

Morphologic Evolution and Effects of Transliterated Terms in China

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Abstract: Transliteration terminology in China has a history of more than 2,600 years, with a process of simple form to multiple forms. The transliterated terms in cross-cultural communication present multiple functions: 1) acronyms are convenient for people to use; 2) some transliterations have strange associative meanings; 3) some transliteration names add completely the opposite meaning to the original term; 4) some transliteration names express people's good wishes; 5) some transliterations add new sounds to some Chinese characters; 6) some transliterated affixes add new morphemes to Chinese. These polymorphic transliterated terms have both positive and negative effects on the development of Chinese language and culture.

1. Introduction

With the continuous enhancement of China's economy, various Sino-foreign cross-cultural communication activities have been carried out increasingly. To engage in the cross-cultural communication activities effectively and efficiently in politics, technology, culture and business, etc., the preparatory work in E-C as well as C-E translation of cross-cultural communication texts is a must. In cross-cultural communication texts, it can be usually found that there are many technical terms. When translating these technical terms into Chinese, transliteration is often adopted. In other word, there are substantial transliterated terms in cross-cultural communication texts. From the diachronic perspective, the overall transliterated terms show a morphologic evolution, along with the 2000-year history of translation. Meanwhile, the transliterated terms are usually different in forms from those in the source text, which results in the communicative functions in Chinese cross-cultural communication texts and those in English texts are different.

2. Definition and morphologic evolution of transliterated terms

2.1 Definition of transliterated terms

Transliteration is a translation method that translate words in one language into words in another language that have the same or similar pronunciation. It is a commonly used in the process of translating terms. Therefore, transliterated terms are terms that translated by transliteration.

2.2 Morphologic evolution of transliterated terms

2.2.1 Term translation principles proposed by confucius 2500 years ago

In China, the translation practice of transliterating terms has existed 2500 years ago. When Confucius recorded the names of things in historical books, he adopted transliteration to express foreign things. *The Legend of GuLiang* records that "Confucius said 'man's name should be complied with that the first man who has, while thing's name should be complied with that the Chinese thing has'", which means that names of humans and places should be translated according to the pronunciation of source languages while the names of things should be translated according to the pronunciation of Chinese, and this have became the principle of translating foreign proper

nouns now. After Confucius, transliteration was adopted not only in the translation of proper nouns (names of people, places, institutions and articles), but also in the translation of other sci-tech terms.

2.2.2 Using special Chinese characters to transliterate terms before 21st century

During the Western Han Dynasty (202B.C.-8A.D.), Zhang Qian (164-114B.C.) opened the Silk Road. Since then, over the next 2000 years, China has traded with the nations in Western Asia and Europe. Specialties in China, such as silk and tea, were introduced to Western Asia and Europe, meanwhile, flax, broad beans, pomegranate, garlic, grapes, alfalfa and other goods from Western Asia and Europe, were also introduced to China. When translating the names of these foreign things, people usually use special Chinese characters to transliterate them. Alfalfa, for example, its Chinese transliteration is Mu Xu, the combination of two new Chinese characters, phonetically sounding like the pronunciation of original Persian term, while morphologically adding an affix, the Chinese radical cao zi tou to the two Chinese characters which indicate that alfalfa is a kind of herbage. [1]

From the late Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220A.D.) to the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279 A.D.), Buddhism had been introduced into China and flourished in China for one thousand years. During that period, lots of Buddhist terms were translated into Chinese by both Chinese and foreign monks. When the monks translate the terms in Buddhist scriptures, they usually adopted omitted transliteration, in which the translators only partly transliterated the syllables of the terms in Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures. Bodhi-sattva, for example, a very common word in Buddhism, was transliterated into Pu Sa in Chinese, which is an abbreviated form of Putisachui.

From late 19th century to early 20th century, China had been invaded and bullied by Western Powers. Under such circumstances, for the sake of enriching and civilizing the country, many Chinese scholars have translated many western social and technological masterpieces. In their translations, some of the terms in these masterpieces had been translated into Chinese by transliteration. When the Chinese scholars transliterate those terms, they had tended to adopt different transliterate styles, which result in the different morphologic forms of the transliterated terms. Some scholars transliterated terms in a colloquial way, for example, “democracy” was transliterated into Sir De, while “science” was transliterated into Sir Sai. While some other scholars transliterated terms in an odd way deliberately, using strange or odd Chinese character combinations to transliterate terms. For example, “inspiration” was transliterated into “yin shi pi li chun”, in which every syllable of the term was transliterated into Chinese by a strange and odd Chinese character. When seeing such transliterated term, the readers had no idea about its meaning at all. Such transliterated terms are the results of translators’ intentional hallowing-out of the terms meaning.

2.2.3 Multi-Methods of morphologic transliterated terms after 21st century

In the 21st century, the importance of translation has become increasingly prominent, with the rapid development of globalization and the increasingly frequent exchanges among peoples, the number of people who engage in translation activities has increased rapidly, and these people are varied in identity and profession. Thus, translation practitioners include not only graduates of English, translation or other language majors, but also those who have professional knowledge in other industries. Broadly speaking, everyone can be a translation practitioner. For example, when some newly emerged sci-tech terms may be mentioned in different fields, the translators in different industries will adopt different translation methods to translate them, in order to meet their needs. Since the beginning of 21st century, sci-tech terms having been emerged endlessly and quickly, transliteration is the most common method of translating them. These terms were transliterated in many different ways, thus, the overall transliterated terms show diverse morphologic forms.

Terms are usually transliterated by different people who adhere to different standards, so good transliteration and bad transliteration are intermingled, and there are differences in people’s acceptance and popularity of the transliterated terms. For instance, many odd transliterated terms were very popular on the internet for a time, but then disappeared. While some transliterated terms were included in XinHua Dictionary, which were accepted by people and became the fixed Chinese words.

3. Effects of transliterated terms in cross-cultural communication texts

3.1 Acronyms facilitating communication

Many English acronyms have been directly used in the Chinese texts, these words are widely used because they are concise in meaning and convenient for people to use. For example, such words like CT, ICU, ECT, IT, AA, IP, ATM are not only frequently used orally, but also used to mark the signs in public places such as hospitals, toll stations, office buildings, restaurants, banks, etc.

3.2 Transliterated terms producing strange associative meanings

When transliterating some terms, people deliberately use some homophonic Chinese characters to transliterate them, which make up words with strange associative meanings. For example, “Iphone 4” was transliterated into “ai feng 4”, which implies “I’m crazy about this kind of mobile phone”. “E-Mail” was transliterated into “e mei er”, which makes people conjure up an image of a “beautiful and graceful maiden”. “AIDS” (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was transliterated into “ai zi bing”, which implies “a sick effecting from sexual activities”.

In 2003, when SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) disseminated in China extensively, people call it “sha si”, which was transliterated from “SARS”. Its Chinese name “sha si” has caused fear and panic among civilians because it had the same pronunciation of the word kill in Chinese. [2]

As soon as WiFi being emerged, translators began to seek an appropriate Chinese word to translate it. At first, “wa fa” (meaning frog crying) was used to be the Chinese transliteration of “WiFi”. It sounds similar to “WiFi”, meanwhile, it can also evoke certain psychological associations. Because the croak of frogs in the ponds in summer, can only be heard in a limited range, which is similar to the wireless LAN. Then, some translators proposed the transliteration of “wei fa” (meaning powerful Internet), which intended to imply the powerful functions of “WiFi”. [3]

3.3 Transliterated terms adding the completely opposite meanings to original terms

Due to the difference between Chinese and English culture, some transliterated terms in Chinese cannot fully convey the cultural value contained in the English terms, sometimes some terms even expressing the meaning completely opposite to the source words. For example, in English language, “show” implies the respect for individual value, which is characterized by advocating individuality and individual value. However, its cultural connotation is substantially different from that of Chinese culture. The personality and moral norms in Chinese culture comply with “the doctrine of the mean” of Confucianism and “selflessness” of Taoism. As a result, the Chinese tend to associate this word with deception and undeserved reputation, thus, “show” in Chinese is often used and treated with a completely different way from that of English.

Same with “show”, “Yahoo” is another example of the meaning being changed by transliteration. Yahoo, a famous American internet portal, comes from a character in Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels. In the novel, there is a kingdom of horses, in which horses are vulgar, low-level humanoid animals, being named yahoo, with human vices. The founders of Yahoo, Jerry Yang and David Filo originally chose the name because they thought they were lazy and incompetent in Stanford University, so they call themselves yahoo as self-mockery. However, “yahoo” was transliterated into “ya hu” in Chinese, its Chinese transliteration meaning a graceful, bold and cautious tiger.

3.4 Transliterated terms expressing good wishes

When transliterating some terms, people often combines selected Chinese Characters to express their good wishes in the transliterated terms. For example, “Isosorbide Mononitrate” is a medicine which is used to prevent and treat angina for a long time, and its Chinese names were transliterated by different pharmaceutical manufacturers, such as yi bei te, de ming, ai si mo, yi li ding, ai di mo ni, yi mu duo, xin kang, jin xin tai, mo nuo mi di, chen gong zai jia, li wei, shan su, shu bi lai te, dan zuo, yi suo man, li zhu xi le, qian xin, nuo ked a, ge fen da, lu nan xin kang, etc. [4] All these

transliterated names, transliterating from any two syllabus or full syllabus of the original terms, express the meaning that this medicine can help people's health.

3.5 Transliteration contributing new sounds of Chinese characters

Some transliterations add new sounds to the sound of the particular Chinese characters. For example, the Chinese character “qian” has only one sound “qian” before a film naming Sissi was introduced into China. After Sissi was popular in China, people began to pronounce “Qian” as “xi”. Because the name of the heroine of the film Sissi was translated into “xi xi”, and the name was pronounced as “xi xi” in the film. In this way, the sound of “xi” became popular and accepted by people. In the Revised Edition of Modern Chinese Dictionary, “qian” was marked as a polyphone, with two pronunciations, qian and xi.

3.6 Transliterations contributing new morphemes for Chinese

In the 21st century, more and more transliterated words are flooding into Chinese at a fast speed. Some transliterated words were absorbed into Chinese and they were given different conceptual meanings, which can be used as suffixes to create new Chinese words. For example, “ba” used to be a modal particle without any notions in Chinese, but when “ba” was used to transliterate “bar”, with the meaning of “entertainment and leisure places”, many new Chinese words were created immediately, with “ba” as a morpheme. Now, many new words with “ba” as a morpheme are very popular, such as cha ba (tea bar), shu ba (book shop), wang ba (public Internet room), tao ba (a place for people making earthenware for entertainment), ba tai (a counter in a bar) ba nv (a girl in bar), ba ke (a special guest in bar) etc. [5]

4. Conclusion

To summarize, transliteration terminology in China has a history of more than 2,600 years, with a process of simple form to multiple forms. The transliterated terms in cross-cultural communication present multiple functions: 1) acronyms are convenient for people to use; 2) some transliterations have strange associative meanings; 3) some transliteration names add completely the opposite meaning to the original term; 4) some transliteration names express people's good wishes; 5) some transliterations add new sounds to some Chinese characters; 6) some transliterated affixes add new morphemes to Chinese. These polymorphic transliterated terms have both positive and negative effects on the development of Chinese language and culture.

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