

A Harmonious Perspective on the Identity of Translators: Taking Shiwan Ceramic Sculpture Culture Translation as an Example¹

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Abstract

Translation is necessarily subjective and requires a variety of translation behaviors to adjust to the communicative need of various texts and contexts. Harmony has been central to Chinese philosophy and culture for thousands of years and permeates art, scholarship, and daily life. Translation without harmony cannot communicate core ideas between languages and cultures since a translator simultaneously serves as a text interpreter, local cultural researcher, cultural coordinator, and discourse reconstructor. The translator must harmonize these dynamic identities to achieve a translation which conveys the complex essence of the original text. This paper takes Shiwan ceramic sculpture descriptions as the research object, showcasing the translator's identity and role in international translation. This research seeks not only to shine light on the translator's role, but simultaneously to tell the story of Shiwan ceramic sculpture culture and to promote the overseas understanding of Shiwan ceramic sculpture.

Key words: international translation, translator identity, Shiwan ceramic sculpture, harmony

1. Introduction

The connotation of harmony in Chinese culture is mainly reflected in the relationships between people and nature, people and people, and people and society, emphasizing mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and respect for objective laws. Overall, the connotation of harmony includes balance in the whole, coordination in differences, order in complexity, and unity in diversity. This last concept, unity in diversity (和而不同; *he'erbutong*) is a pillar of a harmonious life and connects intuitively with translation. The harmonious perspective has been a focus of discourse analysis in China for decades (c.f., Fan, 2005, Huang et al., 2021, and Pang & Marlow, 2021). This paper applies this concept to translators' identity.

Translation is necessarily subjective and requires the translator to adjust to the communicative need of various texts and contexts as they seek harmony and balance among different and diverse identities. Identity exploration of translators as visible in translated text, therefore, provides empirical material for the study of the mechanisms and positioning of local cultural translators.

With the acceleration of globalization, the pace at which Chinese culture is going global is also accelerating. Examples include artistic exchanges, tourism promotion, educational cooperation, amongst many other venues. Within China, a country with more than 300 living languages, the term international translation is employed to refer to translation between any variety of Chinese and another language (Zhang, 2013). International translation primarily focuses promoting Chinese culture as it goes global. Translations related to China's politics, economy, and culture aid other countries in our increasingly interconnected world as we all seek to understand other people groups, to ameliorate misunderstandings and biases based on ideological differences, and to improve international relations. Cultural elements in texts, therefore, must not be separated from other translation elements.

To achieve the desired results, external and internal language factors must be considered in international translation. External factors include different national systems, values, ideologies, religious beliefs, and customs.

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The translator must take into these external factors into account for each target audience and seek to predict the audience's response to the translation. Different countries, different religious beliefs, ideologies, and customs elicit different reactions and judgments from the same text. Internal linguistic factors refer to the choices made by translators in language expression and discourse layout. For example, in international translation, translators need to deeply consider their choices and make decisions on how to effectively spread desired content to global audiences through careful organization of language in translation.

2. Shiwan Ceramic Sculpture culture

To explore these translation factors, it is helpful to limit the focus. In this paper, we explore translations of Shiwan pottery sculpture exhibition texts. Shiwan pottery sculpture embraces a wide range of themes, rich local characteristics and unique artistic styles. Shiwan pottery sculpture, represented by character design, combines both form and spirit, full of warmth and humanity and has been called a “concentrated encyclopedia of Chinese folk culture.” Most Shiwan pottery sculptures are beloved as they are full of charm and closely related to the local people's lives. Shiwan Town is a district of Foshan City in the Guangdong province in Southern China. A folk saying, “石湾瓦，甲天下” (shiwān wǎ, jiǎ tiānxià: Shiwan pottery, best under heaven) reflects the high reputation of Shiwan pottery in China. Its representative works include ceramic tile ridges and figurines. Ceramic tile ridges are used for roof decoration in buildings, known for their exquisite shapes and colors, such as the *King of Flower Ridges* in the Foshan Ancestral Temple Museum (Image 1). Shiwan figurines typically depict historical figures, characters from myths and legends, or scenes from daily life. *Lady Holding a Fan* (Image 2) captures elegance, arrogance, and classically valued features of a wealthy woman of the Qing Dynasty.



Image 1: King of Flower Ridges



Image 2: Lady Holding a Fan

Key characteristics of Shiwan ceramics include:

- **Thematic Variety:** Foshan pottery sculptures are very rich in content, including people, animals, myths and legends, folk life, etc., especially known for shaping historical figures and characters in folk stories.
- **Vivid Design:** The production process includes detailed processing, with realistic images and vivid expressions which capture the personality traits of people and the dynamics of animals.
- **Vibrant Colors:** Thanks to a high-temperature glaze technique, the colors are bright and long-lasting, resulting in works that look both beautiful and have high value.
- **Folk Artistry:** Holding to traditional handmade methods, production involves multiple steps such as molding, carving, and painting; each step requires professional expertise.
- **Functional Artistry:** Some pottery sculptures blend form and function with works of art also serving practical functions as tea sets, vases, etc.
- **Regional Characteristics:** Foshan pottery sculptures are deeply influenced by local culture, and many works reflect the local customs and social style of their region.

Because of their rich uniqueness, Shiwan ceramics are officially recognized not only as one of the cultural heritages of the city of Foshan and the Guangdong region but also nationally. In 2006, “Shiwan Ceramic Sculpture Art Technique” was included in the first installation of national level recognition as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage.”

This paper, then, takes museum descriptions of Shiwan Ceramics Sculpture as the research object, showcasing the translator’s identity roles in the international translation from Chinese to English. Museums are important windows and platforms for international tourists to learn about Chinese culture and history. Through exhibitions, explanations, interactive activities, and other media, they help international visitors understand and appreciate the unique features of Chinese culture. High quality translation of museum captions for international visitors is crucial for their understanding of exhibits. This research may promote the telling of the story of Shiwan Ceramic Sculpture culture and the overseas development of Shiwan Ceramic Sculpture.

3. Translator’s Identity in International Translation

The translator’s identity as a core concept in the theory of translator’s behavior research has come to the forefront of research in recent years (Wang & Zhang, 2023; Wang, et al., 2024). As Zhou points out, “The publicity-oriented translator is the spokesperson for approaching the target language market and improving the publicity effect. It has undergone changes in identity and corresponding identity of all behaviors” (Zhou, 2022: 3-4). However, the research on translator identity remains new and needs to be further explored. As for international translation, in the process of interpreting local cultural information, interpreting local cultural significance, and conveying cultural values, translators have multiple identities as text interpreters, cultural researchers, cultural coordinators, and discourse reconstructors. In the process of translation, translators need to fully mobilize their multiple roles. These identities present diverse and overlapping characteristics, which are highlighted to varying degrees in specific translation behaviors and strike a balance between their own initiative and external constraints.

3.1 Text Interpreter

The role of the text translator is not to literally translate the original text, but “to immerse oneself in the intention of the original text, so as to preserve the meaning of the original text in the translator’s intention” (Zeng, 2013). If literal translation sufficed, computers would have replaced human translators years ago. Instead, the effort reflects the dynamic relationship between the translator and the reader, as well as the translator’s identity as the interpreter of the text. As a reader of the source text, the translator’s primary task is to understand and express what the message of the source text in language readers will understand. The translator should grasp the main idea as well as the purpose, then change the original text by restructuring, adding or deleting, editing, or processing to ensure the end results match the original purpose. For example, the main purpose of advertising is to persuade and promote sales to increase the profits; Tourism materials are meant to be understood by ordinary international tourists, and to arouse their interest in further travel, whereas news reporting conveys information. Therefore, only by deconstructing the original manuscript can international translation achieve the above objectives.

With this foundation, we are now ready to examine the Chinese and English captions on ceramic sculptures in the Guangdong Shiwan Ceramics Museum.

3.1.1 Chinese Exhibition Text

石湾山公微塑独创的艺术表现形式对我国陶塑艺术作出了卓越贡献。老一辈代表性陶艺家有刘辉胜、罗雪薇、黄兰书、陈红、苏茨、刘国成等。

3.1.2 Existing translation

The original artistic expression of Shiwan Shangong miniature sculptures makes outstanding contributions to Chinese ceramic sculptures. The representative ceramics artists of old generation include Liu Huisheng, Luo Xuewei, Huang Lanshu, Chen Hong, Shu Ci, Liu Guocheng and so on.

3.1.3 Suggested translation

The unique artistic expression of Shiwan miniature sculptures has made outstanding contributions to the art of ceramic sculpture in China. Two of the most famous founding artists of this style are Liu Huisheng and Luo Xuewei.

3.1.4 Translator's commentary

The suggestions here smooth out the grammar of the original translation and emphasize the esteemed nature of the artists and the style. Plus, the communicative dimension (see Pang & Marlow, 2023 for related discussion) leads us to cut the “Shangong” from the sculpture name and the names of four of the six artists originally listed as these references will not add meaning for many international readers. *Water Town of the South* by Luo Xuewei (Image 3) is an example of Shiwan miniature sculptures.



Image 3: *Watertown of the South*

3.2 Local Cultural Researchers

Cultural research supports and maintains cultural continuity and diversity. The continuous interpretation and innovation of ethnic history and culture in different periods of the same language involves intra-linguistic translation, which promotes the proliferation of culture. The cultural dissemination between different languages is through inter-linguistic translation, which preserves cultural heterogeneity and uniqueness. Therefore, some scholars have proposed that “all cultural studies can be understood as a translation behavior” (e.g., Gu, 2016). According to this viewpoint, cultural researchers function as translators. Similarly, cultural translators should also be cultural researchers, as they need to be familiar with the folk knowledge of relevant cultures, understand the laws of folk production, development, evolution, inheritance, and their structures, functions, and properties, and be familiar with the genre conventions of the text to convey the cultural characteristics and values in the source text through different languages. For example, Shiwan pottery works such as *Wang Mian Studies while Riding a Cow* (Image 4) and *Old Man Studying* (Image 5) demonstrate that while the culture of Shiwan pottery workers may lack sophistication, they respect scholars and aspire for their children to become successful through education. International translators should be familiar with local culture to fully introduce Chinese culture overseas readers. Taking the Shiwan pottery sculpture as an example, the translator should explore the cultural connotations of the pursuit of harmony, folk customs, legendary stories, Confucianism, religious beliefs, and other aspects exhibited

by the Shiwan pottery sculpture. Only by understanding the unique cultural connotations of the Shiwan pottery sculpture can the translator actively introduce local culture and tell Chinese stories well.



Image 4: Wang Mian Studies while Riding a Cow



Image 5: Old Man Studying

3.2.1 Chinese Exhibition Text

(白釉醉仙)

具有寓巧于拙的艺术趣味。“醉仙”是历代石湾艺人反复塑造的题材。这件作品洋溢出来的醉态，透出憨厚、拙朴的情趣和超乎自然的美学意境。

3.2.2 No existing translation. Computer generated translation from Google provided

(White Glaze Zuixian) has the artistic interest of combining skill with clumsiness. Drunken Immortal exemplifies a theme repeatedly created by Shiwan artists in the past dynasties. This piece of work overflows with drunkenness, revealing a simple and honest taste and a supernatural aesthetic conception.



Image 6: Drunken Immortal with White Glaze

3.2.3 Suggested translation

The pottery sculpture *Drunken Immortal with White Glaze* (Image 6) artistically combines cleverness with clumsiness. The theme of drunk Li Bai has been repeatedly created by Shiwan artists throughout history, because the greatest pleasure in pottery workers' spare time is drinking wine. This work epitomizes the drunken state with a humble and rustic charm, as well as an aesthetic conception beyond nature.

3.2.4 Translator's commentary

Pottery making is a heavy physical labor. Historically, pottery workers in Shiwan have paid more attention to food and drink than clothing. Drinking is their favorite pastime. The poet Li Bai, who was known for his good wine, is regarded as a confidant and inspiration.

3.3 Cultural coordinator

In China, international translators are often referred to as ambassadors of cultural exchange. However, Anthony Pym (2012) proposed that translators are not so much as ambassadors of cultural exchange, but rather coordinators of cross-cultural communication activities such as translation and intercultural living in the space of cultural exchange. The translator negotiates and mediates between two languages and cultures, building a platform for communication between the source text and the target language readers, making dialogue between the two possible. More precisely, the translator should be a negotiator for information transmission and communication between different languages and cultures, as well as a cultural coordinator and bridge at the intersection of the source language and target language cultures. In international translation, we should attend to the reader's receptive ability, embrace the translator's subjective initiative, adhere to the translation orientation of cultural centeredness, protecting cultural diversity, avoiding cultural conflicts, and letting international readers understand and enjoy Chinese culture. Our next text accompanies a sculpture at the front of the hall which welcomes visitors to the exhibit, *Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of Macau's Return to China* (Image 7).



Image 7: Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of Macau's Return to China

3.3.1 Chinese Exhibition Text

新中国成立后，在时代的感召下，陶艺家们创作了许多具有鲜明时代特色的人物陶塑作品。当代，陶艺家们更是解放思想、个性突显，传统和新锐佳作纷呈，石湾陶塑迎来新的发展高峰。

3.3.2 Existing translation

After the founding of the people's Republic of China, inspired by the times, ceramic artists created many figure works with distinctive characteristics of the times. At present, ceramic artists are emancipating their minds and highlighting their personalities, because it can meet the needs of social development and people's ideological concepts had to break free from the shackles and constraints of old habits so that the traditional and cutting-edge works are brilliant and varied. Shiwan ceramic sculptures are facing in a new development peak.

3.3.3 Suggested translation

Following the inspiration that accompanied the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949), Shiwan sculptors created many works with distinctive characteristics of the times: like loving life and being patriotic. Contemporary potters are more open minded and highlight their own personalities blending traditional and cutting-edge techniques. Today, Shiwan pottery sculpture enjoys renewed artistry and development.

The accompanying sculpture, while not addressed in the original text here, reflects the spirit of Shiwan pottery's characteristic of staying current and following the pulse of the times. The work also reveals the creator's patriotic and family loving emotions from the details.

3.3.4 Translator's commentary

The existing translation exceeds the tone original Chinese text with the concept of breaking free of shackles in ways that may not resonate with the international audience. Our suggested translation tones this down while simultaneously informing the reading of key characteristics highly valued by Chinese society in the 1950s as well as modern expansion. Further, we offer additional cultural detail to supplement the global visitor's experience.

3.4 Discourse Reconstructor

Translators, like creative writers and politicians, participate in powerful rhetorical action to create knowledge and shape culture by deliberate selection, combination, construction, and creation of words and phrases. This viewpoint reflects a critical awareness of translation as an innovative activity in which the translator serves as a discourse reconstructor. Translators change their discourse of power through manipulation of text.

The translator must not only interpret the source text (see Section 3.1) but also create the new text. They deconstruct the source text according to communicative intent of translation, make numerous translation choices based on the readers' needs and the expressive techniques of the target language, and convey the original information through reconstructed discourse. This rewriting reflects the role of the translator as a discourse reconstructor, and the translator can be a discourse reconstructor with multiple identities alternating between writing, editing, and rewriting. In international translation, the translator's identity as a discourse reconstructor is the ultimate embodiment of the identity of a text interpreter, cultural researcher, and cultural coordinator, which determines the final quality of the translation. Discourse reconstruction is illustrated in the following excerpt which accompanies *A Figure Eating Watermelon* (Image 8).



Image 8: *A Figure Eating Watermelon*

3.4.1 Chinese Exhibition Text

钟汝荣，1956年出生，石湾人。中国工艺美术大师。擅长表现田园、市井风情题材，作品极富生活气息和时代感。作品结构严谨精巧，造型夸张传神。

3.4.2 No existing translation. Computer generated translation from Google provided

Zhong Rurong was born in Shiwan in 1956. Master of Chinese arts and crafts. He is good at expressing pastoral and urban style themes, and his works are full of life and sense of the times. The structure of the work is rigorous and exquisite, and the shape is exaggerated and expressive.

3.4.3 Suggested translation

A Figure Eating Watermelon, by Zhong Rurong. Master of Chinese Arts and Crafts. Born in Shiwan. 1956 -.

Zhong's work encompasses both pastoral and urban styles, and his sculptures are full of life with an acute reflection of the times. Rigorous and exquisite, his work is exaggerated and expressive.

In Guangdong, due to the hot weather, many people of all ages like to eat watermelon to refresh themselves. With simple pleasures like eating watermelon, the people, young and old, are cheerful, which reflects the optimistic side of the local people.

3.4.4 Translator's commentary

In the Guangdong Shiwan Ceramics Museum, a label for *A Figure Eating Watermelon* is placed under the artwork, but the commentary does not introduce the artwork itself. Rather it simply offers an introduction to the artist. Here the suggested translation adds the title of the work for the benefit of the international audience. Under this appears a single line background for the artist. These two elements, unnecessary for the Chinese audience help the international audience understand the work more fully. Here the translation expresses an optimistic attitude towards life through language. The translation also cuts out a few words for ease of reading and clarity. To increase the readability of local culture to the western world, translators must make both insertions and deletions and enliven translations to highlight key information based on the specific communicative goal. The original Chinese description does not provide the cultural background about the weather and the elderly as this would be obvious to Chinese visitors, but overseas guests will benefit from the cultural background. This addition to the translation promotes cultural exchange.

4. The Dynamic Overlap of the Translator's Varying Identities

The above analysis indicates that as the practical subject of translation activities, translators possess multiple identities, just as individuals have multiple different social roles. The translator's identity is influenced by various social factors, including translation motivation, the source language text, source culture, target culture, target readers, and translation purposes, etc. Therefore, in specific translation, the translator "will not appear as an abstract and static identity but will melt the abstract and static identity factors into specific, dynamic, and closely interacting identities with different social factors and environments" (Tan, 2011). In the translation of different functional text types, the translator's multiple identities are not fixed and unchanging, but change with different social and environmental factors. In international translation, translators are text interpreters, cultural researchers, cultural coordinators, and discourse reconstructors. These identities are in an overlapping state and are highlighted to varying degrees in specific translation behaviors. The sculpture of early Communist revolutionary *Chen Tiejun* (Image 9) demonstrates this feature.



Image 9: *Chen Tiejun*

4.1. Chinese Exhibition Text

陈铁军（1904—1928年），原名陈燮君，广东佛山人。1928年，因叛徒告密，陈铁军被国民党反动派逮捕，受尽酷刑，宁死不屈。同年，2月6日她与周文雍在监狱铁窗前合影并宣布结婚，英勇就义，年仅24岁。作者塑造的陈铁军头部微微抬起，表现出大义凛然的神态，作者试图在彰显陈铁军坚毅品格的同时，将她作为女性柔美的一面展现出来，表现一位革命者为了共产主义理想不畏牺牲的精神。

4.2 No existing translation. Computer generated translation from Google provided

Chen Tiejun (1904-1928), formerly known as Chen Xiejun, was a native of Foshan, Guangdong. In 1928, Chen Tiejun was arrested by the Kuomintang reactionaries because of a traitor's report. He was tortured and would rather die than surrender. In the same year, on February 6, she and Zhou Wenyong took a photo in front of the prison bars and announced their marriage. She died heroically at the age of 24. In the sculpture Chen Tiejun's head is slightly raised by the author, showing a righteous demeanor. The author tries to highlight Chen Tiejun's strong character and at the same time show her soft side as a woman, showing a revolutionary who is willing to sacrifice herself for the ideal of communism.

4.3 Suggested translation

Chen Tiejun (1904-1928), Communist revolutionary hero from Foshan, struggled against the capitalist of the Kuomintang in the early years following the fall of the Qing Dynasty. A revolutionary who did not fear of sacrifice, she fought boldly for ideal of Chinese Marxism across southern China. Facing imminent execution on February 6, 1928, at the age of 24, she requested a photo with her lover and co-revolutionary, Zhou Wenyong, announcing that the gunfire that killed them would be their wedding salute. The artist portrays this powerful and principle-driven woman with a slightly raised head while simultaneously showing her soft side.

4.4 Translator's commentary

In this example, the translator is a dynamic superposition of the roles of text interpreter, folklorist, cultural coordinator, and discourse reconstructor, rewriting the text. The expression methods of English and Chinese are different. Chinese tends move from detail to generalities, while English often tends introduce the general before specifics. Therefore, in our suggested translation we move Chen Tiejun's status as a revolutionary hero to the beginning. We also elide her alias as this is unknown in Western society. Further, we offer additional personal history to help the international reader connect more fully with this heart-wrenching story.

5. Conclusion

As the subject of translation, the translator's identity is not a simple and static single composition, but a multi-layered construction with overlapping and dynamic elements. In international translation, translators serve as text interpreters, cultural researchers, cultural coordinators, and discourse reconstructors. They must consider the structure and connotation of the source language together with the source culture and ensure the original message is reflected when viewed in the target language. They are cultural coordinators who must be adept at adapting between different cultures, as well as discourse reconstructors who also work, compile, and rewrite texts to maintain message integrity. Successful translators embody different roles and integrate various skills as needed, thereby achieving the harmonious coexistence of multiple identities. From the harmonious perspective, translators must not passively provide literal translations. Translators not only actively and proactively achieve communicative transfer between languages, but also strive to achieve the conversion between different cultures, ultimately achieving the transformation of communicative dimensions. This fluidity of identity not only helps improve translation quality, but also promotes cross-cultural understanding and communication.

Under the dynamic overlap of translator identities, translators exhibit different or similar subjectivity and translation behaviors at different translation stages, which plays an important role in cultural dissemination. Exploration of the translator's identity exploration in international translation can provide empirical materials for the study of the subjectivity of cultural translators and the accurate positioning of cultural translators. This investigation helps us reflect on the literacy composition of cultural translators, the necessary prerequisites for an ideal translator, and the responsibilities of translators. It is beneficial for translators to better clarify the essence of international translation, clarify the purpose of international translation, grasp the translator's behavior and translation choices, and play a positive bridging role in translation and cultural exchange. Translation is not for the weak of heart, but through skillful juggling of dynamic identities and balancing the responsibilities of remaining true to the communicative intent of original text with the cultural understandings and expectations of the target audience, the result can achieve the ultimate goal of promoting authentic and empowering cross-cultural communication.

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