

# On C-E Translation of Relic Texts in Museums from a Functional Equivalence Perspective: A Case Study of Hubei Provincial Museum

Ni Shiwei

Student, School of Interpreting and Translation Studies, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangdong, China

## Abstract

Museums play an important role in China's communication with the world and demonstrate to some extent China's soft power. As China further strengthens its international exchanges, more and more people hope to know China through its history and culture. However, due to the lingual and cultural distinctions, there are many unavoidable problems in translating Chinese relic texts (Source Text or ST) into English texts (Target Text or TT). As Eugene Nida said in his functional equivalence theory, the Target Reader's (TR) comprehension and appreciation of the translation is significant. Therefore, in translating relic texts, attention should be paid to how the TR can understand and accept the content. This thesis aims at finding proper translation principles and methods by analyzing the translations of the relic texts in Hubei Provincial Museum from the perspective of the core concepts of functional equivalence theory. Through a study on the functional equivalence theory, the thesis finds three principles of translating relic texts: accuracy, readability and acceptability. An analysis of the relic texts of Hubei Provincial Museum has led to several translation methods including addition, omission, paraphrasing and rewriting, which help to achieve the functional equivalence of relic texts translation.

**Keywords:** Functional equivalence; Relic texts Translation; Reader's response; Translation principles; Translation methods.



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## 1. Introduction

As China rises as the second largest economy, the world seeks eagerly to know China.

The museums of China, presenting China's history and culture, should be as reliable and accurate as possible. However, due to some translation inadequacy, foreign visitors to museums in China often fail to understand the meaning of the ST.

These problems impede international communication. To solve them, many translation theories have been established, among which Eugene Nida's functional equivalence theory definitely sheds light on translating cultural relic texts.

Basing on functional equivalence theory, the author will make a case study of the relic texts of Hubei Provincial Museum and discuss the solutions to some translation difficulties employing comparison, classification and exemplification.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Previous Studies on Translation of Relic Texts in Museums

In the past two decades, museum texts translation has been studied from different perspectives. There are more than 100 papers on the translation of relic texts on [www.cnki.net](http://www.cnki.net). Most of them focus on translation strategies. Some are about the types of mistakes and countermeasures of relic texts translation. A few are reviews of previous studies on relic texts translation. The perspectives adopted in these articles are mainly Functionalist Theory, especially Skopos Theory, and communication studies.

For example, through comparison of the relic texts of Chinese museums and those of the U.K. and of America, Li (2009) points out in *The C-E Translation Strategies of Introduction Texts of Museums in China* the different structures and focus of Chinese and English relic texts and calls for amplification in translation. Dou Hongli, in *A Research on the Models of China's Museum Text Translation* (2011: 165-168), classifies the mistakes of translation of museums and also provides countermeasures, like A→A model, A→B model and A→0 model. Xu (2013), in *On the Condition of Researches on CE Translation of China's Museum Texts*, reviews the previous researches and divides them into three types: studies on translation mistakes and countermeasures, studies on translation strategies and methods, and studies on translation principles of relic texts.

### 2.2. Previous Studies on Functional Equivalence Theory

Eugene A. Nida is one of the founders of the modern discipline of Translation Studies. His biggest contribution to translation theory is Dynamic Equivalence, or Functional Equivalence Theory.

Eugene first came up with "dynamic equivalence" in *Toward A Science of Translating* (1964) and elaborated the term in *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969). He first treated the term as the "closest natural equivalent", but the term "dynamic" has been misunderstood by some people. In order to avoid misunderstanding and emphasize the concept of function, Eugene replaced "dynamic" with "functional" to describe the degrees of adequacy of a

translation. By “functional”, Eugene treats translation as a form of communication and thinks highly of the receptor’s response.

The functional equivalence theory has inspired many scholars in translation studies. There are 4,450 papers on translation studies from the perspective of functional equivalence theory as search results on www.cnki.net. Most of these papers are about translation strategies, methods and techniques. This theory has shed light on a number of domestic studies on translation of news, literary works, subtitle, tourist texts, engineering texts and advertisement etc.

### **3. A Brief Introduction to Functional Equivalence Theory**

#### **3.1. Development of Functional Equivalence Theory**

The development of functional equivalence can be divided into three stages according to the theoretical focuses: dynamic equivalence and formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence and formal correspondence, and functional equivalence and formal correspondence.

Eugene first came up with the concept “dynamic equivalence” in *Toward a Science of Translating* (Nida 1964) and elaborated the concept in his *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969). He then described functional adequacy in translating in many of his books and articles as “dynamic equivalence”. Eugene explained “dynamic equivalence” as the “closest natural equivalence”. “Dynamic equivalence” is reader-oriented while “formal equivalence” is text-oriented. However, the term “dynamic” had been misunderstood by many who were led to think that the impact of a translation was decisive. To avoid such misunderstanding and emphasize the concept of function, Eugene replaced the term “dynamic” with “functional” in mid-1980s.

#### **3.2. Implications of Functional Equivalence**

By “functional equivalence”, Eugene focuses on the function of translations and sees translation as a form of communication. “If a more or less literal correspondence is functionally equivalent in both designative and associative meaning, then obviously no adjustments in form are necessary” (Nida, 2001). But if it is not the case, then adjustments are needed to avoid misunderstanding or to make semantically and syntactically difficult original texts easier for target readers to read.

In general it is best to speak of “functional equivalence” in terms of a range of adequacy, since no translation is ever completely equivalent. A number of different translations can in fact represent varying degrees of equivalence. This means that “equivalence” cannot be understood in its mathematical meaning of identity, but only in terms of proximity, i.e. on the basis of degrees of closeness to functional identity (Nida, 2001).

According to Eugene, there are two definitions of functional equivalence, the minimal and the maximal. A minimal, realistic definition of functional equivalence could be stated as “The readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it.” A maximal, ideal definition could be stated as “The readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner as the original readers did” (Nida, 2001). According to the two levels of functional equivalence, the minimal and the maximal, a translation’s adequacy can be evaluated by the receptors’ response.

### **4. Functions and Features of Relic Texts in Museums**

#### **4.1. Informative Function**

Relic texts are to tell visitors critical information about the relics. A timeline, for example, shows the significant events during a certain period in the most direct way. A form of name, origin, size, color, weight and so on can answer almost all the questions that visitors may have at the first sight of an object on display. Relic texts provide information to readers and help them have a comprehensive view of the exhibition.

#### **4.2. Communicative Function**

Relic texts are also written to communicate with the readers. Presenting the stories behind the cultural objects, the cultural value and historical significance, relic texts are designed to arouse in the readers’ mind a sense of admiration, proud, or inspiration. If TR resonates with the TT after reading, they are more likely to remember what they have seen and thus more likely to share that experience with others. Besides, if a foreigner agrees with a translation of a relic text, he or she will be more willing to know more about the culture. It is in this way that relic texts work in cultural communication.

### **5. Translation Principles and Methods for Relic Texts in Museums from a Functional Equivalence Perspective: A Case Study of Hubei Provincial Museum**

Hubei Provincial Museum hosts more than 230,000 collections, among which one thousand are Grade-one cultural relics of the state, some of them with translations. This chapter will first focus on the principles in translating relic texts, and then analyze how some methods are applied in the translations that the author has collected from Hubei Provincial Museum.

## 5.1. Translation Principles

### 5.1.1 Accuracy

To present a country's history and culture, museum texts should be accurate and objective. Information of cultural relics such as name, age, size, origin, craftsmanship and technique, historical value and cultural features should all be as accurate as possible.

According to Eugene, translating means communicating, and this process depends on what is received by persons hearing or reading a translation (Nida, 2001). Many Chinese relic texts omit information that are familiar to the natives. However, the translations are intended for foreigners whose average knowledge of China cannot compare with the natives. The omission of such information often forms barriers for English readers to have a comprehensive picture of the relic. So a translator should decide when the accuracy of a translation needs improving. For example, when the ST gives a rough idea of time such as “the previous dynasty” on the premise that most natives are familiar with the unspoken information, the translators are responsible for removing vagueness and adding specific information.

### 5.1.2. Readability

The principles for the production of functionally equivalent translations have a number of very practical implications:

The greater the differences in the source and target cultures, the greater the need for adjustments.

The greater the differences between the source and target languages, the greater the need for adjustments (Nida, 2001).

Given the distinctions of Chinese and English relic texts, a literal matching of words, phrases or sentences to maintain faithfulness may only cause awkwardness in an English translation. This literal matching may lead to “translationese”.

In order not to upset the target readers with unnatural translations, adjustments are needed in C-E translation of relic texts. Readability can be worked on directly by translators by improving the quality of language.

### 5.1.3. Acceptability

Different from readability, which can somewhat be controlled by translators through refining the translation, acceptability is depends more on the receptors who decide whether they agree with the translation.

Since the functions relic texts are to first make target readers understand and then accept the content, acceptability is decisive in assessing translation adequacy. TR may come from all kinds of social and educational background. Therefore, translators should put themselves in the receptors' shoes in translating.

For example, there are some socially or culturally related cases where a certain system or custom featuring Chinese characteristic cannot be found in the target readers' culture. In these cases, translators may search for approximate counterpart in the TR's culture and make a comparison. To TR, comparing a foreign topic to something they are familiar with often narrows the cultural gap.

## 5.2. Translation Methods

Given the three principles in translating such texts, this section is a more specific discussion of translation methods. The author has selected some relic texts with translations from Hubei Provincial Museum in the hope they can exemplify how functional equivalence is achieved through certain translation methods.

### 5.2.1. Addition

#### 5.2.1.1. Addition of Semantic Information

Generally speaking, the structure of Chinese sentences resembles bamboo, while that of English sentences is like a tree. Chinese tends to have the logic hidden in the context while the link between English sentences is often explicitly shown by logical connectors and other words. Therefore, words, phrases or sometimes sentences should be added to turn implicitness into explicitness and to avoid misunderstanding.

Example-1.

<p>朱元璋（1328-1398）建立明朝（1368-1644）后进行制度改革，废去丞相，直接管辖六部，扩大科举争取知识分子拥护，制定“大明律”稳定社会。</p>	<p>After he founded the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), <i>Zhu Yuanzhang</i> (1328-1398) reformed the political system. He abolished the post of prime minister in order to put the six ministries under his direct control. He granted people easier access to the imperial examination to win support from the educated. He had Laws of Great Ming made to stabilize the society.</p>
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The ST in [example 1](#) is one sentence made up of five clauses sharing one subject “朱元璋” and with no logical connectors. In the TT, there are four sentences, each telling one contribution of Zhu Yuanzhang, and “he” is added to each sentence as subject. Division of sentences and addition of subjects as such are the translator's methods to ensure readability.

Phrases including “the post of”, “in order to”, “have sth done” are added to make the translation semantically complete. “废去丞相” in the original text literally means “abolished the prime minister”, yet according to “制度改革” (reform in the political system) in the first clause, it was not just the then prime minister that was fired, but the

post of prime minister was abolished. Therefore, “the post of” is added to avoid misunderstanding. Also, there is no logical connectors between the clauses in the Chinese text, so “in order to” is added to connect “废去丞相” and “直接管辖六部”. In this way, “直接管辖六部” becomes an adverbial of purpose. “制定‘大明律’” cannot be translated literally into “he made the Laws of Great Ming” in that Zhu could not have finished the laws by himself but had his subordinates do the donkey work. That’s why “have sth done” is added to explain the making of the laws.

### 5.2.1.2. Addition of Background Information

In Chinese texts, some background information may be omitted for most Chinese readers know it well. However, in translating, such information should be added in order not to confuse the TR. Here are some examples.

Example-2.

明成祖（1402-1424）即位后为稳定北方，迁都北京（公元1421年）。	When Emperor Chengzu (1402-1424) acceded to the throne, he moved the national capital from Nanjing to Beijing in 1421 to stabilize North China.
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In Example 2, “迁都北京” means literally “moved the national capital to Beijing” but the original capital is not mentioned. It may not be a problem for Chinese readers yet might make English readers wonder. That’s why “from Nanjing” is added to make the former capital clearly as Nanjing.

Example-3.

商代玉器早期多为刀、圭等平雕器物，琢制常见直道、阴纹技法，线条粗、穿孔外大里小。	Most jade articles dating from the early Shang Dynasty are jade swords and <i>gui</i> (elongated pointed tablets of jade) with designs composed of engraved thick lines, and holes that taper inside.
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Example-4.

传说大禹收所辖地域之金（青铜）铸成九鼎。	...legend has it that <i>Yu</i> (founder of the Xia Dynasty) had all bronze in his kingdom collected, melt and cast into nine ding.
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In example 3 and 4, proper noun “圭”, and celebrity name in ancient China are presented without any explanation in ST. However, TR may have no idea what “gui” is and who “Yu” is. In this case, annotation provides a way where explanatory information can be added right after the word.

### 5.2.2. Omission

Chinese texts may adopt repetition or parallelism to create a beauty in form and rhythm. In English, however, such rhetorical figures exist more frequently literary forms such as poems and speeches than in relic texts. Therefore in translating relic texts from Chinese into English, conveying meaning is paramount while unnecessary rhetorical information may as well be deleted. A case in point is as follows.

Example-5.

爵前面有流，后面有尾，腹下有足，造型像鸟雀，而古音“爵”与“雀”通，故得名。	<i>Jue</i> was so named because it resembled a bird (the word for ‘bird’ sounded the same as <i>jue</i> in ancient pronunciation) in shape, with a beak-like spout, a tail and feet.
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In Example 5, the shape of the *jue* is described in parallelism. However, the parallelism should not be kept by translating the ST into “with a beak-like spout on the front, a tail at the rear and feet under the stomach” which is too wordy. Since the English texts often convey the meaning in a plain and brief way, it is better to delete these unnecessary phrases to ensure syntactic conciseness in the TT.

In Chinese relic texts, examples may be listed to describe something in detail. However, these details should not always be kept. They may as well be deleted sometimes as long as such omission doesn’t ruin the integrity of the discourse.

Example-6.

祭祀用器和杂器 明初朝廷规定薄葬，亲王的葬制遵照洪武二年（1369）常遇春的葬礼标准。其随葬“明器九十事”中有军器、日用器皿、乐佣、厨具等；而日用器皿均为锡造。此后王公随葬器物统一由朝廷管理，如宝源局负责造铜制冥器、军器局负责“锡造”日用器皿、营缮所负责“木造”仪仗等，目的在于抑制厚葬的风气。该墓出土共51件（套）祭祀器皿。	Sacrificial Vessels and Miscellaneous Articles In the early Ming Dynasty it was stipulated that a prince's funeral should be modeled on the funeral of Chang Yuchun (one of the generals important in founding the dynasty) in 1369, the second year of Hongwu. There would be ninety types of burial articles, including weapons, daily articles, figurines of musicians, and cooking utensils. All daily articles should be made of tin. After the stipulation was made, all articles to be buried with princes were commissioned by the court in order to prevent lavish funerals. Unearthed from the tomb were fifty-one pieces (sets) of sacrificial vessels.
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In [example 6](#), the ST is about the frugal funerals in Ming dynasty with an array of examples. Given several examples of articles “including weapons, daily articles, figurines of musicians and cooking utensils”, three more examples only make the passage too wordy. Besides, proper names of departments then like “宝源局”, “军器局”, and “营缮所” are not even familiar to Chinese readers, let alone English readers, thus the omission of such details won't harm the integrity of the text. Therefore, deleting these three examples won't spoil the receptors' reading experience. Instead, it ensures that they are not overwhelmed with too much unfamiliar information.

### 5.2.3. Paraphrasing

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, paraphrase means to “express what somebody has said or written using different words, especially in order to make it easier to understand.”

Since words are more likely to be used in their general meaning in Chinese than in English, paraphrasing in translating allows translators to express the ST in other words so that people of all backgrounds can understand the TT easily.

Example-7.

朱元璋（1328-1398）建立明朝（1368-1644）后进行制度改革，废去丞相，直接管辖六部，扩大科举争取知识分子拥护，制定“大明律”稳定社会。	After he founded the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398) reformed the political system. He abolished the post of prime minister in order to put the six ministries under his direct control. He granted people easier access to the imperial examination to win support from the educated. He had Laws of Great Ming made to stabilize the society.
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In Chinese, such words as“扩大”，“增强”，“加强” are sometimes used in a too general way that its real meaning can only be inferred through the context. To make the TR comfortable, in translating, it is necessary to narrow down the meaning of such words. In the TT, “granted people easier access to the imperial examination” is added to tell the readers what specific things the emperor did. By turning general ideas as such in Chinese into specific ones, the translator makes the translation more acceptable to the TR.

There are also cases where some proper names cannot be understood by even the natives unless they are explained in common words. Such proper nouns are either too terminological or too outdated (see [example 8](#)) that people today have no idea what they are. These proper names should also be expressed in common words during C-E translation.

Example-8.

青铜水器主要是在行礼时用于盥洗，以表示恭敬和虔诚。大致可分为承水器盘、注水器匜（yí, 音移）、盥（hé, 音禾）和盛水器釜、盆、鉴、缶等	Bronze water vessels were mainly used for washing before attending rites, which showed respect and piety. It was divided into three categories, i.e. basin, the waste water container, yi and he, the articles for pouring water into other vessels and f, plate, jian and fou, the clean water containers.
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During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the noble used to wash hands before meals using *yi* and waste water container. *Yi* was used to pour water on hands and the waste water container was put under to collect waste water. However, proper names “承水器盘”，“注水器匜” and “盛水器” are too difficult to even Chinese readers. Therefore, the translator explains in plain words the functions of these vessels so that the readers can quickly grasp the main idea.

### 5.2.4. Rewriting

Due to the differences in syntactic and discourse structure between Chinese and English, translators may need to re-adjust the structure of the ST. In this part, rewriting falls roughly in two types, rewriting at syntactic level and rewriting at discourse level.

#### 5.2.4.1. Rewriting at Syntactic Level

According to some linguists, Chinese is parataxis-prominent while English hypotaxis-prominent. Chinese can often go without lexical or syntactic connectors. Therefore, translators need to figure out the logical of the ST and then restructure them in English with connectors.

Example-9.

爵前面有流，后面有尾，腹下有足，造型像鸟雀，而古音“爵”与“雀”通，故得名。	Jue was so named because it resembled a bird (the word for ‘bird’ sounded the same as jue in ancient pronunciation) in shape, with a beak-like spout, a tail and feet.
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Example 9 is a typical example of sentence rewriting in C-E translation. The ST first describes the shape of *jue* and points out that it resembles a bird. Then, it tells the readers that the vessel is called *jue* because the ancient pronunciation of bird sounded like *jue*. In the TT, however, the clauses are re-ordered, only consisting of two parts: the resemblance between *jue* and a bird and the annotation of the similarity in their pronunciation. Since the whole text is about the origin of *jue*'s name, such information should be put at the beginning and an annotation explaining the similarity in pronunciation follows the word “bird”.

#### 5.2.4.2. Rewriting at Discourse Level

Due to different discourse structures of Chinese and English, translators often need to re-adjust the sentences of a discourse. That means sentences may need to be divided, combined or put in another sequence to make the information more readable and clearly presented to the TR.

Example-10.

<p>郑和的时代</p> <p>朱元璋（1328-1398）建立明朝（1368-1644）后进行制度改革，废去丞相，直接管辖六部，扩大科举争取知识分子拥护，制定“大明律”稳定社会。明成祖（1402-1424）即位后为稳定北方，迁都北京（公元1421年）。其后的仁宗（1378-1425）、宣宗（1398-1435）国力都处在上升阶段，明朝为宣扬国威还前后七次派郑和（1371-1435）到西洋列国，宣德八年（1433）才停止。郑和的时代是中国封建社会后期的鼎盛时期，不仅农业的发展超过前代，手工业与商业也空前活跃。蒙元流行的密教也受到社会上层的欢迎。</p>	<p>The Era of Zheng He</p> <p>After he founded the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398) reformed the political system. He abolished the post of prime minister in order to put the six ministries under his direct control. He granted people easier access to the imperial examination to win support from the educated. He had Laws of Great Ming made to stabilize the society.</p> <p>When Emperor Chengzu (1402-1424) acceded to the throne, he moved the national capital from Nanjing to Beijing in 1421 in order to stabilize North China. In the next two periods—the reign of Renzong (1378-1425) and that of Xuanzong (1398-1435), the nation continued to grow more powerful.</p> <p>To demonstrate the national Zheng He (1371-1435) travel seven times to countries west of the South China Sea. The last of his voyages ended in 1433, the eighth year of Xuande.</p> <p>The era of Zheng He was the heyday of the late period of Chinese feudal society, characterized by unprecedented development of agriculture, handicraft industry and commerce. Tantrism, a Buddhist cult that had been widely spread since the Yuan Dynasty, was popular among the upper class.</p>
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In this example, one Chinese paragraph is translated into four paragraphs in English in chronological order. Paragraph 1 is about the period of Zhu Yuanzhang, paragraph 2 the periods of Emperor Chengzu, Renzong and Xuanzong and paragraph 3 Zheng He's travels, and the last paragraph is a conclusion.

Division, combination and re-adjustment of sentences are rewriting methods at discourse level to improve the language quality and information flow of the TT and to make the translations more readable and acceptable to the TR.

## 6. Conclusion

This thesis first discusses the two primary functions of relic texts, informative function and communicative function. Then, according to the core concepts of functional equivalence theory, the thesis sums up three principles in translating relic texts. Accuracy guarantees the reliability of the texts, readability ensures that the translations are natural and idiomatic to Target Reader and acceptability makes sure Target Reader can agree with the translations. In light of these 3 principles, four translation methods are advocated in analyzing the translations from the Hubei

Provincial Museum: addition, omission, paraphrasing and rewriting. Addition is often adopted to add semantic and background information. Omission is usually used to delete unnecessary information to Target Reader. Paraphrasing is adopted to explain an idea in simple words. Rewriting is often used to re-order clauses or sentences to improve readability.

Relic texts can vary, so this thesis only discusses some of the characteristics of Chinese and English relic texts. Also, since the reader's response is hard to evaluate, and there are many more complicated cases of translation, this thesis may have not covered all the proper translation methods and techniques. All in all, the author hopes this thesis will draw more attention to relic texts translation and more studies will be made in this field.

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