

# A Study on the English Translation of Museum Ceramic Exhibition Titles from the Perspective of Cultural Translation Theory: A Case Study of Jiangxi Provincial Museum and Jingdezhen Chinese Ceramic Museum

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## **Abstract:**

Translation is not merely the conversion of linguistic symbols; it is also an act of cultural exchange. The concept of cultural translation requires that the target language accurately reflects the meaning, manner, and style intended by the source language from a cultural perspective. This study conducts a comparative analysis of the translations of ceramic exhibition titles in two museums, exploring the selection of cultural translation strategies to effectively preserve and convey the essence of the source culture.

**Keywords:** Cultural Translation, Museum Translation, Ceramic Exhibition, Jiangxi Provincial Museum, Jingdezhen Chinese Ceramic Museum

## **1. Introduction**

Ceramics have been an integral part of Chinese cultural heritage since ancient times, with the province of Jiangxi emerging as a cradle for this ancient craft. Chinese ceramic culture, as a vital component of the broader Chinese cultural tapestry, finds its visual narrative in the curated exhibitions within museums. These exhibitions are not merely displays; they are storytellers of a heritage that spans millennia. However, the English translations of these exhibition texts are often marred by spelling errors and omissions, which significantly impede the precise communication of information and the depth of cultural inter-

action. The challenge is particularly pronounced in the translation of distinctive four-character Chinese idioms that frequently serve as titles. These idioms, rich in cultural connotations, are often the epicenter of translation inaccuracies.

The present study focuses on four-character idiomatic titles found within the ceramic exhibition halls of museums. Drawing from Bassnett's cultural translation theory, it explores the strategies employed in their translation. The objective is to address existing translation issues, elevate the standards of translation quality, and ensure that the translations not only convey information accurately but also preserve the cultural essence. This endeavor aims to foster more

effective cultural exchange. By tackling these challenges, the study aspires to enhance the role of museum translations as ambassadors of Chinese ceramic culture to an international audience.

This study aims to provide practical guidelines and methodologies to ensure that, during the translation process, not only is the informational content accurately conveyed, but also the phonetic beauty, morphological elegance, and profound implications of these titles are effectively communicated.

## 2. Comparative Analysis of The Translation Strategies

Susan Bassnett, the renowned British translator, emphasized that is meant to satisfy the needs of culture and the diverse groups within a particular culture. should be regarded as the unit of translation and that one must translate functional equivalent of the text in the translated culture. Therefore, cross-cultural translation involves a linguistic transformation that assumes semantic equivalence between macro-cultures.

### 2.1 . The Translation of “ 水土宜陶 ”

The expression “ 水土宜陶 ” presents two distinct translation strategies used in the English translations of various museums, illustrating the diversity and complexity of translation choices in cultural exchange and dissemination. The Jiangxi Provincial Museum translated the term as “Natural Endowment for Ceramic,” which emphasizes the universality and comprehensibility of the concept. This approach aims to help visitors from diverse cultural backgrounds quickly understand its meaning, highlighting the significance of natural resources in the region’s ceramic production.

At the same time, the Jingdezhen China Ceramic Museum opted for a more direct translation method, rendering it as “Suitable Soil and Water for Porcelain.” This translation underscores the significance of remaining faithful to the original culture. The two elements, “水” (water) and “土” (soil), are clearly articulated, conveying not only the local natural conditions suitable for pottery but also implicitly indicating that ceramic production relies on these two fundamental elements. This translation captures both the intuitive meaning of the original text and the essence of the pottery-making process, providing visitors who wish to understand Chinese culture and language with accurate information. It respects both the literal meaning and the cultural connotation of the original text, helping to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the culture.

The disagreement between these two translation approach-

es highlights a long-standing debate in translation theory: how to strike a balance between fidelity to the original text and effective communication with readers from the target language and cultural background.

### 2.2 . The Translation of “ 薪火相传 ”

“薪火相传” has been translated by the Jiangxi Provincial Museum as “Pass the Torch”, which uses a metaphorical expression widely recognised in the English language as referring to the passing on of knowledge, skills or traditions from one generation to another. “Pass the Torch” has strong cultural resonance in English and is often used to describe the transmission of history and cultural heritage. This translation strategy emphasises the universality of cultural transmission, enabling audiences from non-Chinese speaking backgrounds to intuitively understand its meaning and facilitating cross-cultural communication. However, it may lose the cultural colour of the original word “薪火” (“the flame of a burning piece of firewood”), i.e. the firewood can be burnt out, but the fire will be passed on. It also loses the figurative quality of the word, which cannot be associated with firewood in a porcelain kiln. It may not be sufficient for viewers who wish to delve into the details of Chinese culture. Expressions that are taken for granted in the source language are likely to be misunderstood by the target audience if they are directly translated in violation of the expression conventions of the target language [2].

The Jingdezhen Museum of Chinese Ceramics, on the other hand, translates it as “To Carry Forward The Kiln Fire”, which is closer to the literal meaning of the original text, directly referring to the “窑火” (“kiln fire”), which is a central element in the making of ceramics. making. It retains the culturally specific context of the original term, which is the passing of “fire” during the firing process of ceramics. This translation strategy is more faithful to the cultural details of the original text, provides richer information for understanding Chinese ceramic culture, and helps to maintain the originality and authenticity of the culture. However, it may not be intuitive enough for viewers unfamiliar with ceramics production or traditional Chinese culture, and may require additional explanation or background knowledge to fully understand.

## 3. Mistranslation case studies

### 3.1 . Mistranslations of Vocabulary in Ancient Poetry

The title “物华成器” is derived from the classic Chinese literary masterpiece, “Preface to the Tengwang Pavilion”

(《滕王阁序》), written by Wang Bo, a prominent writer of the Tang Dynasty. This work celebrates the natural beauty and cultural richness of the Nanchang area. The term “物华” originates from the phrase “物华天宝, 人杰地灵” (its products are nature’s jewels, its talented people are outstanding), which highlights the exceptional natural landscape and cultural atmosphere of Nanchang. The expression “物华” emphasizes the abundance and beauty of Nanchang’s natural resources. This phrase carries profound cultural significance and reflects the elegance of Chinese refinement.

However, the Jiangxi Provincial Museum’s straightforward translation of the title “物华成器” as “The Making of Pottery and Porcelain” conveys the literal meaning—a description of the ceramic production process—but fails to fully capture the deeper significance of the original text. While it provides a clear depiction of how ceramics are made, it does not express the underlying notion that the creation of ceramics is deeply rooted in and inspired by local natural resources. The original title suggests a harmonious integration of the beauty of nature and human ingenuity in the art of ceramics, celebrating ceramics as both a cultural vessel and a form of artistic expression. The direct translation, while clear, overlooks the original text’s celebration of the unique culture and natural resources of the Nanchang region, as well as the deeper significance of ceramic art as a cultural symbol of this area. A more suitable translation would reflect this fusion of culture and art while conveying the poetry and depth of the original. For instance, consider translating “物华成器” as “Shaping Nature into Ceramics,” which not only preserves the original text’s appreciation for the beauty of nature but also emphasizes that the theme of the gallery is the art of ceramic production. In the context of a museum exhibition, such a translation can better guide the audience to understand that ceramic works are not merely material products but also the crystallization of culture and art. It encourages the audience to explore the cultural narratives behind each ceramic piece and to experience the rich ceramic heritage and artistic achievements of the Nanchang area and the entirety of Jiangxi Province.

### 3.2 . Mistranslations of Potential Meanings of Words

The term “积淀” in “陶瓷积淀” refers to accumulation and precipitation, a concept that originated from Li Zehou’s “Three Books of Aesthetics” (《美学三书》). It is primarily used to describe the long-term accumulation and deepening of culture, knowledge, and experience. In the context of ceramic art, “积淀” reflects the inheritance of skills, cultural integration, and innovative development of

ceramic art from ancient times to the present. The translation of “development” is clearly inadequate, as it fails to fully convey the rich connotations and deeper meanings of the original term.

The term in English typically refers to the processes of growth and change, emphasizing dynamic and forward progress. However, it does not encompass the historical depth and cultural significance inherent in the term. It is more appropriate to use or to highlight the historical legacy and cultural richness of ceramic art.

### 3.3 . Improper direct translation

In “青瓷神韵”, the term “神韵” in Chinese typically refers to an ineffable beauty, aura, or spiritual quality of a work. The translation “The Charm of Celadon” effectively captures the elusive beauty and character of celadon. The choice of the word “Charm” not only reflects the elegance and allure of celadon but also preserves a sense of mystery and depth of meaning, aligning with the essence of “Shen Yun” in Chinese.

The title “盛世瓷韵” is translated as “Prosperous Porcelain Rhyme”, utilizing the word “rhyme”. While the term “rhyme” retains its original meaning of “harmonious sound”, it is frequently associated in English with poetic rhyme, which diminishes the multi-dimensional connotation of the Chinese word “韵”. This mistranslation may prioritize formal correspondence at the expense of content relevance and cultural communication. Consequently, target readers may misunderstand “瓷韵” due to the translation of “rhyme,” potentially hindering their appreciation and understanding of the intrinsic beauty of ceramic art.

The term “盛世” (translated as a golden age or age of prosperity) is rendered as the adjective which aligns better with English grammar and expression, making the translation more concise and easier to understand. However, the term the broader implications of “盛世” in Chinese. This term encompasses not only economic and cultural prosperity but also signifies an era of peace and national strength. While conveys a sense of wealth and success, it may fall short of encompassing the full cultural and historical significance of “盛世.”

In order to more accurately convey the meaning and cultural connotations of Porcelain Rhythm, more culturally resonant and aesthetically pleasing terms. For instance, translations such as Ceramic Elegance or Charm of the Golden Age not only capture the aesthetic qualities of ceramic art but also preserve the cultural depth and historical richness of the original phrase.

### 3.4 . Lack of information on local cultural con-

### text

The phrase “文脉永昌” is translated as “The Ceramic Culture Forever.” The character “昌” in the original text is culturally significant, meaning “prosperity” in Chinese. Additionally, “昌” (chang) is also the name of Nanchang (南昌), the capital of Jiangxi Province. While the translation does not directly capture this pun, it conveys the essence of “永昌” as long-lasting prosperity and eternal development through the term “forever.” This approach cleverly avoids potential confusion that could arise from a direct translation of geographical names. However, when culturally loaded words are entirely absent in the target language, direct transliteration is preferred. In such cases, the first occurrence should be supplemented with a paraphrase to maintain the external appearance of the source word. What is lacking in this translation is a note that explains the cultural connotations involved, which would enhance readers’ understanding and contribute to the global dissemination of Jiangxi’s culture.

### 3.5 . Mistranslation of culturally loaded words

The original meaning of “器” (utensil; apparatus) in the phrase “天下之器” refers to artifacts that can be utilized by people, such as “银器” (silverware) and “玉器” (jade artifacts). However, this term holds a deeper connotation in Chinese culture. “器” not only denotes specific objects but also embodies profound symbolic significance, representing importance, influence, and cultural value. For instance, the phrase “国之重器” (valuable national asset) refers to items or talents that are essential to the nation.

The direct translation of this title as of the World limits the cultural connotation of the original text. The term refers to an invention or a physical object with a specific function and purpose. However, the word in also acknowledges the cultural and practical value of porcelain on a global scale. Therefore, to better reflect cultural equivalence, a more symbolic term such as of the World or could be employed in the translation. These alternatives preserve the original meaning of while highlighting its global significance and impact.

## 4. Application of Intentional Translation Strategies

Intentional translation is a prevalent method in the naturalization strategy, particularly employed when significant differences or semantic gaps exist between the cultures of the source and target languages. In museum ceramics exhibitions, many four-character titles utilize idioms to preserve their concise linguistic characteristics. These titles must be translated in the context of the exhibition content

rather than through direct translation.

For example, “博采众长” is translated as “Drawing the Best from the Masses” by the Jiangxi Provincial Museum. This translation is a thoughtful adaptation of the exhibition hall’s content rather than a direct rendering of “collect widely all good qualities.” It reflects a nuanced understanding of the corresponding chapter’s themes. The phrase “from the masses” in the translation emphasizes the importance of drawing inspiration from a diverse array of people, cultures, and traditions. This suggests that the development of ceramic culture is not solely the work of specialists and craftsmen; rather, it is a collective achievement that embodies the wisdom of society as a whole and various groups.

“群芳竞艳” refers to a variety of flowers competing for beauty. The corresponding content of this title discusses the establishment of several creative design parks in Jingdezhen, which provide abundant creative spaces and exhibition platforms for professionals in the field of ceramic art, ranging from seasoned master craftsmen to emerging artists. Translating the title as “The Flourishing of Ceramic Art” reflects an adaptation to the target language and culture. Instead of using the literal meaning of the original idiom, this translation opts for an English expression that conveys a similar sentiment and atmosphere. It emphasizes the prosperity and diversity within the field of ceramic art, resonating with the essence of “群芳竞艳”, which illustrates the beauty of numerous flowers vying for attention. Furthermore, translating “群芳竞艳” with an emphasis on the word “compete” may overstate the competitive aspect, potentially misleading readers into believing that the primary focus of the content is rivalry among ceramic artists. Such a translation could overlook the positive elements of cooperation and collaborative development inherent in the original text. In contrast, the term “flourish” more accurately reflects the overall vitality and creativity of the ceramic art field, rather than merely highlighting competition.

The literal meaning of “海纳百川” is that the sea can accommodate the inflow of countless rivers, serving as a metaphor for broad-mindedness and tolerance of all phenomena. Although the Jingdezhen Ceramic Museum does not reference the imagery of the sea or rivers, it translates the phrase as “Embracing All and Diversities”, effectively conveying the cultural concept of tolerance and integration represented by the original text. This translation communicates to the reader that Chinese ceramic culture has historically absorbed and integrated various techniques and styles, resulting in a rich and diverse ceramic art form.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

In promoting the international dissemination of Chinese ceramic culture, translation serves not only as a means of language conversion but also as a crucial bridge for cultural transmission. Translators must possess a profound understanding of the cultural nuances of the source language while also considering the cultural context of the target language. This dual awareness is essential to ensure that information is accurately conveyed and that the culture is appropriately represented. As a vital platform for cultural display, the translation of museum exhibition texts requires meticulous attention to detail to fulfill the communicative function of fostering cultural empathy.

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