

An Analysis of the English Translation of Museum Interpretive Texts from the Perspective of Thick Translation

—A Case Study of the Shaanxi History Museum

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Abstract

Shaanxi is rich in cultural and tourism resources and attracts a steady stream of foreign visitors. The Shaanxi History Museum is therefore an important vehicle for the overseas dissemination of Shaanxi culture and for constructing the image of Shaanxi. Based on thick translation theory, this paper analyzes the English translations of the museum's interpretive texts from three dimensions—cultural context, cultural explanation, and deeper connotation. It identifies current shortcomings in translation and aims to help overseas audiences gain a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural lineage of the Qin region, thereby promoting Shaanxi culture more effectively.

Keywords

Thick Translation, Cultural Relic Interpretive Texts, Shaanxi Culture, Shaanxi History Museum

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of globalization, China has continued to advance the overseas dissemination of its culture. Shaanxi is one of the major birthplaces of Chinese civilization, and Xi'an, as the capital of thirteen dynasties, possesses a profound cultural heritage. The Shaanxi History Museum, located here, is an important carrier of Qin civilization and Chinese cultural legacy. The museum's interpretive texts explain the meaning of cultural relics, build cultural memory, convey historical depth, and foster cultural identity, serving as a bridge between visitors and the relics.

According to the Shaanxi History Museum annual report, in 2023 the museum received 2.95 million visitors, a 2.6% increase compared with 2019 before the pandemic, setting another historical record. In 2024, the museum as a whole received 4.9533 million visits, including 3.4576 million visits to the main museum and 1.4957 million to the Qin and Han Branch Museum. With more than 2 million annual visitors and billions of clicks on its reservation system, the Shaanxi History Museum has become a must-visit destination for domestic and international tourists to Shaanxi. It plays an irreplaceable role in external publicity and image building for Shaanxi culture, and serves as a key platform for showcasing the charm of Shaanxi's historical culture and enhancing Shaanxi's international influence.

2. The Current Situation of English Translation of Interpretive Texts at the Shaanxi History Museum and the Concept of "Thick Translation"

2.1. Current Situation

Shaanxi, as an important birthplace of Chinese civilization, has accumulated a rich and distinctive cultural heritage. The Shaanxi History Museum, known as "a pearl of ancient capitals and a treasure house of Chinese civilization," is a cultural hall that displays the history of the Qin region and Chinese civilization. Its architecture follows the Tang-style form of "a central hall with four corner towers," featuring a regular layout and grand, layered structure that combines traditional spirit, regional characteristics, and contemporary significance.

Through field research, the author found that the English translations of the museum's interpretive texts are generally standard in terms of style. For example, passive voice, linking verbs, simple sentences, and coordinate sentences are used when introducing collections, which conforms to the requirements of expository writing and fulfills educational and promotional functions. However, in terms of conveying cultural connotations, some interpretive texts do not sufficiently explain the meaning of the relics, making it difficult for visitors to understand their historical and cultural significance. In terms of language expression, translators, by ignoring differences between Chinese and Western ways of thinking and culture, often translate literally those Chinese expressions that emphasize social value and the authority of tourism-related economic status. As a result, foreign visitors feel unfamiliar with the imagery and the intended communicative effect is hard to achieve. These shortcomings can be attributed to cultural factors—that is, translators overemphasize Chinese linguistic habits and modes of thought during translation while neglecting cultural differences between Chinese and English, as well as the cultural psychology and aesthetic preferences of readers (Appiah, 1993).

Thick translation can supplement the cultural context and help solve problems such as cultural omission and terminology confusion in the museum's English translations. The author therefore applies thick translation theory to analyze the English translations of interpretive texts in the Shaanxi History Museum, focusing on the historical background, craft features, and cultural significance behind the

relics.

2.2. Thick Translation Theory

Thick translation was proposed by scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah in 1993 as a translation strategy and research approach. It refers to the addition of various annotations, commentaries, and long prefaces within a translated text, placing the translation in a rich cultural and linguistic environment so as to integrate meanings obscured by the words themselves with the translator's intentions (Hong, 2006). In his essay on thick translation, Appiah points out that differences in cultural interpretation and ideology can obscure the connotations of a translated text. Moreover, due to cultural differences, the connotations of the translated text themselves are also uncertain. Appiah believes that thick translation can restore for readers the true historical background in which a text was created, and that this immersive approach enables readers to better understand and respect the culture embedded in the text.

2.3. Analytical Framework

To ensure the systematicity and reproducibility of the analysis, this study establishes an analytical framework before examining the selected examples. Drawing upon Appiah's theory of Thick Translation, the English translations are analyzed from three operational dimensions: Cultural Context, Cultural Explanation, and Deeper Connotation. Each example is examined according to the same analytical criteria rather than being discussed illustratively.

Cultural Context refers to the supplementation of historical, social, or cultural background that is necessary for target readers to understand the original text.

Cultural Explanation refers to the explicit interpretation of culture-specific concepts, institutions, historical references, or customs that may not be readily understood by international audiences.

Deeper Connotation refers to the reconstruction of implicit cultural values, beliefs, symbolic meanings, and modes of thinking embedded in museum interpretive texts.

These three dimensions serve as the analytical criteria for all six examples discussed in this paper. Each example is evaluated according to whether the translator reconstructs the cultural context required by Appiah's concept of Thick Translation, rather than merely adding explanatory or evaluative information.

2.4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach to investigate the application of Thick Translation in the English interpretive texts of the Shaanxi History Museum. Field research was conducted at the Shaanxi History Museum from June 9 to June 25, 2025. During this period, bilingual interpretive labels displayed in the museum's permanent exhibition galleries were photographed and transcribed for subsequent analysis. A total of 40 bilingual interpretive labels covering different

historical periods and exhibition themes were collected to ensure the representativeness of the research data. All bilingual interpretive labels cited in this study were photographed and transcribed by the author during field research. The transcriptions were verified against the original museum labels before analysis to ensure textual accuracy.

After data collection, all bilingual labels were coded and compared with their corresponding Chinese source texts. The analysis focused on translation strategies involving cultural supplementation, contextual explanation, and the reconstruction of implicit cultural meanings. Six representative examples were selected according to three criteria: 1) the presence of culture-specific expressions that may cause cross-cultural comprehension difficulties; 2) the use of explanatory translation strategies that potentially reflect Thick Translation; and 3) their relevance to one of the three analytical dimensions established in this study, namely Cultural Context, Cultural Explanation, and Deeper Connotation. To enhance the transparency and reproducibility of the research, each selected example was verified against the complete official bilingual museum label photographed during fieldwork. The Chinese source text and its corresponding English translation were transcribed verbatim before analysis. The analytical process consisted of four stages: data collection, transcription, coding, and comparative analysis. Each example was then examined using the same analytical framework to determine whether the additional translation information merely constituted ordinary explication or fulfilled Appiah's concept of Thick Translation by reconstructing the cultural context embedded in the original text.

Museum interpretive texts embody rich and unique ethnic culture, which requires cross-cultural interpretation in the English presentation of museum texts and, as far as possible, a reproduction of the source culture's meaning. Thick translation can create a cultural environment and explain specific ethnic cultural elements; it can stimulate readers' interest in the source language and the background of the relics, and greatly reduce the difficulties in understanding caused by cultural differences.

Cultural relics in museums are carriers of history and culture, while interpretive texts are precisely cultural explanations. Numerous domestic scholars have conducted research from the perspective of cultural interpretation and have found that thick translation has positive significance for cultural translation. Duan (2006) argues that thick translation can create an interactive space between readers and translations, strengthen cross-cultural communication, and serve as a beneficial translation method. Sun (2010) proposes that from the perspective of cultural anthropology, the essence of thick translation is interpretive translation; it allows translators to exercise subjectivity while promoting readers' cultural understanding. Zhang and Hu (2011) argue that thick translation is an effective strategy for dealing with cultural translation and also provides new ideas for translation studies.

As one of the first batch of national 4A-level tourist attractions, the Shaanxi

History Museum, with its rich collections, refined exhibitions, beautiful environment, and high-quality services, has become an important window for disseminating outstanding Chinese culture and carrying out external cultural exchange. The English translation of its interpretive texts is a key vehicle through which the world perceives Chinese culture. It not only meets the service standards of cultural institutions in the context of globalization and promotes mutual learning between Chinese and foreign civilizations and cross-cultural understanding, but also further highlights the museum's role in the international cultural communication system. Based on thick translation theory, this paper analyzes the English translations of the museum's interpretive texts from three dimensions—cultural context, cultural explanation, and deeper connotation—with the aim of helping Shaanxi culture reach the world and demonstrating the important position of Shaanxi's historical culture within Chinese civilization.

3. An Analysis of Thick Translation in the English Translation of Interpretive Texts at the Shaanxi History Museum

The author will interpret the application of thick translation in the English translations of the Shaanxi History Museum's interpretive texts from three aspects: cultural context, cultural explanation, and deeper connotation.

3.1. Cultural Context

The core value of museum interpretive texts lies not only in accurately reproducing the basic information of cultural relics and exhibits and faithfully conveying the literal meaning of the original, but also in deeply exploring and transmitting the historical context, cultural background, and spiritual essence behind the exhibits, so that visitors can understand the stories and cultural depth behind the relics. For English translations aimed at foreign visitors, the requirements for translation quality are even higher, and thick translation theory provides a core guiding framework for such texts. Thick translation emphasizes moving beyond surface-level linguistic conversion and, through strategies such as cultural annotation, background explanation, contextual supplementation, and connotative extension, preserving and transmitting the deeper cultural significance of the source text to the greatest extent.

Example 1

Source: Official bilingual interpretive label, Permanent Exhibition, Shaanxi History Museum. Photographed and transcribed by the author during field research (June 9-25, 2025).

Source text: ……华夏始祖炎黄部落勃兴于……

Translation: ...the Yandi and Huangdi clans, both reputed as ancestors of Chinese nation...

From the perspective of cultural context in thick translation theory, the phrase “both reputed as” in the translation is not a simple literal rendering of “ancestors”. Instead, it supplements the historical and cultural background implied in the

source text through cultural explanation, reflecting the functions of “contextual supplementation” and “cultural interpretation” in thick translation. For Chinese readers, “Yandi and Huangdi as the ancestors of the Chinese nation” is a concept with deep cultural accumulation. People generally understand the cultural tradition that Yandi and Huangdi are the common ancestors of the Chinese nation, so “ancestors” needs no additional explanation to be understood. For English readers, however, “Yandi” and “Huangdi” are unfamiliar historical and cultural figures. If they are directly translated as “the ancestors of the Chinese nation,” foreign visitors may mistakenly assume that these two figures possess verified historical identities, while overlooking their mythological and legendary nature as well as their role in constructing Chinese cultural identity. By adding “both reputed as,” the translator signals that Yandi and Huangdi being regarded as the ancestors of the Chinese nation belongs more to a shared belief in Chinese traditional historical memory and cultural identity than to an objectively verifiable fact in modern historiography. This handling not only accurately conveys the national identity concept embodied in “descendants of Yandi and Huangdi” in Chinese culture, but also conforms to the linguistic habits of English academic and cross-cultural expression, which distinguish historical fact from cultural tradition. It effectively avoids cultural misunderstanding.

Therefore, by adding the culturally restrictive information “both reputed as,” the translator helps target readers understand the historical tradition, historical conception, and national identity behind the concept of “ancestor,” making the translation achieve not only linguistic conversion but also complete transmission of cultural meaning and improving the accuracy and acceptability of cross-cultural communication.

Unlike ordinary explicitation, the addition of “both reputed as” does not merely improve linguistic clarity. Instead, it reconstructs the historical-cultural context in which “Yandi” and “Huangdi” function as symbolic ancestors within Chinese cultural memory. Therefore, this addition conforms to Appiah’s notion of Thick Translation rather than simple explicitation.

Example 2

Source: Official bilingual interpretive label, Permanent Exhibition, Shaanxi History Museum. Photographed and transcribed by the author during field research (June 9-25, 2025).

Source text: 旗鼎内壁共铸铭文 4 行 28 字，大意是说：某年八月初，王姜将原赐予师枌的土地收回，转赐给旗，旗便做此鼎纪念。铭文反映了“普天之下，莫非王土；率土之滨，莫非王臣”的土地占有制形态，是研究西周土地制度的重要资料。

Translation: Twenty-eight characters inscribed on the interior side of Ding read that Yu made the tripod to commemorate his great honor to receive land bestowed by Empress Wang Jiang. The record well proves the monarch’s absolute control of the land as an important material of land system then.

In translating Example 2, the translator added explanatory information to help

foreign visitors understand the Western Zhou land system and political culture. First, “Yu made the tripod to commemorate the event” is translated as “Yu made the tripod to commemorate his great honor to receive land,” where “his great honor” is added. The original text only states that Yu cast the tripod to commemorate receiving land; it does not directly evaluate the significance of the event. The translation, however, makes explicit the “great honor” involved, thus highlighting the political prestige implied in receiving land and helping foreign visitors understand the deeper reason for casting the vessel.

Second, when translating “all within heaven under heaven belongs to the king; all within the borders are his subjects,” the translator does not use a literal rendering but instead translates it as “the monarch’s absolute control of the land.” Here, “monarch,” “absolute,” and “control” are all added information. The original text indirectly expresses the idea of royal supremacy over land through a quotation from the Book of Songs, whereas the translation directly explains this cultural meaning as “the monarch’s absolute control of the land,” making the political system more explicit and reducing the difficulty of comprehension for target-language readers.

The added information in the translation does not depart from the original text; rather, based on a full understanding of the cultural implications of the source text, it makes implicit meanings explicit and supplements them, enabling target readers to more accurately understand the political system and land concept of the Western Zhou period. This interpretive amplification oriented toward communicative effect is precisely a manifestation of the cross-cultural function emphasized by thick translation theory.

The added information is not simply evaluative amplification. Instead, it embeds institutional and historical knowledge that enables foreign readers to interpret the political ideology behind the inscription, thereby satisfying Appiah’s requirement that translation should reconstruct the cultural context of the original text.

3.2. Cultural Explanation

Cultural explanation is an important function of museum English interpretive texts and a concrete manifestation of thick translation’s explanatory role. Thick translation emphasizes moving beyond simple linguistic conversion and, through the addition of cultural background, explanation of historical allusions, and clarification of social context, helps target audiences fully understand the source culture. In museum interpretive texts, cultural relics are not merely historical remains; they are important carriers of Chinese civilization and national culture. Their cultural meanings are often difficult to convey fully through literal translation alone. Given that overseas audiences generally lack the relevant historical and cultural knowledge, translators need to use the explanatory function of thick translation to provide appropriate additions and explanations concerning the historical origin and cultural implications of the relics, thereby compensating for cul-

tural differences among foreign visitors and reducing comprehension barriers. This allows audiences not only to learn the basic information about the relics, but also to gain a deeper understanding of their cultural connotations and era-specific value, thereby improving the cross-cultural communication effect of museum English interpretive texts and better promoting the international dissemination of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

Example 3

Source: Official bilingual interpretive label, Permanent Exhibition, Shaanxi History Museum. Photographed and transcribed by the author during field research (June 9-25, 2025).

Source text: 错金杜虎符……

符是古代朝廷用于传达命令、调动军队的一种特殊凭证……

Translation: Gold-inlaid Tiger-Shaped Tally with Inscription ...Tally was a special token used by emperor to transmit his order and to confer military power upon his ministers...

According to the analytical framework established in this study, this example is categorized under cultural explanation because the translator does not merely clarify the literal meaning of the source text but reconstructs the institutional knowledge underlying the tiger tally. Rather than introducing the artifact as an isolated object, the translation explains its function within the centralized military administration of imperial China.

In translating “Tiger Tally,” the translator uses “Tiger-Shaped” to clearly indicate that the tally is designed in the shape of a tiger, enabling foreign visitors to intuitively understand its appearance. More importantly, the translation does not stop at introducing the relic itself; it further explains its historical and institutional background. In particular, when translating “the tally was a special token used by the imperial court in ancient times to convey orders and mobilize troops,” the translator first specifies “the imperial court” as “the emperor,” thereby making it clear to visitors unfamiliar with ancient Chinese political systems who issued the orders. Second, “mobilize troops” is further explained as “confer military power upon his ministers,” an expression that not only explains the tally’s use in dispatching troops but also reveals its political function within the ancient centralized system, helping visitors understand that the tally was not merely a relic but also an important institutional tool for imperial control over the army.

These explanations supplement the historical context lacking on the part of foreign visitors. Without such supplementation, it would be difficult for foreign visitors to understand why a tiger-shaped bronze tally could represent a military command. In translation, the translator does not limit himself to introducing the name of the relic, but instead integrates cultural annotation, background explanation, contextual supplementation, and cultural amplification to transmit the military system, imperial politics, and ancient administrative mechanisms embodied by the tally. Such a translation method, which extends from relic introduction to institutional and cultural explanation, is a typical example of cultural explanation

in the translation of museum texts.

Unlike ordinary explication, the additions in this example do not simply make the wording easier to understand. Instead, they reconstruct the political institution behind the artifact by explaining the emperor's exclusive authority to delegate military power. This enables international readers to understand why the tiger tally functioned as an official military credential in ancient China.

In Appiah's view, Thick Translation should reconstruct the cultural context that gives meaning to the original text. The explanation of imperial military authority therefore goes beyond linguistic clarification and restores the institutional background embedded in the museum label.

Example 4

Source: Official bilingual interpretive label, Permanent Exhibition, Shaanxi History Museum. Photographed and transcribed by the author during field research (June 9-25, 2025).

Source text: 金怪兽……有学者推测，金怪兽有可能是神话传说中的蛊雕，以之作为冠冕顶饰，反映了匈奴人对勇猛强悍动物的崇拜，该饰件综合运用了多种工艺，制作精湛，是最有代表性的匈奴艺术珍品。

Translation: Gold Beast Ornament...This uniquely designed object is a masterpiece art work of the Huns... Such gold and silver ornaments are typically in animal shapes with zoomorphic patterns. The beast image shown here not only demonstrates rich imaginations of the craftsman but also arouses curiosity among its admirers. Such a crown decoration may show people's worshiping of those ferocious animals.

This example belongs to the dimension of cultural explanation because the translator supplements the artistic conventions of Xiongnu goldwork rather than merely describing the appearance of the artifact.

When translating "This ornament integrates multiple techniques and is exquisitely crafted, making it one of the most representative artistic treasures of the Huns," the translator does not render it word for word, but adds the sentence "Such gold-and-silver ornaments are typically in animal shapes with zoomorphic patterns." This content does not appear explicitly in the original text; rather, it is added by the translator based on the cultural features of Hunnic art. The translation places the individual relic within the broader Hunnic artistic system, enabling foreign visitors to understand that animal forms and animal motifs are common artistic features of Hunnic gold and silver ornaments rather than unique features of this particular item. This supplementary explanation not only helps foreign readers understand why the object takes the form of a beast, but also reveals the aesthetic tradition and nomadic cultural characteristics of the Huns, who revered animal imagery. The added description of zoomorphic patterns is not an evaluative addition intended to embellish the translation. Instead, it introduces a characteristic artistic tradition of Xiongnu culture that is absent from the target readers' cultural knowledge. Without this cultural explanation, international readers would probably regard the beast image as an isolated artistic choice rather than a recur-

ring visual tradition in nomadic art.

In addition, the translation adds “This uniquely designed object is a masterpiece art work of the Huns.” The original text only states that this is a Hunnic artistic treasure, without emphasizing its artistic status. By adding the evaluative expression “masterpiece artwork,” the translator helps readers form an overall sense of the relic’s artistic value before reading the main text, thereby further enriching the contextual presentation of the object. Such supplementation of historical and artistic background reflects the audience adaptation and cultural explanation emphasized by thick translation. The translation therefore reconstructs the artistic and cultural background of the artifact, fulfilling Appiah’s concept of Thick Translation by restoring the interpretive context omitted in literal translation.

3.3. Deeper Connotation

Deeper connotation is the core link that connects the material attributes of exhibits with their cultural value in museum English interpretive texts. Its function goes far beyond basic information transmission. It determines whether international visitors can move from merely “understanding the exhibit” to truly “understanding the culture,” and it also supports the deeper shaping of the museum’s cross-cultural communication and cultural image (Wei et al., 2024). The deeper connotations of exhibits often include historical background, ethnic customs, and value concepts—cultural contents that are beyond the cognitive familiarity of English audiences. Effectively conveying these connotations in English can fill the cognitive gap of foreign visitors and avoid misunderstandings and information loss caused by cultural differences. As a regional cultural calling card, the deeper connotation in museum interpretive texts is an important carrier for showcasing the unique value of local civilization. It helps break the stereotype that “exhibits are merely antiques,” enabling overseas audiences to grasp the developmental logic and spiritual core of civilization and enhancing the international recognizability and communicative power of the culture.

Example 5

Source: Official bilingual interpretive label, Permanent Exhibition, Shaanxi History Museum. Photographed and transcribed by the author during field research (June 9-25, 2025).

Source text: 人面鱼纹盆(Figure 1)是彩陶的代表作之一。目前所见多用作仰韶文化半坡类型孩童葬具“瓮棺”的顶盖。陶盆底部留有小孔,先民认为可供死者灵魂出入。内壁绘鱼群围绕的人面,应是当时的一种图腾,或包含着生者对亡者的祝福和长者对晚辈的亲情。

Translation: As a masterpiece of the painted pottery, the human-face-and-fish-designed basin is often found to be used as the cover of children burial jars. The tiny holes bored at its bottom may allow the soul of the deceased in and out in the primitive belief. The interior pattern of human face surrounded by fish may symbolize a clan totem or the living’s blessing for the dead of the elderly affection for the young.



Figure 1. Pottery basin with human face and fish pattern.

According to the analytical framework, this example is classified under deeper connotation because the translation attempts to reconstruct the prehistoric beliefs and symbolic meanings associated with burial practices rather than merely describing the physical features of the artifact.

When translating “the human-face-and-fish-pattern basin,” the translator adopts standardized renderings, clearly defining the cultural attribution of the relic and conforming to the prerequisite of thick translation: making the cultural identity clear first, so as to lay a foundation for conveying deeper connotations. In precise translation of deeper meaning, thick translation requires that the audience first understand the basic information accurately and then proceed to cultural interpretation.

The translator renders “weng coffin” as “burial jars” rather than “coffin” or “weng coffin.” By using “burial,” the essential funerary function is clearly conveyed, removing the initial cognitive barrier and leaving room for subsequent cultural interpretation. In the traditional sense, a “coffin” is usually rectangular and fitted with a lid, while the “human-face-and-fish-pattern basin” is a round pottery vessel. The translator therefore chooses “jars” rather than “coffin,” which better fits the shape of the object. However, “jars” does not indicate the funerary function, so “burial” is added to make that function explicit and fully restore the core meaning of “weng coffin.” If “weng coffin” were translated simply as “coffin,” it might create a mismatch in imagery and cause confusion for foreign visitors, preventing them from focusing on the core cultural meaning conveyed later in the text.

When translating “a small hole is left at the bottom of the pottery basin, which the ancients believed allowed the soul of the deceased to enter and exit,” the translator adds “in the primitive belief,” making the implicit semantic hierarchy in the Chinese text explicit, clarifying the boundary between “objective fact” and “subjective belief,” and enabling both intra-sentence logic and the narrative logic of the whole paragraph to form a coherent chain. This restores the deeper meaning of the “soul concept” and avoids foreign visitors misinterpreting it as a practical function. This kind of logical supplementation is a typical example of thick translation’s strategy of making implicit information explicit. It is not an irrelevant cultural annotation; rather, it fills in the logical markers necessary for target readers

to understand, responding to the fundamental differences in Chinese and English linguistic logic. It not only clarifies the semantic hierarchy within the sentence but also connects the narrative chain of the entire cultural explanation, ultimately achieving the deeper cultural goal of accurately conveying the ancestors' views of life, death, and belief, while avoiding the logical mismatch and cultural misunderstanding that literal translation might cause.

The translator renders “totem” as “clan totem” rather than simply “totem” because the original term has a specific cultural restriction: it refers to the collective worship symbol of the Banpo-type clan society in the Yangshao culture and is an identity and belief marker of a kinship-based clan community, rather than a generalized spiritual symbol. By adding the modifier “clan,” the translator directly places the concept within the category of “prehistoric clan worship,” preventing foreign visitors from confusing it with “totem” in other cultural contexts such as personal totems or tribal deities. This accurately restores the specific cultural attribute of the original term and essentially fills a cognitive gap between Chinese and Western cultures through lexical supplementation. It is a typical embedded thick translation strategy. The translator does not use lengthy footnotes, but instead precisely supplements the boundaries and background of the cultural concept through the addition of a single modifier, dissolving cross-cultural semantic misalignment and giving the deeper meaning of the motif a clear socio-cultural grounding, fully aligning with the core logic of thick translation: moving from surface to depth and conveying the essence of culture.

Overall, the translation achieves equivalent transmission of deeper connotations by accurately rendering cultural terms, clarifying semantic logic, and supplementing necessary context, enabling international audiences to truly understand the cultural logic behind the exhibit. These additions reconstruct the worldview, ritual beliefs, and symbolic system behind the artifact. They therefore satisfy Appiah's definition of Thick Translation rather than representing ordinary explication.

Example 6

Source: Official bilingual interpretive label, Permanent Exhibition, Shaanxi History Museum. Photographed and transcribed by the author during field research (June 9-25, 2025).

Source text: 三彩三花马(Figure 2)……

“三花”是指马鬃经精心修剪后形成三缕堞垛(die duo, 即城墙上像齿状的矮墙)状的鬃毛。用“三花”来装饰马, 是唐代宫廷和贵族间流行的时尚, 也是良马和等级的体现。唐太宗陵前的“昭陵六骏”, 马鬃都被修饰成三花的样子。在唐代绘画和雕塑中, 三花马也屡见不鲜。

Translation: Tri-colored Pottery Horse with Three Locks of Mane...

This tri-colored pottery horse features finely trimmed mane with three long locks (namely Die Duo), which is not only a popular decoration style but also a sign of its identity. This type of horses can be commonly found in the Tang-dynasty paintings and sculptures.



Figure 2. Tri-colored pottery horse with three locks of mane.

This example is analyzed under the dimension of deeper connotation because the mane style symbolizes social status and aristocratic culture in the Tang Dynasty. The translator strictly follows the information hierarchy of the original text and renders “tri-colored three-lock horse” as “Tri-colored Pottery Horse with Three Locks of Mane.” By adding “Pottery,” the material and core morphological characteristics of the relic are made explicit, anchoring its ontological attributes and laying the foundation for subsequent cultural interpretation. “Three Locks of Mane” accurately corresponds to the relic’s core feature, also laying the foundation for the transmission of deeper meaning. The transliteration “Die Duo” preserves the cultural specificity of the original term. However, without further explanation of its resemblance to the crenellations of ancient city walls, international readers cannot fully understand the cultural association intended by the source text.

However, merely transliterating “Die Duo” without explaining that it refers to “tooth-like low walls on city walls” and its relation to the shape of the mane actually adds a cognitive barrier for foreign readers. When translating the part about “a fashion popular among the Tang imperial court and aristocracy” and “the Six Steeds of Zhao Mausoleum,” the translator omits the specific social-class restriction and deletes the historical evidence of the “Six Steeds of Zhao Mausoleum,” presumably to avoid confusing foreign visitors unfamiliar with Chinese history and culture. This example shows that the deeper connotation in thick translation is the key link between the attributes of the collection and its cultural value, and also an important bridge for cross-cultural communication that helps international visitors understand the cultural logic behind the exhibit. Its value far exceeds basic information transfer. Only by effectively filling cross-cultural cognitive gaps on the basis of complete and accurate facts and logic can we truly help international visitors understand the cultural logic of the exhibit and achieve a profound effect in external cultural communication.

This example demonstrates that Thick Translation requires not only the preser-

vation of culture-specific terms but also the reconstruction of the historical associations that give those terms their cultural significance.

4. Conclusion

Thick translation provides a new translation strategy for the English translation of museum interpretive texts and is crucial to the high-quality development of the Shaanxi History Museum and the promotion of cultural exchange. However, there is still room for improvement in the English translations of the museum's interpretive texts in terms of content, language, and communicative effect.

During field research, the author found that in two exhibition halls of the Shaanxi History Museum, the same relic—"Gold Bowl with Mandarin Duck and Lotus Pattern"—was translated differently: one version was "Gold Bowl with Mandarin Duck and Lotus Pattern", while another was "Gold Bowl with Mandarin Ducks and Lotus Petals." This clearly shows that the translation quality of museum interpretive texts still needs to be improved.

At present, the English translation of museum interpretive texts still suffers from ambiguous rendering of culture-specific items and insufficient transmission of deeper connotations. Some translations omit core historical facts, literal translation leads to semantic deviation, and some even mistranslate key information such as dates and the functions of relics. These problems not only affect international visitors' understanding of the value of the exhibits, but also constrain the museum's cross-cultural communication function.

Therefore, improving the quality of museum interpretive translation requires a systematic review mechanism involving historians, translators, and other relevant parties (Li & Yao, 2025), with a focus on the accuracy of historical facts, linguistic standardization, and cultural adaptability. Such a mechanism can systematically correct translation problems of various kinds. In this way, interpretive texts can truly serve as bridges for cross-cultural communication, helping global audiences understand the civilizational essence behind the relics, promoting the dissemination of outstanding traditional Chinese culture to the world, and enhancing the museum's international influence and professional credibility. It will also provide a platform for civilizational exchange and mutual learning, enabling the value of cultural relics to transcend linguistic and regional barriers and showcasing to the world the unique charm and profound heritage of Chinese culture.

Author Contributions

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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