

A Comparative Study of the Translation of the Huangdi Neijing Suwen from the Perspective of Cultural Communication: A Case Study of Maoshing Ni and Paul Unschuld

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Abstract: This study compares and analyzes the English translation of the Huangdi Neijing Suwen by Maoshing Ni and Paul Unschuld, and discusses the translation strategies in the process of disseminating Chinese and Western cultures. The study first summarizes the dissemination process of the Suwen, highlighting the important position of this document in traditional Chinese medicine and world cultural heritage. Secondly, the characteristics of the two translators' translations are analyzed in depth, and the two translations are compared from five aspects: communicator, communication content, communication audience, communication media, and communication effect. This study not only provides insights for understanding the international dissemination of the Suwen, but also provides a valuable reference for future cross-cultural translation work.

Keywords: Huangdi Neijing Suwen; Translation; Cultural dissemination

1. Introduction

Exploring the international dissemination of classical texts is an important window to reveal the deep dynamics of cultural exchange. The translation and dissemination of the English translation of the *Suwen* is one of the cornerstones of Chinese medicine, and its translation and dissemination in English is not only related to the recognition and acceptance of Chinese medicine knowledge on a global scale, but also reflects the complexity of cultural exchanges and understanding between China and the West. In the context of globalization, understanding and analysing how different styles of translation address linguistic and

cultural barriers, and how to balance faithfulness to the original text and adaptation to the needs of the target audience, will provide insight into the underlying mechanisms of cross-cultural communication. This study aims to deepen people's understanding of cross-cultural communication by comparing the English translations of Maoshing Ni^[1] and Paul Unschuld^[2], and exploring cultural standardization and localization strategies in translation, and how they affect the international transmission and reception of culture.

As the cornerstone of traditional Chinese medicine, the spread of the *Suwen* in the Western world began in the 19th century. In the early days, translation work was carried out by European scholars and physicians who were interested in Oriental learning^[3]. For example, the French sinologist and physician Georges Soulié de Morant was one of the first scholars to introduce parts of the *Neijing* to the West. As international interest in TCM grew, at the beginning of the 20th century, more experts began translating and publishing the classic. During this period, the British scholar Ilza Veith's translation of *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* became a milestone, and her translation, which for the first time systematically introduced the main contents of the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic* to an English-speaking audience, was praised for its detailed commentary and deep understanding of the original text, and was published in the US in 1949. In the second half of the 20th century, as the cultural exchange between the East and

the West deepened, more translations were published. For example, the translation of American sinologist and physician Ted J. Kaptchuk, *The Web That Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine* (published in 1983), although not a direct translation, widely quoted the content of the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*, played an important role in bridging the Western understanding of Chinese medicine. In the 21st century, with the popularization of traditional Chinese medicine around the world, various English translations of the *Neijing* have been published one after another. These translations have not only had a profound impact on Western academic circles, but have also aroused widespread interest among general readers. Among them, the translators are committed not only to faithful to the original text, but also to adapt it to the understanding and application of modern readers. From the original European scholars to modern translators with multicultural backgrounds, the translation work of different translators in different periods has not only promoted the dissemination of the *Suwen* in the West, but also built a bridge for the exchange of Chinese and Western medical cultures, so that this ancient medical classic can be inherited and developed on a global scale.

2. Characteristics of the Translation of Maoshing Ni and Paul Unschuld's *Suwen*

2.1 Features of Maoshing Ni's translation

2.1.1 Interpretation of Terms

Maoshing Ni's translation of the *Suwen* has done a great deal of work in terms of word interpretation to ensure the accuracy and intelligibility of technical terms and ancient texts. Ni is well aware of the complexity and uniqueness of TCM terminology, and he not only attaches importance to the literal translation of words, but also pays more attention to the

communication of connotation and cultural background. For example, for specific medical terms, he is not content to provide a simple literal translation, but helps readers understand the culture and medical theories behind each term through thorough annotations and explanations. For example, when translating specific medical terms such as "qi" and "yin and yang", Ni is not satisfied with providing only superficial literal translations, but explains the deep cultural and medical theories behind these terms through detailed notes and explanations, such as interpreting "qi" as the flow of life force, rather than simply "gas". Ni's approach not only allows Western readers to access the original knowledge of TCM, but also greatly promotes the understanding and acceptance of TCM theories in the West.

2.1.2 Sentence style

In terms of sentence style, Ni's translations strive to maintain the accuracy and rhythm of the original text, while also striving to make the translation fluent and easy to understand for Western readers. He is fluent in both Chinese and English and is well versed in both cultures, which allows him to flexibly adjust his translations without losing the meaning of the original text and conforming to English expression Xi. For example, when dealing with the idiom "draw inferences" that are difficult to translate literally, he did not choose a literal translation, but instead used "learn one and infer three", which conveyed both the original meaning and the English Xi. When encountering allusions with deep cultural backgrounds, he often uses equivalent expressions, such as translating "wind horses and cattle are not related" as "apples and oranges", which not only retains the cultural connotation of Chinese, but also makes it easy for Western readers to understand. This style of translation, which balances the faithfulness of the original text with the reader's comprehension, makes his translations both scholarly and readable, and is well

received by readers. Ni's translation style reflects his superb skills and profound cultural literacy as a translator.

2.2 Characteristics of Paul Unschuld's Translation

2.2.1 Explanation of Terms

Paul Unschuld's translation of the *Suwen* adopted an approach to interpreting words that focused on both academic rigor and universal readability. He takes special care in the interpretation of terms to present complex TCM terms and concepts in a way that is easier for Western readers to understand. This is reflected not only in the literal translation of technical terms, but also in the in-depth explanation of the philosophical and cultural connotations behind these terms. For example, when translating the concept of "Five Elements", Paul Unschuld not only literally translated it as "The Five Phases" instead of simply "Five Elements", but further explained the application of the Five Elements Theory in Chinese medicine and the philosophical idea of its interrelationship with the natural world. Paul Unschuld strives to make his translations both faithful to the original meaning and clear and easy to understand, so that even readers who do not have a deep understanding of Chinese medicine can grasp the basic meaning of the text. He provides the reader with the necessary cultural and historical background information in the translation, which greatly enhances the readability and educational value of the translation.

2.2.2 Sentence style

In terms of sentence style, Paul Unschuld's translation shows its unique literary charm and smooth narration. Compared with Maoshing Ni, Paul Unschuld pays more attention to the fluency and literary beauty of the sentences while maintaining the accuracy of the original text. His translations not only remained faithful to the meaning of the original text, but also sought to reflect the rhythm and rhyme of the original text, making the English

translation both literary and delicate^[4]. For example, for the original text of "to treat an illness only when it has arrived, to order only when chaos has begun is like digging a well when one is already thirsty or forging a weapon after the battle has begun. Is it not too late?". Here, he not only accurately conveys the philosophy of the original text, but also shows the beauty and fluency of English in sentence structure and language choice. In addition, Paul Unschuld pays great attention to adjusting and improving the sentence structure in the translation to ensure that the translation is natural and fluent in the English context. His attention to linguistic detail and control of the text as a whole have made his translations not only recognized in the academic field, but also loved by a wide range of English-speaking readers. Through such careful translation and the pursuit of linguistic beauty, Paul Unschuld's translation not only conveys the essence of Chinese medicine, but also adds to the pleasure of reading.

3. Comparison of Two Translations at Different Levels from the Perspective of Cultural Communication

3.1 Communicators

As translators of two different translations, Ni and Paul Unschuld's backgrounds, translation concepts and methods have a decisive impact on the style and dissemination of the translations. Ni is known for his profound knowledge of TCM theory and his academic attitude of faithfulness to the original text. He not only delves into the spirit and philosophy of Chinese medicine, but also strives to preserve the original flavor of Chinese medicine classics in translation. Through precise terminology translations and detailed elaboration of complex theories, Ni attempts to provide readers with a rich and in-depth experience of TCM culture. However, this approach may require the reader to have some prior knowledge to

fully understand and appreciate it. In contrast, Paul Unschuld's translation strategy is more focused on the ease of understanding and cultural adaptability of the translated text. He is well aware of the impact of language and cultural differences on translation, so he has adopted a more flexible and innovative approach to translation, striving to express TCM theories in a way that is more in line with the Xi of Western readers. This includes not only the adoption of terminology and metaphors more familiar to Western readers, but also adjustments to the structure and language style of the text to enhance its readability and appeal in the context of a new culture. This adaptable translation style allows his translations not only to convey the basic concepts of TCM, but also to stimulate the interest and curiosity of Western readers in TCM culture.

3.2 Dissemination of Content

Maoshing Ni's translations insist on a high degree of faithfulness in the content of the communication, and are committed to conveying every detail and deep meaning of the original work. His precise translation of terminology and detailed elaboration of complex theories demonstrate a deep respect and understanding of the original text. This approach not only ensures the scholarly integrity of TCM classics in the translation process, but also provides a valuable resource for professional readers who are interested in gaining a deeper understanding of TCM culture and theories. Through Ni's translation, readers will be able to gain a rich experience similar to the original text, and explore the profound meaning of Chinese medicine. However, this high degree of faithfulness and scholarship may also make the translation somewhat obscure to the general reader, especially those in the West who lack a background in TCM. On the other hand, Paul Unschuld's translation is markedly

different in that it focuses more on legibility and cultural adaptation. Paul Unschuld deeply understands that successful cultural communication lies not only in the accurate delivery of content, but also in how to make these contents take root in the new cultural environment. As a result, he has adopted a localization strategy, striving to explain TCM theories in approachable language and concepts familiar to Western readers. This strategy greatly enhances the accessibility and attractiveness of the translation, allowing ordinary readers with no background in TCM knowledge to understand and appreciate the wisdom of this ancient medical system. While spreading the culture of TCM, Paul Unschuld's translation also takes into account the diversity of readers and the differences in reception methods, and strives to find a balance between being faithful to the original text and adapting to the target culture.

3.3 Communicate the Audience

Ni's translations are designed for readers who have a deep understanding of TCM or who are eager to study it further. Such readers may already have a certain background in Chinese medicine, or have an in-depth understanding of Chinese and Chinese culture. With its rigorous scholarship and in-depth cultural interpretation, Ni's translations meet the needs of these readers to explore the essence of Chinese medicine. His translations not only provide a detailed interpretation of TCM theories, but also try to preserve the cultural atmosphere and philosophical implications of the original text, so that readers can have a profound experience similar to reading the original text. However, this highly specialized and in-depth content can be difficult for the general reader to understand without relevant background knowledge, limiting its popularity to a wider audience. On the other hand, Paul Unschuld's translation is

more focused on universal understanding and cultural adaptation, making it more accessible and appreciative to Western readers without a background in Chinese medicine. By simplifying the terminology and adopting more colloquial language and culturally equivalent explanations, Paul Unschuld lowered the threshold for TCM theory and made it more accessible and accessible to the general reader. His translations not only convey the basic concepts of TCM, but also are able to stimulate readers' interest and curiosity about TCM culture, thus effectively popularizing TCM knowledge and philosophy to a wider audience. Through this strategy, Paul Unschuld's translations not only promote TCM culture, but also provide opportunities for readers from different cultural backgrounds to understand and appreciate TCM classics.

3.4 Media

As an important medium for the dissemination of translations, the positioning and marketing strategy of publishing houses largely determine the scope and audience of translations. Professional or academic publishers tend to publish translations that are academically rigorous and in-depth, such as Ni's edition. These publishers usually have a stable academic readership and professional channels that can provide a precise target market for translations. In the layout, design and promotion of these translations, they will take more into account the academic value and depth, and emphasize the research and cultural importance of the translations, so as to attract professional readers or people with in-depth knowledge of Chinese medicine. However, this positioning may also limit the popularity of translations among a wider audience, as they may be too specialized and complex for the average reader. On the other hand, publishers for the mass market are more likely to choose translations that are easy to read and

understand, such as Paul Unschuld. These publishers are often looking for wider market acceptance and higher sales, so they are more likely to consider the popularity and attractiveness of their content when choosing translations^[5]. The language of Paul Unschuld's version is easy to understand, and the content is close to daily life, which is more acceptable to ordinary readers without a background in traditional Chinese medicine. Publishers may use more diverse and innovative marketing strategies to promote such translations, such as through social media, public reading events, or promotional activities in conjunction with cultural festivals, to attract more non-specialist readers. Through this strategy, Paul Unschuld's translations are able to reach a wider audience and promote the dissemination and understanding of TCM culture on a wider scale.

3.5 Propagation Effect

Communication effectiveness is the ultimate criterion for evaluating the success or failure of a translation effort, reflecting not only the quality of the translation, but also the actual impact of the translation strategy on the target audience. Ni's translation, with its academic rigor and in-depth cultural inquiry, may be more popular with the academic community. In the professional field, such translations are a valuable resource that can stimulate in-depth discussion and research, and promote the further development of TCM. It provides insightful insights and detailed information for researchers, scholars, and even TCM practitioners. However, this depth and professionalism may also limit its dissemination to a wider audience, especially those who do not have much knowledge of TCM. With its legibility and wide range of cultural acculturations, Paul Unschuld's translation may have a wider dissemination effect among the general public. By simplifying complex concepts

and employing language and metaphors that are closer to the daily lives of Western readers, this translation lowers the bar for TCM theories and makes them more accessible and acceptable to the general reader. Therefore, Paul Unschuld's version not only disseminates the basic knowledge of TCM, but also helps to stimulate the public's interest and curiosity about the deeper culture and philosophy of TCM. This kind of translation can bridge the Eastern and Western cultures to a certain extent, enhance the understanding and respect of Chinese medicine in Western society, and thus promote cultural exchange and understanding.

4. Conclusion

An in-depth analysis and comparison of the English translations of Ni and Paul Unschuld's *The Suwen* shows that although both aim to convey ancient Chinese medical wisdom to Western readers, there are significant differences in their approaches, styles, and strategies. Known for its scholarship and faithfulness, Ni's translations seek to provide readers with a version that is as close to the original as possible through thorough annotations and precise explanations of technical terms. Paul Unschuld's translation, on the other hand, pays more attention to the fluency and readability of the text, and he adopts more linguistic localization and paradigm localization strategies, making the complex theories and practices of TCM more understandable and acceptable in Western culture. These two different approaches and styles of translation not only reflect the translator's deep understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, but also demonstrate the complex challenges of balancing fidelity and readability in the process of cross-cultural communication.

This study not only reveals the characteristics and influence of the cultural transmission of the English translation of

the *Suwen*, but also provides valuable reference and enlightenment for future cross-cultural translation and dissemination work. Both Ni's insistence on the faithfulness of the original text and Paul Unschuld's focus on the readability of the target audience emphasize the importance of understanding and respecting both cultures, and remind translators to constantly seek balance and innovation in their future translation work. With the deepening of globalization, the proper translation and dissemination of classic documents such as the *Suwen* can not only promote cultural exchanges and understanding, but also help people all over the world to understand and appreciate traditional Chinese medicine and the profound culture behind it, thus opening up a broader space for international dialogue and cooperation.

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