



Differences between Chinese and Western Tea Cultures and English Translation Techniques for Tea-Related Terms

Yue Yu¹, Pianpian Huang²

¹Hospitality Management Major, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, China

²Department of College English, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, China

Email: 37783302@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Yu, Y. and Huang, P.P. (2026) Differences between Chinese and Western Tea Cultures and English Translation Techniques for Tea-Related Terms. *Open Access Library Journal*, 13: e16000.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1116000>

Received: September 7, 2026

Accepted: October 10, 2026

Published: October 13, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

With social development, economic trade and cultural exchanges between China and other countries have become more frequent. In this context, to enhance the competitiveness of domestic industries and cultural influence, it is necessary to base international communication on a sound understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and to carry out corresponding communication and promotional work with care. Notably, the umbrella term “Western tea culture” covers highly heterogeneous traditions across Britain, continental Europe, Russia, and the United States, rather than representing a unified monolithic practice. This paper therefore treats “Western tea culture” as a collective label for these varied regional traditions, while acknowledging their internal diversity. This paper takes tea translation as its research object, actively explores the problems arising in tea translation against the backdrop of cultural differences, distinguishes three practical translation categories (tea-name translation, commercial product-description translation, and cultural-concept translation), and seeks appropriate techniques and methods for tea translation. The aim is to promote the exchange and development of Chinese and Western tea cultures and to boost the tea industry through improved translation competence.

Subject Areas

Culture

Keywords

Differences between Chinese and Western Tea Cultures, Tea Translation, Translation Techniques, Heterogeneous Western Tea Traditions, Translation

 Typology

1. Comparison of Characteristics of Chinese and Western Tea Cultures

1.1. Origins and History of Chinese and Western Tea Cultures

Botanical and archaeological evidence indicates that the wild progenitor of the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) originated in China, and the origin of Chinese tea culture can be traced back to around 3000 BC. According to historical records and archaeological discoveries, the birthplace of tea is mainly located in China's Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou regions. Legend has it that Chinese tea originated with Shennong, a mythological figure regarded as the ancestor of agriculture and herbal medicine in ancient China. It is said that Shennong, while gathering herbs, discovered a wild tea tree and tried brewing its leaves in water. Finding that it had a cooling, thirst-quenching, and refreshing effect, tea began to be adopted by people. Tea gradually became an important beverage in China and was favored by royalty and nobility. During the Tang Dynasty, tea cultivation and production techniques were further developed. The methods of brewing tea and the skills of steeping gradually took shape, reaching their peak in the Song Dynasty. The flourishing of tea culture was also linked to the introduction of Buddhism, which regarded tea as a pure and meditative drink and used it in Zen practice and rituals. The combination of tea and Buddhism promoted the spread of tea and the development of the tea ceremony. During the Song and Yuan dynasties, tea culture further evolved, with the rise of tea utensils, tea art, and tea ceremonies. In the Ming Dynasty, tea culture became more widespread, and by the Qing Dynasty, Chinese tea culture reached a high point. The tea culture and the craftsmanship of tea utensils in the Qing Dynasty became important components of Chinese tea heritage. In modern times, with advances in tea cultivation and production technology, the variety and quality of tea have continuously enriched and improved. Chinese tea culture has also been promoted and disseminated globally, becoming one of the world's most recognized and beloved cultures. In short, Chinese tea culture has a long history and has undergone a protracted process of development, deeply integrating into the life and spiritual world of the Chinese people and forming an integral part of traditional Chinese culture.

The origin and history of Western tea culture can be traced back to the 16th century, in connection with European trade with Asia. Portuguese missionaries such as Gaspar da Cruz produced some of the earliest surviving European written accounts of Chinese tea customs in the 1560s, though large-scale commercial imports to Europe were first organized by the Dutch East India Company early in the 17th century. The first Western country to introduce tea was Portugal. In the early 16th century, Portuguese explorers and navigators, through their explorations of Asia, brought tea back from China and Japan. Tea was introduced to Eu-

rope by the Portuguese and initially became popular among aristocrats and wealthy merchants. Subsequently, the Netherlands, Britain, France, and other countries also joined the Asian trade and imported tea from China, gradually spreading tea throughout Europe. In the 17th century, the British East India Company was established, successfully bringing tea seeds and plants to India for cultivation. It then began large-scale imports of tea from China and India, making tea one of Britain's major import commodities, and tea soon became popular in British society. The spread of tea in Western countries was also linked to colonial expansion and trade activities. In colonial regions, especially British India, tea cultivation became an important economic activity, and tea also became a daily beverage for local residents. In the 18th and 19th centuries, tea culture in Britain gradually developed into a symbol of social interaction and etiquette. The rise of British afternoon tea culture turned tea into an important social activity. Over time, tea culture spread and developed in other Western countries as well. On the European continent, in countries such as France, Germany, and Russia, tea culture gradually took root and developed its own distinctive characteristics. Since the 20th century, with globalization and increased cross-cultural exchange, Western tea culture has become more diverse and inclusive, and the types and ways of consuming tea have become richer. Crucially, what is loosely termed "Western tea culture" comprises distinct regional trajectories rather than one unified tradition. In Britain, tea developed strong associations with middle-class sociability and etiquette, with afternoon tea emerging as a well-known 19th century social institution. Russian tea culture formed largely via overland Eurasian trade routes, distinguished by the samovar-based brewing tradition and accompanying local refreshment customs. The United States developed preferences for iced and sweet tea, with relatively little formal ritualization, while France and Germany adopted tea alongside coffee within continental café culture, without establishing dominant indigenous tea-centred rituals. This paper uses "Western tea cultures" in plural form to reference this set of regionally variable practices. In summary, the origin of Western tea culture can be traced back to the 16th century when Portugal and other countries introduced tea from Asia. With the spread and popularization of tea, tea culture developed into an important beverage and social activity in Western countries, possessing its own unique features and styles.

1.2. Differences in Tea Drinking Habits between China and the West

The contrasts outlined below describe prevailing traditional norms and common contemporary practices; they do not represent universal behaviour for every individual consumer in China or in Western-context societies. In terms of brewing methods and steeping time, in China, tea is usually consumed as a hot infusion, with hot tea being the common choice. Tea is regarded as a hot beverage. In Chinese tea culture, brewing tea is often a meticulous process that emphasizes the quality of the leaves and the flavor of the liquor. Chinese people frequently take

time to steep the leaves and perform multiple infusions. This is characteristic of ceremonial and home-based tea practice, though modern urban Chinese consumers also widely consume bottled cold ready-to-drink tea. In the West, however, cold tea drinks are also common, such as iced tea and cold-brewed tea. Moreover, tea brewing in the West tends to be simpler and quicker, often requiring only a single infusion. Yet hot loose-leaf multi-infusion preparation has grown among specialty-tea communities in Europe and North America. Regarding tea drinking time and social culture, in China, tea drinking is a daily habit, whether in the morning, noon, afternoon, or evening. Chinese people enjoy tea before or after meals or during snack times, and tea drinking is closely tied to social interaction and interpersonal relationships. Tea is seen as a friendly and warm way of hospitality, and people often invite friends, family, or guests to share tea together. That said, many modern Chinese citizens do not maintain regular daily tea-drinking routines. In the West, tea drinking is often more associated with specific occasions, such as afternoon tea, social gatherings, or after-dinner consumption. Nevertheless, tea is also used in the West as part of social activities, such as afternoon tea or enjoying tea with friends at get-togethers. Nevertheless informal casual home tea-drinking is also common. As for food pairings, in Chinese tea culture, tea is often accompanied by snacks, pastries, and light refreshments, which are typically light foods meant to complement the tea. In the West, tea is often paired with pastries, sandwiches, biscuits, and other sweet or savory items. In Western afternoon tea culture, the variety and selection of refreshments are more diverse. Even so, pairing conventions vary heavily by sub-culture and individual preference on both sides. These differences reflect the distinct tea-drinking cultures and lifestyles of China and the West.

2. Linguistic and Cultural Characteristics in Tea Culture Translation

This section introduces a three-category analytical framework for tea-related translation, which structures the discussion of linguistic-cultural features and later practical techniques. The three categories differ in text purpose, expected target-audience and appropriate translation priorities:

- 1) Tea-name translation: covers proper nouns for tea varieties, grades and geographical-origin denominations (e.g. Longjing, Biluochun, FTGFOP). Target readers include importers, merchants and specialist tea enthusiasts. Priorities: terminological consistency, preservation of origin branding, and avoidance of offensive or misleading literal renderings.
- 2) Commercial product-description translation: includes packaging text, product brochures, and marketing copy introducing appearance, aroma, taste and processing features. Target readers are general consumers. Priorities: readability, marketing appropriateness, and factual accuracy.
- 3) Cultural-concept translation: addresses culture-loaded abstract terms such as 茶艺 (tea art) and 茶道 (tea ceremony), plus tea-ritual and poetic content.

Target readers range from cultural-studies audiences to exhibition visitors. Priorities: conveying contextual cultural connotation, often supported by supplementary explanatory notes.

2.1. Specialized Nature of Translation

The tea culture industry contains many specialized terms, such as names of different tea varieties, processing techniques, and classification standards for tea grades. Tea varieties may have different naming conventions in different languages and cultures. For example, in Chinese tea culture, tea varieties are often named after geographical origins or traditional names, such as Longjing tea, Biluochun, and Pu'er tea. In the West, tea varieties are often named after geographical locations or by descriptive characteristics, such as Darjeeling tea, Assam tea, etc. Translators need to understand the naming habits of tea varieties in different languages to ensure accurate transmission of tea variety information. In addition, tea grade classification may differ across countries and regions. For example, tea grades also differ between China and the West. Chinese tea is often graded according to appearance, processing techniques, origin, and quality, such as Biluochun Grade 1, Grade 2, Grade 3, etc. In Western tea markets, grades are usually classified according to overall quality and taste, such as FTGFOP (Finest Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe) grades. Translators must be familiar with the grading conventions of the target language and culture to choose appropriate translation methods. Under the above framework, tea-name translation must respect these different grading conventions to maintain professional accuracy. Therefore, translating tea and related cultural elements also requires a foundation in the original cultural context to faithfully convey the cultural connotations of tea. Tea often carries rich cultural symbolism and meaning across cultures—for example, the tea ceremony, tea art, and tea-related poetry by literati in Chinese culture—all of which need to be communicated during translation to convey the important status and values attached to tea. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure that the translated expressions in English are fluent and logically coherent. Translators should have sufficient knowledge of these terms, choose accurate translations, and maintain consistency throughout the process to guarantee accuracy and professionalism.

2.2. Broad Scope of Translation

In the formation and dissemination of tea culture, a vast array of tea-related vocabulary has emerged. Different historical and ethnic cultures have shaped distinct tea lexicons, reflecting both the differences between Chinese and Western tea cultures and, of course, the trend of their ongoing integration [1]. Tea culture encompasses not only material aspects but also extends to spiritual dimensions. Within our three-category framework: for instance, in the material translation of tea, the cultural content involved is extensive. Tea utensils have corresponding English translations: for example, 茶壺 can be translated as “teapot,” 茶杯 as

“teacup,” and 茶盘 as “tea tray.” Different types of tea have different translations: 绿茶 as “green tea,” 红茶 as “black tea,” 白茶 as “white tea,” and 乌龙茶 as “oolong tea,” among others. Tea-name translation handles basic categorical terms: green tea, black tea, white tea, oolong tea, and quality-grade designations such as premium tea, Grade 1 tea. Commercial product-description translation covers material-object vocabulary for tea-ware: teapot, teacup, tea tray, together with sensory adjectives describing taste and aroma such as fragrant, mellow, refreshing. Cultural-concept translation deals with performance- and value-oriented expressions: tea art performance, tea art, tea ceremony, tea charm, and references to tea-themed poetry. In terms of tea quality and grade translation, these are important in commerce and markets and also have corresponding English equivalents, such as “premium tea” for high-quality tea and “Grade 1 tea” for first-grade tea. Regarding the spiritual dimension of tea, many translations involve tea-related activities, such as 茶艺表演 as “tea art performance,” 诗词歌赋 as “poetry,” 茶韵 as “tea charm,” 茶艺 as “tea art,” and 茶道 as “tea ceremony.” In describing tea quality and taste, translations can cover descriptions of quality, taste, and characteristics. Chinese often uses words like 清香 (fragrant), 醇厚 (mellow), and 爽口 (refreshing) to describe tea, while English equivalents include “fragrant,” “mellow,” and “refreshing.” These translation terms help people better understand and choose teas. Thus, the diverse translation needs in Chinese-English tea translation reflect the broad scope of tea translation.

2.3. Richness of Connotation in Translation

As a special beverage, tea is rich in semantic content. Different languages may have different concepts regarding tea varieties, grades, origins, and production methods. Tea translation needs to accurately convey this rich semantic information to ensure that readers or listeners understand the quality and characteristics of the tea. For example, when translating tea culture, it is necessary to grasp the cultural connections and deeply understand the cultural heritage and connotations. In northern China, the pronunciation of tea is “cha,” which is also found in Persian as “chay” and in many African countries as “chai.” In English, the pronunciation is “tea,” which originated from the southern Min region of China, where the local pronunciation turned “cha” into “tey,” similar to the pronunciation of “tie.” Accordingly, in the connotation of English tea expressions, the phrase “for all the tea in China” implies immense wealth, while “pink tea” expanded from its original meaning of an afternoon tea party to refer to formal social events. Hence, “somebody’s cup of tea” means “to be something that one prefers or desires”—something that appeals to or interests someone [2]. Yet these idiomatic senses are not direct reflections of Chinese tea-cultural connotations, but evolved independently within Anglophone social history, as verified by major English-language dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster:

Not for all the tea in China means “not for any amount of wealth; under no circumstances”. The phrase draws on the historical perception of China as the

world's source of valuable tea, but it is a fixed rhetorical turn rather than a serious commentary on Chinese tea-culture values.

Somebody's cup of tea denotes "something that matches one's tastes or interests", a metaphorical extension within English usage unconnected to Chinese tea aesthetics.

Pink tea historically referred to afternoon-tea-style social gatherings, later broadening to mean formal or semi-formal social events, chiefly within older American-English usage.

However, with the development of the tea industry and cross-cultural exchanges of new tea culture, there is also some overlap and fusion between Chinese and Western tea varieties. In the modern tea market, hybrid products combining both traditions can be found, and tea processing and production methods have also influenced and borrowed from each other. Therefore, the connotations of tea culture are not absolute but are formed as distinctive features under different cultural and regional backgrounds, and tea translation is rich in meaning. Tea translation requires comprehensive consideration of language, culture, industry professionalism, and target audience needs to accurately convey tea information and characteristics, adjusting strategies according to whether they are completing tea-name, commercial-description, or cultural-concept translation.

3. Problems in Tea Culture Translation and Translation Techniques

3.1. Problems in Tea Culture Translation

The first problem is insufficient understanding of Chinese and Western tea cultures. The essence of Chinese-English tea translation lies in cross-cultural communication, using tea as a medium to facilitate multiple forms of exchange between groups from different cultural backgrounds. In view of this, translators must, in the course of their work, undoubtedly have a deep understanding of both Chinese tea culture and the cultural customs of the target language. Only on the basis of clarifying the similarities and differences between the two cultures can a series of translation tasks be effectively carried out and successfully completed. However, in actual practice, some translators lack sufficient cultural knowledge and are unable to accurately grasp the cultural differences between East and West. This deficiency in cultural background often affects the final translation outcome. For example, there is a notable difference in cultural perceptions of the dragon between East and West. In China, the dragon is regarded as a national totem, a symbol of luck and success. In the West, the dragon is considered a fire-breathing demon, a symbol of misfortune and bad luck. Applying our tea-name-translation category, when translating 乌龙茶, if it is directly rendered as "Black Dragon Tea," this translation may cause strong discomfort among Western consumers, not only affecting the sales of tea and related products but also hindering the dissemination of tea culture.

The second problem is lack of flexibility in translation techniques. This inevi-

tably hampers Western English-speaking consumers' understanding of product information and may even lead to numerous misunderstandings and awkward results. For instance, a company once translated the tea name 信阳毛尖 mechanically, literally rendering it as “Xin Yang Fur Sharp”—a translation that does not fit the English linguistic environment. At the surface level, this translation seems to match each Chinese character with an English word, appearing rigorous and error-free. However, this mechanical approach fails to account for the different meanings of Chinese characters in different contexts. Simply combining English words may distort the intended meaning [3]. “Fur” literally means hair or fur, which is semantically correct in terms of the character 毛, but in Chinese, 毛 here is used as a specific term with a concrete referent; within the tea name, it is merely a designation—much like “wife cake” (老婆饼) does not actually contain a wife. Thus, this mechanical, assumptive translation method cannot truly convey the correct meaning in English. It merely converts Chinese vocabulary into English equivalents and strings them together, which is impractical and hardly aligns with English context and idiomatic expression. This example illustrates the risk of literalism within tea-name translation: the root cause of such hasty translation is an incomplete understanding of both the Chinese and English linguistic environments [4].

3.2. Translation Techniques for Tea Culture

Drawing on the three-category analytical framework outlined above, translators should select strategies matching their text-type and audience, often combining multiple techniques within one text.

Firstly, prepare thoroughly for translation by gaining in-depth knowledge of tea culture and tasting tea flavors. Before translating tea products, ensure a full understanding of the product's characteristics, production process, origin, etc. Before undertaking either tea-name, commercial-description or cultural-concept translation, translators should carefully read official product materials, including descriptions, processing methods, and raw material sources [5]. These materials usually provide detailed information on product characteristics, taste, aroma, and origin. In addition, before translation, tasting the tea is the most direct way to understand its characteristics. By sampling different types and brands of tea, translators can experience its taste, aroma, flavor, and aftertaste, thereby gaining a better understanding of the tea's qualities. Translators should also study tea classification and grading systems, such as green tea, black tea, white tea, oolong tea, and the quality differences among grades. This helps translators understand the features and value of different teas and describe them accurately. Furthermore, translators should research the origin and culture of the tea, as its characteristics are influenced by its place of origin and related culture. Studying the origin, geographical environment, climate conditions, and traditional processing methods helps to comprehend the features and flavors of teas from different regions. Translators may also communicate with tea industry experts, tea artists, or practitioners

to ask about product characteristics and evaluation standards. They have rich experience and can provide detailed information and professional opinions on tea, which aids in understanding product names, descriptions, and uses, and better conveys the product's value and quality.

Secondly, conduct multi-faceted in-depth research on tea knowledge and enhance professional competence. When translating, choose appropriate adjectives to describe the product's appearance, taste, aroma, etc. Based on the product's characteristics, select adjectives that can precisely describe them to increase reader interest and appeal. Additionally, when translating product names and varieties, retain original terminology whenever possible. Some tea product names are already widely accepted and used in the target language, so keeping the original terms helps maintain brand recognition and professionalism. If certain specific terms in the source text cannot be directly translated, they can be explained using parentheses or footnotes. This helps target readers understand the uniqueness and cultural background of the tea products.

Thirdly, deploy differentiated translation strategies aligned with the three translation categories:

1) For tea-name translation: prioritize established transliterations for protected geographical-indication tea names (e.g. Longjing, Pu'er). Retain internationally accepted existing renditions to preserve brand recognition. Avoid risky direct literal translation where cultural-symbol conflict may occur. Where necessary, add brief parenthetical notes explaining core product features.

2) For commercial product-description translation: choose precise, natural-sounding target-language adjectives for aroma, taste and appearance, matching consumer-oriented marketing register. Prioritise readability for general-market audiences over over-literal rendering of poetic source-language phrasing.

3) For cultural-concept translation (e.g. 茶艺, 茶道): use established base translations such as tea art and tea ceremony, supplemented by footnotes or in-text explanatory commentary to unpack underlying philosophical or ritual dimensions for readers unfamiliar with Chinese cultural background.

These translation techniques are not mutually exclusive; translators often combine multiple techniques to handle specific translation tasks. Choosing the appropriate technique requires considering the differences between source and target languages, the characteristics of the text, and the needs of the target readers. In practice, translators may flexibly apply these techniques according to the specific context and their own experience.

4. Conclusion

The differences between Chinese and Western tea cultures place higher demands on translation work. This paper starts from the disparities between the two tea cultures, first clarifies the heterogeneous nature of Western regional tea traditions, establishes a three-part analytical framework distinguishing tea-name translation, commercial product-description translation and cultural-concept translation, and

re-examines historical background and consumption habits without over-generalizing whole-population behaviors. It further re-evaluates English tea-related idioms, emphasizing that such idioms arise from Anglophone linguistic history rather than directly mirroring Chinese tea-culture connotations, explores the problems existing in current tea translation, and seeks effective techniques and methods. Through flexible translation, comprehensive mastery of tea knowledge, tea culture, and the differences in target-language cultures, translators can solve a series of problems in tea translation, facilitate the smooth progress of tea cultural exchange activities, create a favorable cultural atmosphere for tea trade, and simultaneously enhance the influence of China's outstanding tea culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] 张昕. 基于中西茶文化差异背景的茶叶翻译技巧与方法分析[J]. 福建茶叶, 2023, 45(3): 124-126.
- [2] 周保群. 文化视域浅析茶叶英语翻译技巧[J]. 福建茶叶, 2022, 44(12): 171-173.
- [3] 梅海瑶. 浅析中西茶文化差异视角下的跨文化冲突[J]. 今古文创, 2022(15): 111-113.
- [4] 邓娟. 茶文化对外传播中英语翻译策略研究[J]. 福建茶叶, 2022(3): 188-190.
- [5] 谭云芳. 茶文化的英语翻译技巧探讨[J]. 福建茶叶, 2021, 43(12): 191-192.