

A Comparative Study on Transitivity Process Transformations in the Translation of Visceral Terms in the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon

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Abstract: Drawing on Halliday's transitivity process theory, this study examines how visceral terms in the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon: Plain Questions are rendered by key translators (Ni Maoxin, Li Zhaoguo, Yang Mingshan, and the Wu family). By comparing translation strategies across versions, it reveals patterns of semantic transformation, cultural transmission, and linguistic adaptation in TCM classic translation, offering insights for the international dissemination of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Keywords: Plain Questions of the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon; Visceral Terms; Transitivity Process; Translation Strategies; TCM Translation

1. Introduction

The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon: Plain Questions, a foundational text of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), contains visceral terminology rich in both physiological knowledge and philosophical underpinnings such as the Five Phases theory. Translating these terms requires precise handling of semantic and cultural dimensions. Halliday's transitivity process theory provides a systematic framework for analyzing such translational transformations. This paper compares translations by Ni Maoxin, Li Zhaoguo, Yang Mingshan, and the Wu family to explore how transitivity processes are transformed in rendering visceral terms.

2. Literature Review

Scholars have examined the translation of visceral terms in the Plain Questions from various perspectives. Tang Hongfang and Gao Yiwei (2025), comparing the Ni, Wu, and Li translations, found that Ni and Li tend to preserve cultural imagery through metaphorical conversion, while the Wu translation, constrained by its historical context, adopts

simpler treatment. Zhang Wenfeng (2009) offered functional-cognitive insights into transitivity processes in TCM terminology. Zhang Xuan and Shi Yunzhong (2008) emphasized the need for annotations to compensate for cultural default when translating culture-loaded words in the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon. Tang Lei and Liu Kai (2022) analyzed Ni Maoxin's translation from a functional contextual perspective. Huang Yuyan et al. (2022) reviewed recent research progress on the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, including terminological translation. While existing studies have contributed significantly, further investigation is needed into the systematization of translation strategies and the balance between semantic accuracy and cultural fidelity.

3. Transitivity System Theory and TCM Translation

Halliday's transitivity system, a cornerstone of functional grammar, comprises six process types: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential. In TCM classics, visceral functions often involve interwoven process types. For instance, "心主血脉" (the heart governs blood vessels) combines relational and material elements. Translators must navigate these complexities, adapting source language semantics to target language structures while preserving theoretical integrity.

4. Semantic Characteristics and Transitivity Classification of Visceral Terms

TCM visceral terms extend beyond anatomical concepts, encompassing functional and philosophical dimensions. From a transitivity perspective, they can be categorized as follows:

4.1 Material Process

Material processes denote concrete physiological actions. Examples include "心主血脉" (heart governing blood circulation) and "肺主气,司呼

吸" (lung governing qi and managing respiration), where verbs like "govern" and "manage" indicate material actions.

4.2 Relational Process

Relational processes express attributes or relationships. Typical examples are "肝属木" (liver belongs to Wood), "心属火" (heart belongs to Fire), and "肾为先天之本" (kidney is the foundation of prenatal essence), establishing connections between viscera and broader TCM frameworks.

4.3 Mental Process

Mental processes appear in emotion-related descriptions. "心藏神" (heart stores the spirit) and "肝主怒" (liver governs anger) illustrate how viscera are linked to mental and emotional activities.

4.4 Behavioral Process

Behavioral processes involve abstract functional actions. "肺主宣发肃降" (lung governs diffusion, depuration, and descent) and "脾主运化" (spleen governs transportation and transformation) exemplify generalized functional descriptions characteristic of TCM discourse.

5. Comparative Analysis of Translation Strategies

5.1 Ni Maoxin: Material Process-Centered Literal Approach

Example 1: "心者,君主之官也,神明出焉。"

Translation: "The heart is the organ of the monarch, from which spiritual brightness originates."

Analysis: Ni converts the relational process "君主之官" into a material attribute description ("organ of the monarch"). "Spiritual brightness" preserves the mental process metaphor, but "originates" weakens the dynamic sense of "出焉。" The translation emphasizes material attributes over functional dynamism.

Example 2: "肺者,相傅之官,治节出焉。"

Translation: "The lung is the organ of the prime minister, from which regulation proceeds."

Analysis: Similarly, "organ of the prime minister" renders the relational process as material attribute. "Regulation" captures "治节," but "proceeds" lacks the dynamic initiative

implied in the original behavioral process.

5.2 Li Zhaoguo: Functional Equivalence through Relational + Material Processes

Example 1: "肝者,将军之官,谋虑出焉。"

Translation: "The liver is like a general in charge of planning."

Analysis: Li employs an analogical relational process ("is like a general") to retain the cultural metaphor. "In charge of planning" converts the mental/behavioral "谋虑出焉" into a dynamic material process, achieving functional equivalence while preserving cultural imagery.

Example 2: "肾者,作强之官,伎巧出焉。"

Translation: "The kidney is like an official in charge of strength and ingenuity."

Analysis: The same strategy applies: analogical relational process preserves the metaphor, while "in charge of strength and ingenuity" dynamically conveys the kidney's dual physiological and mental functions.

5.3 Yang Mingshan: Dynamic Explicitation through Mental + Behavioral Processes

Example 1: "脾主运化,统血。"

Translation: "The spleen is responsible for transforming and transporting nutrients and controlling blood."

Analysis: Yang uses behavioral process verbs ("transforming," "transporting," "controlling") to explicate physiological functions dynamically. This strategy prioritizes functional clarity over preserving theoretical interconnections.

Example 2: "心藏神,主血脉。"

Translation: "The heart stores the mind and controls the blood vessels."

Analysis: "Stores the mind" renders the mental process as a behavioral action; "controls" similarly dynamizes the material process. The translation prioritizes accessibility for modern medical readers.

5.4 Wu Family: Traditional Rendering with Implicit Process Treatment

Example 1: "肾者,作强之官,伎巧出焉。"

Translation: "The kidney is the organ of vigor, from which ingenuity proceeds."

Analysis: The Wu translation converts "作强" into a static attribute ("vigor") and retains "ingenuity" for "伎巧。" However, constrained by

Qing-era conventions, it does not clearly distinguish process types, prioritizing symbolic conciseness over functional explication.

Example 2: "肺者,相傳之官,治节出焉。"

Translation: "The lung is the organ of the assistant, from which regulation comes."

Analysis: Similar to Ni's approach, this rendering emphasizes static attributes ("organ of the assistant") with weak dynamic expression ("comes"), reflecting historical translation norms rather than functional precision.

6. Core Differences and Underlying Factors

6.1 Handling of Culture-Loaded Words

Ni and Li preserve cultural metaphors through relational + material process combinations; Yang prioritizes functional explication using behavioral processes; the Wu translation, constrained by its era, treats culture-loaded terms symbolically without process differentiation.

6.2 Dynamism vs. Stasis

Li and Yang employ dynamic verbs ("planning," "controlling," "transforming") to highlight functional activity; Ni and Wu favor static structures ("organ of..."), which convey attributes but obscure temporal and functional dimensions.

6.3 Theoretical Integrity

Ni and Li attempt to preserve connections to broader TCM frameworks (e.g., Five Phases); Yang simplifies to isolated functional statements for clarity; the Wu translation reflects limited engagement with theoretical interconnections.

6.4 Translator's Purpose and Cultural Stance

Ni and Li prioritize cultural transmission to Western audiences; Yang targets modern medical readers with accessible functional descriptions; the Wu translation reflects early Sino-Western scholarly exchange priorities.

7. Implications for TCM Translation Practice

7.1 Defining Translation Purpose

For TCM researchers, the Ni/Li "process 复合" strategy preserves cultural depth. For general or Western medical readers, Yang's behavioral process explication enhances accessibility.

7.2 Grammatical Explication of Dynamic

Processes

Using structures like "be responsible for + gerund," "govern," and "control" helps distinguish process types. For instance, "主" may be rendered as "govern," "control," or "be in charge of" depending on context.

7.3 Compensation for Cultural Default

Annotations can clarify transitivity multiplicity. For example, "肝主怒" could be annotated as "related to the emotional process in the Five Phases theory" to bridge cultural gaps.

7.4 Enhancing Translators' TCM Literacy

Deep understanding of TCM theory is essential for accurate transitivity conversion and avoiding semantic distortion.

8. Conclusion

Translating visceral terms in the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon requires negotiating between TCM's functional semantics and target language grammatical norms. Different translators, shaped by purpose, era, and cultural stance, adopt varied strategies in transitivity process transformation. Analyzing these differences illuminates pathways toward balancing semantic accuracy and cultural fidelity in TCM classic translation. Future research may expand the comparative scope to include more translators and theoretical frameworks, further supporting the global dissemination of TCM culture.

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