



From Zero-Sum to Win-Win: A Cultural Selection Model in Lexical Translation

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Abstract

Cultural selection has always been the lifeblood of translation. In the case of translating Chinese-specific terms, cultural selection goes beyond equivalent transmission of semantic content and pragmatic meaning; it emphasizes creating a multi-dimensional alignment of reader effects between the source and target languages. This paper categorizes Chinese-specific terms and proposes a cultural selection model based on three guiding principles: information-first, language appropriateness, and cultural transcoding. Leveraging Xu Yuanchong's "rivalry and advantage" theory, the paper abandons traditional zero-sum game thinking and overcomes the dichotomy between English and Chinese, fostering a win-win approach to semantic expression. This solution enhances translation accuracy, aiming to provide new insights for translation practices.

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1. Introduction

In his significant July 1st speech in 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized that "to build on historical insights and forge a new future, we must continuously advance the building of a community with a shared future for humankind", underscoring the need to "promote the universal values of peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy, and freedom, adhere to cooperation rather than confrontation, openness rather than isolation, and mutual benefit rather than zero-sum games".

Zero-sum is a concept from game theory where the gain of one party inevitably results in the loss of another, meaning that the total benefit or loss for both sides equals zero, hence the term "zero-sum". The concept of the prisoner's dilemma primarily arises from this zero-sum thinking, where each individual seeks to maximize their own interests in a win-lose competition. Society reveals similar zero-sum scenarios across various fields, from individual to national levels, from politics to economics. In this "zero-sum game", the outcomes are often "you win, I lose" or "you lose, I win". Any gain by one party signifies a corresponding loss for the other. Zero-sum theory posits that the world operates as a closed system with limited wealth, resources, and opportunities, suggesting that the enrichment of individuals, regions, or countries inherently implies the exploitation of others. This worldview aligns with a form of "evil evolutionism," where the survival of the fittest reigns, casting the world as one of predatory power, with the success of victors shadowed by the bitterness of the vanquished. Zero-sum thinking is often seen as stemming from Cold War ideologies, where antagonism arose from the ideological clash between two opposing blocs.

The concept of win-win extends beyond simple mutual benefit to encompass the broader idea that both parties in an interaction gain without detriment to third-party individuals, the collective, the environment, or other interests. The foundation of win-win lies in the principle of systemic wholeness, which fosters win-win outcomes by improving relationships between interconnected entities, thereby enabling more effective use of existing resources or development of new ones. In essence, win-win solutions "expand the pie" so that each party gains more, or at least improves their conditions, supporting sustainable development.

Due to the complexity and diversity of global systems and institutional environments, different modes of thought will persist. However, win-win thinking is expected to become the predominant mindset in the knowledge economy era, an inevitable trend shaped by both subjective and objective needs, opportunities presented by objective conditions, the lessons of the past, and the practical demands of the present, as well as humanity's aspiration for an ideal future society.

Translators, too, must embrace a win-win mindset to achieve the greatest common understanding and produce the best possible translation products.

According to Marxist linguistic philosophy, language is not an individual creation but a product of social practice and social interaction. The distinct cognitive frameworks of different nations emerge from variations in these practices, making translation an essential vehicle for cultural exchange (Marx & Engels, 1979) [8].

The unique characteristics and disparities among cultures often manifest in translation as conceptual gaps or conflicts, differences in semantic associations, pragmatic meanings, and psychological perceptions. Thus, translation is not merely a transfer of information between languages but a fusion of distinct cultures. To ensure effective information exchange between cultures, accuracy becomes the cornerstone of translation standards.

2. Literature Review

In translation studies, a substantial body of literature has delved into the foundational principles of translation and its role in cultural dissemination. Particularly in the context of globalization, achieving effective communication and cultural transmission between the source and target languages has become a central issue in translation research. Regarding cultural differences and informational asymmetries in Chinese-English translation, scholars have increasingly recognized the need for a systematic translation strategy that balances semantic accuracy, linguistic appropriateness, and cultural representation. Through principles of information transmission, language adaptation, and cultural transcoding, these frameworks not only ensure translation accuracy and readability but also theoretically support the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication in translation. To explore the roles of these principles in translation, the following sections discuss the concepts of information-first, language appropriateness, and cultural transcoding and their significance in translation practice.

2.1. Information-First Principle

The information-first principle is crucial in translation, particularly for politically and culturally specific terminology, as it places semantic accuracy above stylistic elements such as rhetorical effects or metaphors. Newmark (1988) [10] discusses this in his text classification, asserting that "expressive texts" should prioritize semantic accuracy, especially in political or technical translation, where the informational content must be conveyed accurately to preserve its intended meaning (Newmark, 1988) [10]. This approach aligns with Newmark's classification of "semantic translation" in *A Textbook of Translation*, viewing semantic translation as essential for communicative or political texts (Newmark, 1988) [10].

For instance, Nida and Taber (1969) [12] introduced the dynamic equivalence theory, which stresses that the primary goal of translation should be to convey the meaning experienced by the original text's audience. This means translators must prioritize accurate information transfer to generate an equivalent response from the target audience, enhancing cross-cultural understanding without overemphasizing word-for-word equivalency (Nida & Taber, 1969) [12]. Other scholars, such as Katan (2004) [6], have examined how cultural contexts shape information interpretation, further underscoring the necessity of an

information-first approach. Katan argues that prioritizing the transmission of intended information effectively bridges cultural gaps and enhances the target audience's comprehension (Katan, 2004) [6].

Another significant contribution is the translation strategy model by Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) [18], who emphasize modulation and adaptation to retain meaning, even if it requires restructuring the text. They argue that retaining core informational content is essential, especially when dealing with complex or culturally specific terms that often lack direct equivalents in the target language (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) [18]. In practice, translators often encounter situations where adhering strictly to the source structure hampers effective information transfer. Baker (2011) [2] notes that cultural nuances frequently require explanation or paraphrasing to preserve essential information. Baker's research further emphasizes the importance of explicitation strategies to ensure the conveyed information resonates accurately within the target language (Baker, 2011) [2]. Thus, prioritizing information transmission aligns with the purpose of cross-cultural communication, particularly in political or diplomatic texts where accuracy in information transfer is paramount.

2.2. Language Appropriateness Principle

The language appropriateness principle in translation underscores the need to adjust the translated content to conform to the linguistic and cultural norms of the target language, ensuring readability and cultural resonance. This approach originates from Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence theory, which argues that translators should adjust the language to elicit a similar response from the target audience as from the source audience, thereby enhancing clarity and effectiveness (Nida & Taber, 1969) [12]. Dynamic equivalence generally requires flexibility in translation to ensure cultural relevance and linguistic accessibility for the target audience.

Building on Nida's work, Hatim and Mason (1997) [4] discuss the importance of pragmatic and cultural appropriateness in translation, emphasizing that the translated text should reflect the language norms and expectations of the target culture to avoid misinterpretations. They contend that cultural adaptation often entails adjusting phrases or idioms to match the habitual constructions of the target audience, thus preserving the intended information without compromising clarity (Hatim & Mason, 1997) [4]. Venuti (1995) [17], in his research on foreignization and domestication strategies, notes that translators face choices between preserving foreign elements in the text (foreignization) or adapting it to better suit the target readers (domestication). He argues that domestication often improves readability and acceptance by adjusting culturally specific terms to align with the norms of the target language (Venuti, 1995) [17]. Toury's (1995) [16] concept of "acceptability" further supports the language appropriateness principle, suggesting that translations should meet the norms and expectations of the target culture. Toury's descriptive translation studies indicate that achieving cultural acceptability often requires translators to diverge from literal accuracy to adhere to the target language's grammar, style, and cultural demands (Toury, 1995) [16]. Additionally, Baker (2011) [2] discusses how cultural subtleties in language necessitate translation adjustments to ensure the target audience fully understands the intended meaning. Baker's research advises translators to prioritize

readability and accessibility, providing the target audience with a smooth reading experience (Baker, 2011) [2].

2.3. Cultural Transcoding Principle

The cultural transcoding principle emphasizes the importance of content adaptation in translation to accurately convey cultural meanings across linguistic boundaries. This principle is grounded in the view that translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but a bridge for cultural differences. Eugene Nida's (1964) [11] concept of "cultural equivalence" stresses that translators should employ appropriate cultural references and adjustments to elicit a similar response from the target audience as from the source language audience (Nida, 1964) [11].

Aixelá (1996) [1] introduced the concept of "cultural-specific items" (CSIs), advocating that translators should carefully handle these elements to maintain the cultural relevance of the target text. According to Aixelá, localization or adaptation strategies effectively convey specific cultural meanings, allowing readers in the target culture to fully comprehend the context of the original text (Aixelá, 1996) [1]. Venuti (1995) [17] further contributes to the discussion of cultural transcoding by examining the treatment of cultural elements in foreignization and domestication strategies. He suggests that domestication renders the text more accessible to the target audience, while foreignization retains the source text's cultural uniqueness. These strategies reflect a balance between cultural authenticity and adaptation that translators must navigate (Venuti, 1995) [17]. House (2015) [5] discusses the role of cultural background in translation, recommending that translators pay attention to explicit and implicit cultural cues within the text. House's translation quality assessment model emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness and adaptation, suggesting that effective translation requires both linguistic and cultural decoding to meet the target audience's expectations (House, 2015) [5]. Snell-Hornby (1988) [13] introduced the concept of the "integrated approach", arguing that language transformation alone is insufficient for culturally rich texts. Translators must also consider the unique cultural nuances, idioms, and metaphors within each language to ensure cultural resonance in the translated work (Snell-Hornby, 1988) [13].

3. Cultural Selection Model for Translating Chinese-Specific Lexicon

Renowned translator Xu Yuanchong proposed the "theory of rivalry and advantages", advocating for the strengths of the translated text to compete with those of the original, thus enabling creative translation free from constraints of linguistic form. This approach is especially relevant to lexical translation. Xu suggested that if a foreign language expression is more precise and powerful than the native form, it can be translated literally, integrating the fresh foreign term. Conversely, if the native expression is more accurate or forceful, an interpretive (or adaptive) translation is appropriate. Importantly, this interpretive translation is not arbitrary; it is a creative adaptation based on the original, turning the source and translated texts into complementary entities—achieving a win-win outcome (Xu, 2004) [19].

Due to the unique stylistic and functional characteristics of Chinese language, translating such terms accurately requires more than mere semantic encoding. Beyond the informational dimension, translators should also consider the metaphorical, rhetorical effects, purposes, and linguistic

conventions inherent in Chinese-specific terms. This multi-dimensional approach helps ensure that the translated text aligns effectively with the original. Specifically, in translating Chinese-specific terms, the semantic essence should be fully converted to achieve equivalent informational value in the translation. When necessary, strategies such as dynamic-static shifts may be applied to achieve the same persuasive effect as the original. Additionally, translators should balance the cultural characteristics of both languages, adjusting concepts that may lack equivalents, cause conflict, or differ in semantic associations to achieve a cultural congruity (Zhao, 2024) [20]. The following principles are suggested for translating Chinese-specific lexicon:

3.1. Information-First Principle in Lexical Translation

The essence of translation lies in the correspondence of meaning between two languages. Therefore, one of its primary objectives is to facilitate the flow of information from the original text to the target language, thereby promoting cultural dissemination and exchange. Thus, translation should prioritize accurate information transmission before addressing rhetorical, metaphorical, or other stylistic functions. Peter Newmark, in *The Textbook of Translation*, categorizes political texts as "expressive texts", with semantic translation as their guiding principle. In formal Chinese texts, abbreviations frequently appear, posing serious challenges for smooth translation. Translators must adopt the perspective of the original readers, deciphering the compact yet semantically rich abbreviations and employing strategies such as annotation or paraphrasing to fully convey the underlying information and avoid mechanical translation (Newmark, 1988) [10].

Example 1: 四自一简

Translation: *the Special Customs Supervision Area's mode of supervision based on "four self-initiated actions and the simplification of business approval procedures"*

The new regulatory model, "四自一简" (four self-initiated actions and one simplification), permits enterprises within the Comprehensive Bonded Zone to self-register, independently determine verification cycles, self-initiate verification declarations, self-manage tax payment procedures for supplementary duties, and simplifies qualification procedures for business approvals (Foreign Investment Guide of the People's Republic of China, 2021). This example is concise yet semantically rich. Translating it directly as *Four Autonomies and One Simplification* would not meet the target readers' informational needs, nor would it engage their experiential and aesthetic expectations. Thus, an interpretive translation method was used to convey the meaning through explanation, using terms like *business*, *approval*, and *procedures* to delineate the scope of the policy. While this approach sacrifices some linguistic brevity, it preserves the semantic integrity.

Example 2: 双随机、一公开

Translation: *Oversight conducted through the random selection of both inspectors and inspection targets and the prompt release of results.*

Accurate information transmission requires a comprehensive understanding of the original content. The abbreviation "双随机、一公开" embodies aesthetic symmetry, reflecting a

balance that aligns with Chinese thought patterns. However, if translators prioritize structural fidelity to the original without considering semantic accuracy, it may lead to incomplete transmission of information, sacrificing clarity for form. For this type of terminology, an interpretive translation approach is also appropriate, allowing translators to break free from the constraints of the original structure and reorganize the information in a way that corresponds with the target reader's cognition, information needs, and reading experience. Although the translation may not achieve complete structural equivalency, the primary objective of formal text translation is to convey semantic information. Thus, translators should strive for a profound understanding of the original, converting the message appropriately in the target language. Consequently, translation, as a cognitive activity, demands high proficiency in interpreting and reconstructing the original, extracting and conveying information, and effectively reconstructing and writing in the target language (Tian, 2021) [15].

3.2. Language Appropriateness in Cross-Cultural Contexts

Translation involves conversion across languages or symbols, during which information is transmitted through linguistic or symbolic transformations. However, given the multitudinous structural and stylistic differences between Chinese and English, translation must consider these variations to make necessary adjustments. A translator must thoroughly assess the target readers' needs and reading experiences, contextualizing and transferring the inherent meaning appropriately into the target language. This approach ensures that the translated text achieves an impact similar to, or even equivalent to, that of the original. If the translation maintains linguistic alignment and accuracy while meeting the aesthetic preferences, informational needs, and reading habits of the target readers, then its accuracy is significantly enhanced (Gentzler, 2022) [3].

Example 3: 最多跑一次

Translation 1: *one visit at most*
Translation 2: *without the need for a second visit*

The original phrase “最多跑一次” emphasizes action, reflecting the dynamic syntactic nature of the Chinese language. However, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce rendered it as *One visit at most*, transforming the action into a static phrase. This adjustment not only conveys the underlying meaning of the governmental measure but also aligns with English-speaking readers' habitual reading patterns, enhancing both acceptability and accessibility. Additionally, “最多跑一次” appears in *Report on the Work of the Government* (2019) as *without the need for a second visit*, illustrating that a reversed or negative construction can be a viable strategy to align with the target readers' reading conventions.

Therefore, considering the differences in linguistic habits between the two languages, translating Chinese-specific terms into English requires maintaining information accuracy while taking into account the pragmatic implications. Translators may employ an adaptive translation strategy or choose alternative expressions that ensure the translation conveys both meaning and emotional resonance. This flexible approach helps avoid the mechanical quality of literal or rigid translation, allowing target readers to experience an

effect similar to that of the original audience. Consequently, the translation achieves a level of persuasive efficacy that closely resembles, if not equals, the original's intended impact.

3.3. Cultural Transcoding Principle in Translation

Language serves as a cultural vessel and an essential tool for human communication; thus, translation acts as a bridge between distinct cultures. Essentially, translation is a cross-cultural communication and dissemination activity mediated through various languages. Each culture has its unique characteristics, and when translating, cultural gaps or non-equivalent expressions which frequently arise, pose immense challenges to translators. Chinese language and culture, rich and deeply rooted in a profound history, are filled with culturally loaded expressions such as idioms and proverbs. If these culturally laden expressions can be accurately transferred into the target language, it not only enhances the flexibility and vividness of English translations but also plays a crucial role in promoting the international presence of Chinese language and culture.

Example 4: 不搞“大水漫灌式”强刺激

Translation: *not adopting strong stimulus policies that would have had an economy-wide impact*

Due to differences in thinking patterns and cultural backgrounds between Chinese and English-speaking audiences, rhetorical elements in Chinese may not have equivalent impact in English. For Chinese readers, the image of “大水漫灌” (literally, “flood irrigation”) is familiar, symbolizing a broad, undirected approach to development. A direct translation, however, could confuse foreign readers lacking the relevant agricultural context. Thus, an interpretive translation using the relative clause *would have had an economy-wide impact* clarifies the concept, allowing target readers to understand its political and cultural significance within China and avoiding semantic loss caused by excessive focus on rhetorical effect.

Example 5: 双独二孩政策、单独二孩政策、全面二孩政策

Translation: *selective two-child policy for couples who are the only child in his or her own family; selective two-child policy for couples in which either husband or wife is the only child in his or her own family; universal two-child policy*

Spanish translator Aixelá was one of the first to define “culture-specific items” (CSIs) as “a particular cultural reference within the source text”. Political CSIs, which often involve national policies, political stances, and regulations, require an in-depth understanding of the source text to interpret them faithfully yet accessibly for target readers. The above policy terms represent a series of China-specific population policies, bearing significant historical relevance as new political terminology. Translating them directly may result in confusing and frustrating omissions. Therefore, translators must carefully consider the political and cultural differences between the two societies to prevent conflict between the translation and target culture. In this case, a paraphrased approach allows for the transfer of specific content and inherent meaning into the target language's discourse. Translators should, when necessary, adopt the perspective of the reader to fully respect cultural differences,

explaining the concepts in ways that align with the target readers' habits and understanding to achieve a win-win outcome (Sui, 2006) ^[14]. This process requires strict adherence to the original meaning and cultural nuances, avoiding subjective misrepresentation that could cause target readers to misunderstand China's political stances or policies, thus affecting the nation's international image.

Translation contributes to the global spread of Chinese culture and civilization and plays a key role in shaping the positive national image. Consequently, this paper categorizes specialized political terms in Chinese political texts, proposing that English translations of these terms should adhere to the information-first principle to fulfill the primary objective of political outreach, follow the language appropriateness principle to reduce reading barriers for target readers, and observe the cultural transcoding principle to avoid political misunderstandings due to cultural clashes. This approach ensures the translation achieves equivalent informational value, persuasive effect, and alignment with respective cultural frameworks, thereby enhancing the accuracy of translating specialized terminology across multiple dimensions.

A win-win approach is one of non-destructive engagement, fostering harmony between self and environment, which supports mental health and sustainable development for the maximum effect. From the perspective of win-win thinking, we can see that countless opportunities for mutual benefit in society have been needlessly hindered by zero-sum thinking. Establishing a pervasive win-win mindset in translation will create a more harmonious atmosphere, fully utilize the advantages of each language, and facilitate smoother integration between Chinese and English cultures. As Xu Yuanchong's theory suggests, this perspective allows both languages to leverage their strengths fully, and consequently achieving optimal translation outcomes.

4. Conclusion

In today's era of deepened globalization and international division of labor, translation has evolved from a mere linguistic conversion into a bridge for cross-cultural communication, tasked with conveying information and fostering cultural exchange between civilizations. Particularly in the translation of Chinese-specific terms, the principles of information-first, language appropriateness, and cultural transcoding not only serve as guidelines for achieving translation accuracy but also act as core strategies for creating cross-cultural resonance and integration. The information-first principle emphasizes the precise transmission of the original semantic content, ensuring that the translation faithfully conveys the core information of the source text, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of information transfer. This principle helps guarantee that target readers accurately grasp the main ideas and nuances of the original text. Concurrently, the language appropriateness principle, by focusing on readability and cultural acceptance, ensures that the translation is not only linguistically natural but also culturally aligned with the cognitive habits and expressive preferences of the target readers, enhancing its acceptability and influence. In translating Chinese-specific terms, translators must not only communicate the profound meanings of the terms but also consider the cultural context and pragmatic functions to accommodate the target audience's understanding and experience. Through such flexible translation strategies, translators effectively

overcome cultural barriers, ensuring that the translation achieves equivalent informational and emotional impact to the original source texts.

On the level of cultural transcoding, Xu Yuanchong's concept of "win-win thinking" offers a new perspective for contemporary translation practice. This approach advocates for moving beyond traditional zero-sum dichotomies in the translation process, instead pursuing a dual win in information and cultural exchange through bidirectional cultural integration. Win-win solutions encourage translators to seek consistency in effectiveness between the source and translated texts while also requiring creative adjustments in linguistic expression to bridge cultural differences. This approach enables the target language to recreate the cultural depth and emotional resonance of the source text. The process not only enhances the information transmission in the translation but also highlights the translator's active role in cultural integration, facilitating smoother cross-cultural communication. Particularly when dealing with Chinese-specific political, historical, and socio-cultural concepts, the cultural transcoding principle enables translators to handle culture-specific items with greater flexibility, adapting them based on the target audience's comprehension and preferences to achieve semantic clarity and cultural adaptability. This approach broadens the bridge between Chinese and English, enhancing both the accuracy and cultural cohesion of Chinese-English translation. Moreover, it increasingly contributes to the formation of a distinct Chinese cultural image in international communication, promoting China's cultural influence and values in the globalized world.

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