The Translation of Marine Cultural Heritage in Museum Texts: *Negotiating Meaning and Identity through Translation in the Digital Age*

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the representation of marine cultural heritage through translation in museum texts. Using samples collected from a local museum in Shantou, China, the paper tries to explore whether items associated with marine cultural heritage are represented effectively in English both in terms of meaning transference and cultural representation. Through an analysis of several key cultural elements, the paper has found that although the translation renders the semantic meaning of the text effectively, it quite often fails to reflect the cultural identity of the local community, underrepresenting the historic and social aspects of marine culture heritage. The paper argues that museum translation needs to restore the target text in a rich linguistic and cultural environment, one that can interact with the shared narrative of the culture in exhibit so as to communicate the cultural identity embedded in the source text.

1. Introduction

The sea plays an instrumental role in the social, cultural and economic dimensions of human life. European exploration from the mid-15th to the mid-16th century enabled the discovery of new trade routes and the mapping of the world, which has greatly expanded the scope of human activity. Chinese ocean explorers of the 15th century sailed to Southeast Asia, the India subcontinent, Western Asia and East Africa, expanding the trade route that linked China with the West to what is later referred to as the Marine Silk Road. Marine commerce, facilitated by the exploration and expansion of ocean trade routes, has been an integral part of the economic and social progress of many coastal areas. Sea travel has also facilitated the movement and integration of populations, contributing to the exchange and communication between different cultures and social groups. Marine cultural landscape, a concept first introduced by Westerdahl (1992), refers to the study of "human utilisation of marine space by boat: settlement, fishing, hunting, shipping and its attendant subcultures" (p.5). As Henderson

(2019) observes, Westerdahl's conceptualisation of marine cultural heritage incorporates the study of both underwater sites and coastal heritage, establishing a marine space that enables a more comprehensive understanding of human relationship with the sea. As artefacts of the tangible and intangible aspects of culture created by human activities on or around the sea, marine cultural heritage (MCH) encompasses tangible components such as shipwrecks, coastal settlements, ports and harbours, as well as cultural practices, traditions, and artistic and linguistic expressions (Henderson, 2019). Artefacts representing the marine cultural heritage of a particular region are often displayed in local museums. The translation of museum texts thus severs as an important vehicle for the cross-cultural communication of marine culture and the negotiation of cultural identity. This paper investigates the translation of marine cultural heritage in a local museum in Shantou, a coastal city in southeast China which was historically a harbour on the Marine Silk Road, and later a treaty port connecting China with the

outside world from the early 19th to the mid-20th century. The city is now a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in China with economic and fiscal incentives for industrial innovation and international trade. Focusing on a case study of Shantou *Qiao Pi* Museum, this paper investigates the translation of several key elements in the local marine cultural heritage, in an effort to uncover how translation interacts with the negotiation of meaning and cultural identity in museum texts.

2. Cultural Identity and Museum Translation

Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging to a group, which pertains to an individual or social group's self-perception of their nationality, ethnicity, locality, gender, religion, social class or other kinds of social membership with distinctive culture, practices and traditions (Ennaji, 2005). As a social construct, cultural identity entails the enactment and negotiation of social identification that are influenced by the macro context, interacting with a myriad of factors such as traditions, values, beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, and prevalent public discourses (Collier, 2005). Museums play an instrumental role in the representation of cultural identity, functioning as the institution to display national and regional cultures and to reinforce the social identification of a nation, people or social group. As an important vehicle for intercultural communication, the translation of museum texts not just helps to transmit the local culture to the foreign audience, but also constructs the local cultural identity, preserving shared recollection of the local history and culture.

Since the "culture turn" in translation studies in the 1990s, translation has been generally conceived as a cultural activity subject to the influence of complex social, cultural, and political factors in the target context (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). Translation also plays a crucial role in the construction and articulation of cultural identity. Due to the impact of globalisation and global cultural flows (Tzanelli, 2011), the interaction and exchange between different cultures become increasingly frequent and sophisticated. While hegemonic cultures can exert dominance through the spread of beliefs, values, and perceptions, minority cultures can also resist hegemonic cultures by acquiring agency and critical literary (Bhabha, 1994). As Venuti (1995, 1997) proposes, through the use of foreignising translation strategies, minority cultures can resist the Anglophone hegemony, promoting a more balanced cultural exchange. In this sense, translation can be used as a powerful resource to preserve the identity of less powerful cultures, encouraging inclusiveness and cultural diversity.

As institutions which collect and preserve cultural properties, museums are not neutral spaces for the display of culture, but are sites of contestation and negotiation that reflect the dynamics of cultural power. Cameron (1972) argues that museum collections inevitably reflect the dominant values and collective perceptions in the social environment at large. Bennet (2005) contends that the selection and display of objects in museum exhibitions generate a cultural narrative that perpetuates the perspectives of social elites with greater cultural power. As Weil (2002) sees it, over the past few decades, museums are increasingly construed as spaces of communal empowerment beneficial to social progress. While museums are often used to express the hegemony of dominant cultures (Vickers, 2008), they can also be used to preserve minority cultures, empowering indigenous people to provide personal accounts of their own experience (Santos, 2003; Shannon, 2009).

Despite a few notable exceptions (Guillot, 2014; Jiang, 2010; Manfredi, 2021; Neather 2008; Ravelli, 2006; Sturge, 2007; Valdeón, 2015), museum translation has been a relatively under-researched area in translation studies. Approaching translation from a broad sense, Sturge (2007) proposes that ethnographic museums can be considered as translations, since the selection, display and description of artefacts in the museum reflect the representation and interpretation of other people's tales, lives, beliefs, and culture. Other researchers conceptualise translation in a more strict sense, focusing on the translation of museum texts, which generally encompass labels, explanatory texts, and brochure descriptions that are related to exhibits. Neather (2012) argues that translation quality plays an essential role in the meaning-making process of museum audience, which can determine the museum's successful fulfilment of its cross-cultural role. Jiang (2010) proposes a model of quality assessment for the translation of museum texts, arguing that interlingual and

intertextual comparison is required for the judgment of the translation quality.

While translation quality has been a recurring theme in previous studies in museum translation, more recent research points to the importance of the sociocultural dimension of museum texts. The systematic difference between cultures is observed to play a crucial role in museum translation. As Guillot (2014) put it, the translation of museum texts involves not just interlingual rendering, but also intercultural transfer, pertaining to the differences in norms, customs, and traditions between the source and target cultures. Valdeón (2015) sees museum texts as an indispensable part of the cultural narrative that projects and constructs cultural representation. The discursive choices in museum texts, their translation (or lack thereof), and the decisions made in translation are all part of the museum narrative that contributes to the construction of cultural identity. Manfredi (2021) argues that to engage a multilingual audience, museum target texts should be linguistically accessible and socially inclusive to encompass diverse cultural backgrounds.

To further explore the sociocultural dimensions that enable and constrain the decision-making process in museum translation, this paper investigates the translation of texts in Shantou *Qiao Pi* Museum, endeavouring to unpack the dynamics between translation, museum and the negotiation of cultural identity.

3. Research Methods

To analyse the representation of marine cultural heritage through translation, data was collected from Shantou *Qiao Pi* Museum, a local museum which exhibits correspondence and remittance documents of emigrants of who voyaged from Shantou Port to Southeast Asia from the early 19th to the mid-20th century for higher-paying jobs and better business opportunities. A total of 119 photos were collected, which were then transferred onto a computer for coding and analysis. The data mainly consisted of images of museum artefacts with accompanying texts, which were found in title labels, descriptions of the exhibition, introductory labels, section labels, object captions, and object descriptions.

As with most local and regional museums in China, only selected phrases in the original Chinese text are translated into English due to the lack of funding and resources. Translation was mainly provided for title labels, section labels, and object captions. Introductory labels and object descriptions are sometimes accompanied with a partial translation. The detailed description of the objects and the relevant sociocultural background are often left untranslated. Although the translated corpus is relatively small, its cultural connotations are nonetheless rich and complex. As shall be discussed later, how to effectively convey these connotations with limited words is quite a challenge for the translator.

After the data were collected and transcribed, they were categorised according to the cultural themes they represent, in order to determine what aspects of cultural elements were present in museum texts and what translation methods were adopted to render them. The following section focuses on two of the most pertinent themes emerged from the data: the expression of cultural identity though the local vernacular and the representation of the marine culture in translation.

4. Representing Cultural Identity in Museum Translation

Shantou is a major city in the Chaoshan (潮汕) region of China, a geographically and culturally distinct region in eastern Guandong Province. Residents and descendants of the region, known as the Teochew people (or the Chaozhou people), are part of the Teochew subcultural community with their own dialect, customs and traditions. As a result of the emigration waves in the 19th and the 20th century, the Teochew diaspora is widespread in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore. Many of the artefacts and photos displayed in *Qiao Pi* Museum reflect the emigration history of the locals across the South China Sea. This following part discusses how the local cultural identity and marine cultural heritage are represented and negotiated through translation.

4.1 Expressing Cultural Identity through the Local Vernacular

To showcase the local identity and celebrate the cultural heritage of the Teochew people, the local dialect, a variety of the Southern Min Dialects of Chinese, is sometimes preserved in translation. Take the term 侨批 (*qiao pi*) as an example. 侨 (*qiao*) means "overseas" in Chinese, while 批 (*pi*) means "letter" in the Southern Min Dialects. After the Teochew people migrated to Southeast Asian countries, many of them regularly sent remittance to their families at home through either private couriers or remittance houses (known as 批局 *piju*). The

remittance was often accompanied with a family letter or a simple message, hence the name *qiao pi*.

In the English text, the original spelling of *qiao pi* is preserved. Such a translation choice is made not due to the difficulty of locating a corresponding expression in English, but to the motivation of conserving the local culture and identity. In 2013, the archives of *qiao pi* were inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Heritage List. The UNESCO certificate is exhibited in the museum, which translates *qiao pi* as "correspondence and remittance documents". However, the museum chose not to use UNESCO's wording in its own translation, since referring to *qiao pi* simply as remittance documents downplays its cultural connotation, failing to preserve the regional history and identity that are associated with this term. For many Teochew people at home and abroad, *qiao pi* reflects their history of migration, the legacy of entrepreneurship and the nostalgia for their home country. The retention of the spelling of *qiao pi* can be viewed as a form of resistance in translation (Venuti, 1995), which serves to preserve the local culture and enhance the Teochew cultural identity.

However, for some other cultural elements, the museum seems to lack a consistent translation strategy, which may lead to confusion on the part of the audience. An important section of the *qiao pi* exhibition is the photos of remittance houses run by Teochew people in Southeast Asia. Around the 1830s, remittance houses gradually replaced private couriers, functioning as the main agency for remittance delivery. Among them, the offices operated by Teochew immigrants developed into a business network in Southeast Asia, which is referred to as 潮帮批局 (*Chaobang piju*, literally, remittance houses run by Teochew people). While such information is well explained in the section description in Chinese, it is not translated into English. The museum only translates the section label as "*Chaobang* remittance house". Foreign audience who are unfamiliar with the Teochew culture may find it difficult to establish the connection between *Chaobang* and Chaoshan (潮汕) region, and as a result fail to understand the meaning of the exhibited objects. In Chinese postal Romanisation, a system first introduced during the Imperial Postal Joint-Session Conference in Shanghai

in 1906, the Romanisation of 潮汕 is "Teochew", which is based on the word's pronunciation in the local dialect. The term is widely used in Southeast Asian countries, such as the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan in Singapore, Malaysia Teochew Youth in Malaysia and Southern California Teo Chew Association in the United States. When translating historical texts in the museum, it is advisable to use established Romanisation in order to reflect the cultural and historical heritage of the exhibits. In this case, existing translations of 潮帮批局 in similar sociocultural contexts can lend themselves to the translation predicament. *The Straits Times* in Singapore translates the term as "remittance houses run by the Teochews". The South China Research Centre in Hong Kong renders the terms as "Teochew (Chaozhou) Remittance House Networks". Both translations preserve the connection between the term and Teochew cultural identity, and can be used as translation options to better reflect the social and historical connotations of the term.

4.2 Representing Marine Cultural Heritage in Translation

The Chaoshan region has a long history of marine trade and culture. The exhibits in *Qiao Pi* Museum record the economic and social history of the Chaoshan region, representing the Teochew people's collective memory of their home country and the sea. In the Chinese museum text, the image of the sea appears repetitively, in phrases such as 南洋 (*Nanyang*, literally, southern ocean), 外洋 (*waiyang*, literally, foreign ocean), 码头 (*matou*, dock), 外邦 (*waibang*, literally, foreign country), and in expressions such as 飘洋过海 (*piaoyang guohai*, literally, crossing the seas and oceans) and 四海为家 (*si hai wei jia*, literally, making the four seas one's home). These terms, used in contrast with words denoting the home culture, such as 唐山 (*Tangshan*, China) and 故里 (*guli*, hometown), express the Teochew emigrants' nostalgia for home when they were trying to make a living overseas.

As discussed previously, the Teochew diaspora is widespread in Southeast Asia. Closely related to the Teochew diaspora history is the concept of 南洋 (*Nanyang*), a generic term for Southeast Asian countries. An important object in the *qiao pi* exhibition is a map of the Teochew remittance house network in Southeast Asia, which illustrates the

geographic relationship between the Chaoshan region, the South China Sea, and the Maritime Silk Road, providing the audience with an overview of the spread and distribution of the Teochew people. The object label in Chinese reads 南洋潮帮批局分布图 (*Nanyang chaobang piju fenbu tu*, literally, map of Teochew remittance houses in *Nanyang*), which is translated as "*Chaobang* Remittance Houses in Southeast Asia". As discussed previously, using *Chaobang* rather than the more commonly used term, Teochew, in the English translation weakens the connection to the history of Teochew emigrants. Beyond this, although the term南洋 (*Nanyang*) is geographically equivalent to Southeast Asia, it has a much richer sociohistorical connotation. As a historic term, 南洋 (*Nanyang*) is closely related to the marine trade history of overseas Chinese, and is used in many proper names in Southeast Asia, such as Nanyang Technological University (Singapore), Nanyang Siang Pau newspaper (Malaysia) and Nanyang Commercial Bank (Thailand). To preserve the historic heritage, it would be better to retain the spelling of the term and render the label as "Teochew remittance house network in *Nanyang* (Southeast Asia)", so that the translation can reflect the shared marine recollection of the Teochew people.

Several other geographical terms in the museum are also related to the sea, such as 汕头埠 (Shanotu Port) and 漳林港 (Zhanglin Harbour). Although these terms are translated into English, the translation fails to reflect the relationship between the ocean and Teochew culture. For example, one of the exhibits is a map of Shantou in the Ming and Qing dynasties, showing the location of Zhanglin harbour. The Chinese object description roughly reads, "During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Zhanglin Harbour, located along the east coast of Guangdong, was a major gateway through which vessels sailed to the outer sea to the islands of Southeast Asia. In the past, Teochew emigrants often took *Ang Thau Tsung* (red-headed ships) from here to travel abroad". This description not only explains the relationship between Zhanglin Port and Teochew emigrants, but also gives an account of the history of red-headed ships, which is an important symbol of the Teochew cultural identity. Unfortunately, the museum does not provide a translation for this text. The term 红头船 (*Ang Thau Tsung*), a historical symbol associated with the migration history of the Teochew people, remains translated, failing to reflect the connection between Zhanglin Port and the Teochew cultural identity. As a result, it is difficult for the foreign audience to understand the significance of this display in relation to the theme of the exhibition.

A similar case can be observed with the translation of 汕头埠 (Shantou Port). The source text roughly reads "Shantou Port, Teochew emigrants' place of departure", which is translated as "Departure Place for Emigrants - Shantou Port". Although the translation is relatively accurate, it is not clear who the "emigrants" were, while the source text clearly indicates that they were Teochew people. More information is provided in the object description in Chinese, which explains that "Before Shantou was opened as a treaty port, it was already an important coastal city in southeast China. It was also the main port from where Teochew people travelled across the ocean to other countries". For the Chinese audience, this description establishes the relationship between Shantou Port and Teochew emigrants who travelled across the sea, creating a cultural narrative of the Teochew migration history. However, since the text is not accompanied with a translation, the cultural narrative constructed in Chinese is missing in English, failing to provide the foreign audience with a cultural experience similar to that of the Chinese audience.

5. Discussion: Translating Culture in Museum Texts in the Digital Age

The analysis above has revealed a consistent contrast in the representation of different layers of meaning embedded in texts in *Qiao Pi* museum. While the semantic message of some key cultural concepts is replicated in translation, the cultural connotation is often left untranslated, failing to offer the foreign audience a cultural experience comparable to that of the Chinese audience. This difficulty pertains to the issue of translating culture, which has been long recognised as an extremely trying challenge. Robinson (1997) contends that since different cultures are constructed by different social contexts, cultures are by their very nature untranslatable. This seems to put relatively under-resourced local museums in a conundrum of cross-cultural representation. To address this, we need to look beyond translation and rethink what intercultural

communication implicates in the age of globalisation. Traditionally, culture is believed to be closely integrated with a particular region and is transmitted through the local language. However, with the increase of global cultural exchange, culture is no longer inexorably linked to its home region. The transformationalist perspective conceives the world in a state of constant cultural flows (Tzanelli, 2011). As people, objects and ideas move around the world, the geopolitical boundaries of culture are being constantly transcended and transgressed. The mobility and migration of people around the world lead to constant flows of languages, ideas, and thoughts, causing culture to be shared and experienced more freely, exerting impacts beyond the imaginary boundaries between regions and countries. Cultural flows have created a new space for meaning negotiation and identity construction, with implications for the form and channel of intercultural communication.

Although each culture has its place of origin, with global cultural flows, its influence is no longer confined by its origin. This is particularly true for marine culture, which is known for its openness and inclusiveness. Cultures that have flowed to other parts of the world usually go through a process of meaning negotiation in their interaction with the local context, which can be used as a reference for translation. For example, the migration of the Teochew people to Southeast Asia led to the spread of their culture in countries and regions such as Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Hong Kong, and Macau. Teochew culture has been integrated into the oral and written discourse in these regions and is also displayed in local ethnographic museums. Due to the status of English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2009), texts describing Teochew culture are often either accompanied with English translations, or written directly in English, providing a rich corpus of existing translations.

According to Erll (2014), in the age of globalisation, memory resources can be shared globally in the form of transcultural memory, transcending time, space, and the social groups to which they originally belong. In this sense, the interpretation of a culture in other languages can be understood as an archive of transcultural memory. With the help of computer-aided translation, this memory archive can be stored as translation memory, which can on one hand facilitate future translation tasks, and on the other, enhance the continuation of cultural memory. Translators can create translation memories and term bases with existing translations which can be easily retrieved when needed. If computer-aided translation can be used in local museums, it will not only save the time and labour required for translation, but also improve the accuracy, consistency, and coherence of the target text.

Due to global cultural flows and the sharing of transcultural memory, many cultures have transcended their place of origin and undergone a process of reinterpretation and reconstruction in other languages. This process can be interpreted as what Bhabha (1994) conceives as cultural translation, which he defines as "the performative nature of cultural communication" (p.228). The translation of museum texts needs to be carried out under the perspective of global cultural flows, since only when the interpretation of culture breaks through geopolitical boundaries can it fully reflect the influence of that culture. To borrow Appiah's (1993) notion of thick translation, translation needs to restore museum texts to its own linguistic and cultural environment, which includes not only its native cultural context, but also its interpretation and memory in other languages. Otherwise, the translation of museum texts will be confined to geographical boundaries and lose the vision of a culture's global impact.

6. Conclusion

Museum texts are rich in cultural connotations, which are often expressed with condensed words in the form of cultural elements. Museum translation needs to not only render the meaning of the text, but also recreate a similar cultural experience for the foreign audience. Through an analysis of the translation of several key elements representing the Teochew marine cultural heritage exhibited in Shantou *Qiao Pi* Museum, this paper has found that although the translation manages to render the semantic message in the text, it often fails to fully convey the cultural connotations, underrepresenting the historic and social influence of Teochew culture. The cultural approach to translation views it not merely as a linguistic act, but as a complex social activity involving multiple facets in the source and target context. Museum texts plays an essential role in the construction of the exhibition's meaning and the reinforcement of collective cultural identity.

To achieve meaningful museum translation, it is necessary to reflect not just the textual message, but also the shared cultural narrative and cultural identity. The translator needs to restore the target text in a rich linguistic and cultural environment, one that can reflect and interact with the spread, representation, and (re)construction of a culture in the target language in other parts of the world. With the help of computer-aided translation, transcultural memory can be restored and retrieved as translation memory, empowering translation to better reflect the transmission and (re)construction of culture across geographical, spatial, and linguistic boundaries.

Acknowledgement

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