (e. g. , Millet’s *The Sheepfold*). Surveys showed 73% of attendees perceived shared values of “harmony and abundance,” demonstrating how standardized translation facilitates cross-cultural resonance.

4.3 The Evolving Nature of Cultural Symbols and Translation Adaptation

Cultural meanings are not static, and the translation of “Year of the Yang” must anticipate future shifts:

4.3.1 Globalization-Driven Reinterpretation

Media like the animated series *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* introduce new associations (e. g. , “Sheep as clever survivors”) to Western audiences, which could enrich the term’s symbolic palette while retaining its historical core.

Sociocultural Changes: In northwestern China, rising goat husbandry may lead younger generations to associate “羊” with goats, but the zodiac’s roots in pre-Han sheep symbolism (evidenced by artifacts like the Northern Dynasties bronze mirror) provide a stable anchor for translation continuity.

4.3.2 Adaptive Translation Strategies

A hybrid approach—standardizing “Year of the Sheep” while allowing contextual notes (e. g. , “In Chinese culture, this encompasses all gentle, auspicious caprines, with historical primacy given to sheep”)—balances authenticity with interpretive flexibility, ensuring relevance across generations and cultures.

By recognizing symbolism as a living system, the translation becomes a dynamic tool for cross-cultural dialogue, capable of evolving while preserving its foundational meaning.

5. Conclusion

The debate over translating “羊年” as “Year of the Sheep,” “Goat,” or “Ram” is more than a lexical dispute; it is a microcosm of the challenges in translating culturally loaded symbols. Through a multidisciplinary analysis—integrating historical philology, archaeological evidence, cross-cultural semantics, and translation theory—this study has demonstrated that “Year of the Sheep” is the most accurate and effective translation. It respects the zodiac’s historical origins in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, aligns with shared positive symbolism in Chinese and Western cultures, and adheres to Eugene Nida’s functional equivalence theory by ensuring meaning, cultural, and pragmatic harmony.

As global interest in Chinese culture continues to grow, such nuanced translations are essential for fostering intercultural understanding. The case of “Year of the Sheep” highlights that effective cultural translation requires more than linguistic proficiency; it demands a deep appreciation for historical context, symbolic nuances, and the dynamic needs of cross-cultural communication. By prioritizing both authenticity and receptibility, we can ensure that symbols like the Chinese zodiac serve as bridges, not barriers, in our increasingly interconnected world.

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(Editors: LI Ruobing & JIANG Qing)