

A Study on the English Translation of High-Frequency Movement Names in Chen-Style Taijiquan from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the international dissemination of Chen-style Taijiquan, the English translation of its high-frequency movement names faces challenges such as the absence of standardized renderings and the loss of cultural information. Adopting the theoretical framework of the “three-dimensional transformations” (linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions) in Eco-translatology, this study selects eight typical movements (including “Single Whip”, “Cloud Hands”, “White Crane Spreads Its Wings”, “Buddha’s Warrior Attendant Pounds Mortar” and “Lazily Tying Coat” among others) and examines the adaptive selection processes underlying their established English translations. The findings reveal that: at the linguistic dimension, translators employ literal translation or structural restructuring to achieve formal correspondence and grammatical acceptability; at the cultural dimension, they resort to image transplantation, explanatory conversion, or direct transliteration to preserve culture-specific items, thereby conveying animal imagery, religious-philosophical connotations, and combat wisdom; at the communicative dimension, they ensure the practicality and unambiguity of the translated names in teaching and interactive contexts through functional explicitation and action-oriented instruction. This study demonstrates that the existing translations are the result of the translator’s multi-dimensional trade-offs and adaptations within the translational eco-environment, effectively integrating linguistic forms, cultural connotations, and communicative functions. It thus offers a referential eco-translatological pathway for the cross-cultural translation of Taijiquan terminology.

Keywords

Eco-Translatology, Chen-Style Taijiquan, English Translation of Movement Names

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the ever-deepening international dissemination of Chen-style Taijiquan, the English translation of its high-frequency movement names serves as a crucial vehicle for communicating technical essentials and cultural connotations; thus, its accuracy and expressiveness directly affect the effectiveness of cross-cultural transmission. At present, although multiple translations coexist, no unified standard has been established, resulting in problems such as the loss of cultural information or inadequate communicative functions. An and An (2023) point out that existing studies “lack translation research on different schools of Taijiquan”. This study focuses on the English translation of high-frequency movement names in Chen-style Taijiquan, precisely as a response to this research gap. Eco-translatology, with its analytical framework of “three-dimensional transformations” (linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions), views translation as an adaptive selection process in which translators adapt to the translational eco-environment. This framework offers a systematic perspective for translating terminology that is simultaneously linguistically concise, culturally loaded, and pedagogically practical. Accordingly, this study examines the existing English translations of high-frequency movement names in Chen-style Taijiquan, aiming to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses through the lens of three-dimensional transformations, so as to provide references for formulating translation strategies that are better adapted to the target-language ecology, thereby facilitating the effective dissemination of Taijiquan culture.

2. An Overview of Eco-Translatology

Eco-translatology was formally proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen in 2001 as an interdisciplinary theory that examines translation activities from an overall ecological perspective. The core tenet of this theory regards the translation process as “a process in which the translator adapts to the translational eco-environment and makes adaptive selections of the text”. The “translational eco-environment” here is a complex synthesis composed of multiple elements, including language, culture, society, as well as the author, reader, client, and other agents. Within this environment, the translator is required to understand and adapt to the source text from multiple dimensions, and then make selective transformations and reconstructions in the target language. Eco-translatological research is both “metaphorical” and “literal” in nature. The “metaphorical” sense refers to holistic studies that draw an analogical comparison between the translational ecology and the natural ecology; the “literal” sense refers to research oriented toward the interrela-

tions between the translator and the translational eco-environment, especially studies on the translator's survival situation and competence development within the translational ecology (Hu, 2008).

3. Three-Dimensional Transformations in the English Translation of High-Frequency Movement Names in Chen-Style Taijiquan

This study selects a number of high-frequency movements in Chen-style Taijiquan as the core analytical objects. This study takes the old frame first routine, old frame second routine, new frame first routine, as well as popularized routines such as the 38-form and 19-form of Chen-style Taijiquan as the scope of investigation. Through a systematic review of the movement arrangements in the above routines, it is found that movements such as "Single Whip", "Cloud Hands", "White Crane Spreads Its Wings", "Buddha's Warrior Attendant Pounds Mortar", "Six Sealings and Four Closings", "High Pat on Horse", "Pushing Hands" and "Protect the Heart with the Fist" recur in all these routines and constitute the core technical skeleton; they are therefore defined as high-frequency movements. On this basis, the selection is further conducted according to the following three criteria to ensure the systematicity and representativeness of the research samples. The first is structural high-frequency: the selected movements constitute the technical skeleton of the old frame, new frame, and various simplified routines of Chen-style Taijiquan, recurring frequently within the routines and thus possessing foundational and representative significance. The second is the compound nature of technical and cultural connotations: these movement names not only refer to specific bodily techniques but also deeply embed rich traditional Chinese cultural codes, such as animal imagery, philosophical concepts, and religious elements. Li (2013) points out that one of the naming methods of Chen-style Taijiquan movement names is "observing things to extract meaning", which "uses the images, movements, and offensive-defensive implications of birds and beasts for naming", thus reflecting the rich animal imagery and cultural connotations in Taijiquan movement names. The third is the diversity and controversiality of existing translations. The current English renderings exhibit a spectrum of strategies ranging from literal translation, free translation, to transliteration, and there is room for discussion regarding their translational accuracy and acceptability, which facilitates in-depth comparison and evaluation under the "three-dimensional transformations" framework of Eco-translatology. To ensure the clarity and traceability of the research corpus, the English translations analyzed in this paper are all drawn from Andrew Townsend (2017), *The Art of Taijiquan: An Examination of Five Family Styles*.

The cases selected on the basis of the above criteria constitute a micro-field for observing how translators make adaptive selections within the complex "translational eco-environment". Taking this as a point of departure, the following analysis will examine the translation practice of these movement names from three

dimensions: linguistic, cultural, and communicative.

(1) Linguistic Dimension

Based on the typical translation examples determined by the aforementioned selection criteria, the analysis of the three-dimensional transformations in Eco-translatology can proceed layer by layer. First, we examine the most fundamental level of linguistic form. The so-called “adaptive selectional transformation from the linguistic dimension” refers to the translator’s adaptive selectional transformation of linguistic forms during the translation process (Hu, 2011).

Before analyzing specific examples, this study establishes the following three evaluative criteria for the linguistic dimension: (1) formal correspondence, i.e., whether the translation corresponds to the source language at the lexical and syntactic levels; (2) grammatical acceptability, i.e., whether the translation conforms to the norms of English expression; and (3) conciseness, i.e., whether the translation preserves the brevity of the source-language term. These criteria will guide the assessment of whether a given translation constitutes a successful adaptive selection at the linguistic dimension.

Example 1:

Source text: 单鞭

Target text: Single Whip

Analysis: “单鞭” is a core posture of Chen-style Taijiquan. Its movement involves one hand forming a hook and pulling backward, while the other hand stands upright with the palm pushing forward, with the body extended sideways. The required power (jin) should be as supple, long, and sequentially connected as a whip stroke. Examined from the linguistic-dimensional perspective of Eco-translatology, the translation “Single Whip” is a typical manifestation of “adaptive selectional transformation” of linguistic form. This translation adopts a completely literal strategy, rendering “单” and “鞭” as “Single” and “Whip” respectively at the lexical level, and strictly preserves the concise “adjective + noun” phrase structure of the source language at the syntactic level. Such a transformation maximally maintains the linguistic structure of the original, rendering the translated name highly isomorphic with the source language in linguistic form, conforming to the basic norms of English expression, and thereby achieving direct “adaptation” at the linguistic level within the target-language eco-environment.

Example 2:

Source text: 云手

Target text: Cloud Hands

Analysis: “云手” is one of the core mother movements of Taijiquan. Its action consists of the hands alternately tracing vertical circles in front of the body, continuous and fluid like drifting clouds, so as to train bodily coordination, ward-off energy (peng jin), and the somatic perception of the soft, flowing, and continuous imagery of “cloud”. From the perspective of linguistic-dimensional transformation in Eco-translatology, the translation “Cloud Hands” is an adaptive selection that deconstructs and recombines the source-language compound noun

structure through imagery disassembly and juxtaposition. The metaphorical compound “云手” is directly deconstructed into two independent nouns, “Cloud” and “Hands” which are then juxtaposed in the target language as a novel noun phrase. This strategy largely preserves the original combinatorial mode of imagery and syntactic brevity, achieving direct lexical correspondence, and constitutes an adaptive attempt to creatively accommodate the source-language expression pattern within the target-language ecology.

(2) Cultural Dimension

Building upon the analysis of linguistic-form transformation, an examination from the perspective of Eco-translatology needs to be further extended to the level of cultural connotations carried by the text. Transformation at the cultural dimension requires the translator to go beyond mere formal linguistic correspondence and strive to effectively convey and transplant the unique cultural imagery, historical allusions, and philosophical ideas embedded in the source text.

To ensure consistent evaluation, this study sets out the following three criteria for the cultural dimension: (1) transmission of cultural imagery, i.e., whether the animal, religious, or philosophical imagery of the source term is preserved or effectively transformed; (2) treatment of culture-specific items, i.e., whether appropriate strategies (literal translation, explanatory translation, transliteration, etc.) are adopted for highly culture-loaded terms; and (3) cultural intelligibility, i.e., whether target-language readers can grasp the cultural connotations underlying the movement. These criteria will be applied in the subsequent analysis.

Example 3:

Source text: 白鹤亮翅

Target text: White Crane Spreads its Wings

Analysis: “白鹤亮翅” is a classic Taijiquan movement that imitates the spreading posture of a white crane. Through the extension of the arms and the rising and lowering of the body, it conveys an image of lightness, elegance, and expansiveness, in which the “white crane” in Chinese culture often symbolizes nobility and longevity. Examined from the cultural-dimensional perspective of Eco-translatology, the translation “White Crane Spreads its Wings” is an adaptive selection that achieves a full transplantation of the cultural imagery. By rendering “白鹤” literally as “White Crane,” the translation preserves its cultural symbolism as an elegant animal in the target language; simultaneously, it dynamically reproduces the core posture of “亮翅” (spreading wings) through a subject-verb-object sentence structure. This strategy maximally conveys the vivid natural imagery and graceful aesthetic qualities of the source language, enabling target-language readers to intuitively perceive the movement’s form and cultural implications, thereby achieving effective adaptation and communication at the cultural dimension.

Example 4:

Source text: 金刚捣碓

Target text: Buddha’s Warrior Attendant Pounds Mortar

Analysis: “金刚捣碓” is a typical explosive-force movement in Chen-style Tai-

jiquan. Its form simulates the formidable posture of the Buddhist guardian deity “Vajra” (Jingang) wielding a pestle to vigorously pound a mortar (dui), embodying characteristics of firm, heavy, and solid power, along with profound religious-cultural imagery. From the perspective of cultural-dimensional transformation in Eco-translatology, this rendering makes a clear adaptive choice: in the face of the highly culture-specific concept of “金刚”, the translation does not adopt transliteration but instead constructs an intelligible image of a “Buddhist warrior attendant” in the target-language ecology through explanatory translation, effectively conveying the connotations of power and divinity embedded in the original term; at the same time, “Pounds Mortar” accurately and literally renders the concrete labor-action of “捣碓”. This choice prioritizes adaptation and transmission at the cultural dimension, converting the compounded cultural imagery (religious divine power and ancient labor) of the source language into a combination of images recognizable to target readers, thereby achieving effective transplantation of cultural symbols and accessibility of core meanings in a cross-cultural context. Ge (2024) also points out that if “金刚捣碓” is rendered as “Stamp Foot and Hammer Fist,” it only reflects the external shape of the movement without conveying the cultural connotation of “Jingang”, whereas “Buddha’s Warrior Pounds the Mortar” is more reasonable. This view corroborates the analysis of the present study, further demonstrating the effectiveness of explanatory translation at the cultural dimension.

Example 5:

Source text: 六封四闭

Target text: Six Sealing and Four Closing

Analysis: Analysis: “Six Sealing and Four Closing” is a core concept in Chen-style Taijiquan that embodies profound martial philosophy. It refers to the practice, in actual combat, of tightly “sealing” the six directions (up, down, front, back, left, and right) through intention (yi) and force (jin), while simultaneously achieving a rigorous “closing” of the entire body, internal and external, as well as the breath and energy pathways, so as to attain a perfect offensive-defensive state of controlling the opponent without being controlled, reflecting the unique Chinese martial wisdom regarding spatial control and energy management. Examined from the cultural-dimensional perspective of Eco-translatology, this translation makes an adaptive choice characterized by a high degree of formal correspondence. It strictly follows the original’s numerical and antithetical structure (“six sealing” versus “four closing”) and renders the abstract philosophical and martial concepts of “封” and “闭” directly as “Sealing” and “Closing” respectively. The use of the singular rather than the plural forms more closely approximates the abstract and generalized character of the Chinese original, which does not carry numerical markers, and avoids the possible misreading of “specific counts” or “multiple actions” that English plural forms might suggest. This choice maximally preserves the source term’s word-formation, numerical philosophy, and highly generalized and abstract cultural character, directly presenting the Eastern philo-

sophical thinking embodied in the original term to target-language readers. It ensures the formal integrity and uniqueness of the core cultural concept, enabling the term to be accepted and disseminated in the target-language ecology as a complete culture-specific item.

Example 6:

Source text: 高探马

Target text: High Pat on Horse

Analysis: “高探马” is a classic Taijiquan movement that imitates a rider leaning forward in the saddle. Typically, one hand reaches forward and upward while the other presses downward, with the body leaning forward and the hips sinking backward, embodying an imitation of ancient mounted archery and combat postures, and conveying martial wisdom of extending the body and controlling distance. From the perspective of cultural-dimensional transformation in Eco-translatology, this translation makes a visually vivid adaptive choice. It creatively converts the abstract body-posture concept of “探” (reach/probe) into a concrete “Pat”, while fully retaining the core images of “High” and “Horse.” This choice vividly reconstructs a dynamic scene of “a rider patting lightly on a horse at a high position” within the target-language ecology. Although there is a certain shift in precision from the original “reaching” intention, it effectively conveys the historical-cultural context of mounted archery and the basic spatial orientation (high, horse) underlying the original term. This strategy prioritizes the vivid perceptibility of cultural imagery, allowing target-language readers to quickly grasp the typical posture and cultural associations of the movement, thereby achieving a successful transformation and adaptation at the cultural dimension from abstract body dynamics to a concrete scene.

(3) Communicative Dimension

Having examined the transformations at the linguistic and cultural levels, the analysis ultimately needs to focus on the practical utility of the translations—that is, the transformation at the communicative dimension. This dimension is concerned with whether the translation can fulfill its core communicative functions of guiding practice and facilitating understanding within the target context. [Shen and Dai \(2021\)](#) also emphasize that “in translation, techniques should be improved, and the translated text should be simple and easy to understand, conforming to the objective and rational reading style of Western audiences”. Therefore, the evaluative criteria for the communicative dimension may include functional explicitation, unambiguity, and instructional usability.

For the communicative dimension, this study adopts the following three evaluative criteria: (1) functional explicitation, i.e., whether the translation clearly conveys the combative intent or training purpose of the movement; (2) unambiguity, i.e., whether the translated name avoids misunderstanding in teaching and exchange; and (3) instructional usability, i.e., whether the name is easy for teachers to explain and for learners to imitate and remember. These criteria will inform the assessment of the communicative effectiveness of each translation.

Example 7:

Source text: 懒扎衣

Target text: Lazily Tying Coat

Analysis: “懒扎衣” is one of the classic movements in Chen-style Taijiquan. Its name originates from Ming-dynasty martial arts and literally means “lazily tying up one’s coat”, while actually embodying a martial realm of composure and readiness, responding to movement with stillness. From the linguistic-dimensional perspective of Eco-translatology, “Lazily Tying Coat” adopts a literal translation strategy, rendering “懒”, “扎” and “衣” as “Lazily”, “Tying” and “Coat” respectively, thereby highly preserving the formal features of the source language at the lexical and structural levels. From the cultural-dimensional perspective, this translation preserves the movement imagery and cultural associations of the source language through image transplantation: a martial artist who appears indolent yet is actually poised for action, adjusting his garment and preparing to face an opponent. This imagery conveys the Daoist philosophical implication of “doing nothing yet leaving nothing undone” and the Taijiquan combative wisdom of “striking after the opponent strikes,” enabling target-language readers to intuitively perceive the cultural disposition behind the movement. However, from the communicative-dimensional perspective, this rendering fails to fully explicitate the practical combat intention embedded in “扎衣”—namely, tightening the garment and preparing for battle—so target-language readers may understand it merely as an everyday act of dressing, and its direct instructional function in teaching contexts is somewhat insufficient. Overall, this translation successfully preserves the form and imagery of the source language at the linguistic and cultural dimensions, but exhibits insufficient functional explicitation at the communicative dimension, reflecting the translator’s trade-offs and adaptations across the three-dimensional transformations.

Example 8:

Source text: 护心拳

Target text: Protect-the-Heart Fist

Analysis: “护心拳” is a typical defensive movement in Chen-style Taijiquan. Its core essence lies in using the fist or forearm to block and strike, thereby protecting the vital central line of the chest and abdomen (i.e., the “heart” area in traditional terminology) while seizing opportunities for counterattack, embodying the martial philosophy of integrating offense and defense. From the perspective of communicative-dimensional transformation in Eco-translatology, this rendering makes an adaptive choice of intention explicitation. The translation uses hyphens to combine “Protect-the-Heart” with “Fist” into a compound noun phrase, which not only preserves “Fist” as the central head noun but also directly specifies, through premodification, the protective target (the heart) and the protective intention of the movement. This structure is common in English terminological naming; it is concise, memorable, and enables target practitioners to quickly grasp the core combative intent and target body area of the movement. This transfor-

mation prioritizes the direct instructional function and unambiguity of the translation in cross-cultural teaching and training contexts, effectively facilitating the accurate transmission and practical application of technical essentials. It exemplifies the successful realization of the translation's communicative effectiveness within the target-language eco-environment.

4. Conclusion

Based on the three-dimensional transformation framework of Eco-translatology, this study has analyzed the English translations of eight high-frequency movement names in Chen-style Taijiquan. Overall, the linguistic dimension achieves formal correspondence through literal translation; the cultural dimension conveys cultural connotations through image transplantation and explanatory translation; and the communicative dimension emphasizes functional explicitation and instructional practicality. The three dimensions are not always balanced, and translators often need to weigh cultural fidelity against communicative accessibility. For example, “Buddha’s Warrior Attendant Pounds Mortar” adopts an explanatory rendering that balances cultural imagery and intelligibility; “Six Sealing and Four Closing” uses singular forms to avoid ambiguity; and “High Pat on Horse” employs “Pat” to construct a dynamic scene, which, though deviating from the literal meaning of “探” (reach), facilitates cross-cultural understanding.

This study is limited by a small sample size and a relatively single source of translation examples. Future research may expand the corpus and conduct empirical studies. Practically, this study can provide a reference for the standardization of Taijiquan terminology. Han (2024) argues that “taijiquan” should be adopted as the standardized English translation, a view that also offers a reference for the translation of Chen-style Taijiquan movement names. This suggests that translated names should balance linguistic form, cultural connotation, and instructional function so as to promote the effective international dissemination of Taijiquan culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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