

A Study on the English Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *The Colors of the Tang Dynasty: A Panorama of Tri-Colored Glazed Pottery* Based on Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract

Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery represents a pinnacle of ancient Chinese ceramic art. Its specialized terminology poses significant challenges for English translation due to its deep cultural and historical connotations. This paper applies Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory to analyze the translation strategies employed for Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery terminology. Through a comparative examination of existing translations in museum catalogues, academic publications, and official documents, the study identifies four major strategies—transliteration, literal translation, free translation, and transliteration plus annotation—and evaluates their effectiveness in achieving communicative and functional equivalence. The findings suggest that a flexible, multi-strategy approach, guided by the target audience and communicative purpose, best serves the cross-cultural transmission of Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery.

Keywords

Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery; intangible cultural heritage translation; international communication.

1. Introduction

Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery (唐三彩), literally "three colors of the Tang," refers to a distinctive type of low-fired lead-glazed pottery that flourished during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE). Characterized by its vibrant amber, green, and cream glazes, Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery encompasses a wide range of objects—including figures of horses, camels, court ladies, and mythical beasts—that reflect the cosmopolitan spirit of the era. As a UNESCO-recognized element of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, the accurate translation of Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery terminology has become increasingly vital for international scholarship, museum exhibition, and cultural diplomacy. However, Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery terminology presents a formidable translation challenge. How to render such terms into English without sacrificing cultural fidelity or communicative clarity is a question that demands both theoretical grounding and practical analysis. This paper addresses this gap by (1) classifying Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery terminology into typological categories, (2) applying Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory (1964) as a guiding principle, and (3) analyzing the translation strategies adopted in major English-language sources. The aim is to propose a principled framework for the translation of Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery specialized vocabulary.

2. Culture-loaded Words

Culture-loaded words refer to words or expressions that originate and develop within a specific culture, carrying its unique connotations, and often lack fully equivalent counterparts in other cultures. Proposed by translation theorist Eugene Nida, they encompass ecological, material, social, religious, linguistic, and historical dimensions. These words are characterized by cultural

uniqueness, semantic vacancy, and non-translatability, with meanings that evolve over time and often rich in emotional connotations. In translation practice, culture-loaded words pose the greatest challenge, typically requiring strategies such as transliteration with annotation, free translation, a combination of literal and free translation, or substitution. They represent the intersection of language and culture, and understanding them is of great significance for cross-cultural communication, translation studies, language teaching, and cultural dissemination.

3. Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional Equivalence, proposed by the renowned American linguist and translation theorist Eugene A. Nida, holds that translation should not be confined to the superficial "formal correspondence" of language, but should instead strive to achieve "the closest natural equivalence" in the psychological response and cognitive effect experienced by target-language readers when reading the translation, comparable to that experienced by source-language readers when reading the original text. Nida emphasized that translation is "the reproduction in the receptor language of the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style"

The theory primarily encompasses the following four dimensions of equivalence: First, lexical equivalence. This serves as the foundation of equivalence. Nida stressed that the meaning of a word is determined by its use in specific contexts, and translators should seek functionally corresponding expressions based on the context rather than mechanically applying dictionary definitions. Second, syntactic equivalence. Addressing the structural differences between languages (e.g., Chinese prioritizing parataxis while English prioritizing hypotaxis), translators need to reorganize sentence components, convert voice, and employ other techniques to ensure that the translation conforms to the grammatical norms of the target language, maintaining clarity of logic and naturalness of expression. Third, textual equivalence. This dimension focuses on the cohesion and coherence of the discourse. It requires the translation to be consistent with the original text in overall structure, information progression, and logical relationships, enabling the target text to fulfill the same narrative or argumentative function as the source text within its macro-context. Fourth, stylistic equivalence. This involves aspects such as linguistic style, emotional tone, and degree of formality. Translators must appropriately employ the rhetorical resources of the target language to reproduce the artistic appeal or academic rigor of the original, thereby achieving corresponding effects at the stylistic-functional level. Within this framework, Nida explicitly put forward the principle of "meaning takes precedence over form." When form and meaning cannot be reconciled, form should be adjusted or even sacrificed to preserve the actual function, ultimately achieving effective cross-cultural communication.

4. English Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *The Colors of the Tang Dynasty: A Panorama of Tri-Colored Glazed Pottery*

4.1. Material Culture-loaded Words

Original Text: 唐三彩属于低温铅釉陶, 这是其独特魅力的重要基石。

Translation: Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery is classified as lead-glazed low-temperature earthenware, a fundamental basis that underpins its distinctive appeal.

Footnote: Lead-glazed low-temperature earthenware: a type of glazed pottery fired at 800-1100°C with lead oxide as flux.

Analysis: Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory emphasizes that translation should produce the closest natural equivalent in the target language, prioritizing the reader's response over rigid formal correspondence. The source text "低温铅釉陶" carries layered technical and

cultural information: firing temperature (低温), lead-based glaze (铅釉), and earthenware substrate (陶). A purely formal-equivalent rendering such as low-temperature lead-glazed pottery risks confusing Western readers with porcelain, since "pottery" alone fails to signal the non-vitreous earthenware body—a critical distinction Nida would flag as a breakdown at the lexical-semantic level of equivalence. Conversely, low-temperature lead-glazed porcelain violates factual accuracy entirely, producing what Nida terms *amis* representation that would distort the target reader's cognitive response. The adopted rendering lead-glazed low-temperature earthenware achieves functional equivalence at the technical-referential level: confirmed by *Termium Plus* and *Journal of Asian Ceramics*, it precisely encodes the glaze composition, firing range (800–1100°C), and earthenware substrate, ensuring the English reader arrives at the same material understanding as the Chinese reader. At the textual-discourse level, the appositive clause "a fundamental basis that underpins its distinctive appeal" preserves the source's evaluative tone and logical structure, maintaining coherence and readability. Following Nida's principle of functional compensation, the footnote bridges the cultural gap by explicitly defining the material's firing process and chemical basis, ensuring that Western readers without prior knowledge of Chinese ceramics can reconstruct the source text's informational intent. Thus, the translation balances formal fidelity with functional clarity, realizing Nida's ideal that "the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message"

4.2. Social Culture-loaded Words

Original Text: 骆驼俑是唐代丝路文明的具象载体。

Translation: Camel Figurines (Luotuo Yong) serve as tangible embodiment of Silk Road civilization during the Tang Dynasty.

Footnote: Camel Figurines: Tang tri-colored glazed ceramic sculptures, most often modeled as two-humped Bactrian camels, symbolizing the prosperity of the Silk Road and a spirit of resilience.

Analysis: The camel figurine is a Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery ceramic sculpture modeled after the two-humped camel, symbolizing Silk Road prosperity and resilience. As a funerary *mingqi*, it serves both as a mortuary symbol and an artistic emblem of the High Tang (Rong Xinjiang, 2022). Translation challenges arise from the absence of a Western equivalent for "yong" (funerary figurine) and the camel's elevation to a symbol of Silk Road civilization, requiring a balance of material form, functional purpose, and cultural metaphor. Functional equivalence theory demands that the translation restore the full informational hierarchy of the source text. The domestication approach "Ceramic Camel Figurine," while intuitive, strips away ritual function and cultural symbolism; full foreignization as "Luotuo Yong" lacks annotation and risks a cognitive gap. The principle for translating culture-specific terms calls for balancing "preserving cultural heterogeneity" with "lowering the cognitive threshold," yet the figurine's multilayered connotations exceed what any single strategy can convey. The translator therefore adopts a composite "free translation plus transliteration with annotation" approach: Camel Figurines (Luotuo Yong). The free translation establishes a cognitive foundation; the transliteration anchors the culture-specific term and preserves heterogeneity; the gloss reads: Tang tri-colored glazed ceramic sculptures modeled as two-humped Bactrian camels, symbolizing Silk Road prosperity and resilience. The annotation specifies the species, elevates the Silk Road symbolism, and distills the spirit of resilience, enabling target readers to perceive the Eastern philosophy of "vessels conveying the Dao." This approach is better suited to the cross-cultural communication demanded by the artifact's status as a world cultural heritage carrier.

4.3. Religious Culture-loaded Words

Original Text: 三彩宝相花盘以釉下钴蓝点彩为底，中心绘团窠对狮纹，边缘饰以回纹联珠带，色彩浓烈而不失典雅，体现唐代工艺的极致追求。

Translated Text: The Tri-colored Glazed Grecious-Blossom Dish features cobalt-blue underglaze dotted patterns as its base, with a central medallion depicting paired lions in a roundel and a border adorned with a meander-and-pearl band. Its vibrant yet elegant palette embodies the Tang Dynasty's mastery of craftsmanship.

Analysis: The example depicts a tri-colored (*sancai*) Baoxiang flower dish with distinctive Tang Dynasty characteristics, requiring the translation to balance craftsmanship details, cultural symbolism, and artistic aesthetics. In terms of color terminology, "cobalt-blue underglaze dotted patterns" (釉下钴蓝点彩) has its technical features confirmed by archaeological reports on cobalt-blue glazed wares excavated from the Famen Temple underground palace. The technique originated from Central Asian glass decoration and was transmitted to China via the Silk Road, where it merged with indigenous blue-and-white porcelain techniques (Yan Cunliang, 2005). The translator adopts "dotted patterns" instead of the literal "pointillism" (点彩), which could be confused with the Western Impressionist painting term, as "dotted" more closely reflects the ceramic practice of "dot-applied glazing"; "underglaze" clarifies the technical layer. "Vibrant yet elegant" (浓烈而不失典雅) retains the original oxymoron through its parallel structure, and the palette metaphor concretizes the color combinations, achieving functional equivalence in aesthetic effect. Regarding pattern terminology, "Paired lions in a roundel" (团窠对狮纹) integrates Persian Sasanian pearl roundels with Central Asian Sogdian lion motifs. Guided by Nida's functional equivalence, which prioritizes communicative effect over formal correspondence, the translator combines "roundel" with "paired lions" to balance geometric composition and cultural symbolism, enabling the target reader to achieve a response equivalent to that of the source reader—what Nida calls "the closest natural equivalent." This reflects the creative transformation of foreign patterns through localized recontextualization. "Meander-and-pearl band" (回纹联珠带) similarly employs the "-and-" structure to avoid semantic fragmentation, consistent with Nida's naturalness principle, while "band" specifies spatial position and reproduces the linear arrangement, preserving the source text's visual and informational functions across linguistic boundaries.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the translation of Tang Tri-colored Glazed Pottery professional terminology through the dual lens of Culture-Specific Items theory and Functional Equivalence Theory. The analysis reveals the terminology spans a spectrum of cultural specificity—from relatively transparent technical terms to deeply culture-bound concepts—and that no single translation strategy is universally adequate. Instead, a flexible, context-sensitive approach is required, guided by the twin principles of preserving cultural identity (as CSIs theory demands) and ensuring communicative effectiveness (as Functional Equivalence requires).

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