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# A Study on English Translation of Chinese Four-character Idioms: Strategies and Problems

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**Abstract**--Chinese Four-character idioms are fixed phrases with four Chinese characters that have been used for a long time in Chinese. They are language units with richer meanings and equivalent grammatical functions than words. They are concise, easy to remember, and easy to use. Many idioms have two or more meanings. It is precisely for this reason that the English translation of Chinese idioms has brought considerable difficulties. In the process of translating idioms into English, it is difficult to be accurate, profound, and complete. Therefore, a variety of English translation techniques should be combined for translating Chinese four-character idioms. This paper analyzed the definition, characteristics, classification, and translatability of Chinese four-character idioms, and concluded three commonly applied strategies for translating Chinese four-character idioms into English: the literal translation, the free translation, and the combination of literal and free translation. Finally, some problems existing in the translation of Chinese four-character idioms are analyzed and summarized: poor acceptance by foreigners, loss of cultural elements, and unbalanced cultural status.

**Keywords**--Chinese-English translation, four-character idioms, techniques, translation strategy.

**Introduction**

Chinese idiom is a special lexical phenomenon formed by people in long-term use, especially four-character idiom with language refinement, precise structure, and rich meaning, which is a kind of fixed phrase with strong expression. How to translate the four-character Chinese idiom into English accurately and fluently is a puzzle for many translators, because many Chinese idioms seem to be simple,

but their meanings are much more complicated. In particular, some idioms that contain allusions and interesting historical stories often have profound connotations and cannot be translated simply from the literal understanding, which must be carefully considered. Therefore, being familiar with the four-character Chinese idioms, especially their origins, features, and cultural characteristics contributes to translators translating them into English.

It has been recognized that a correct command of and familiarity with the translation techniques of Chinese idioms can help non-Chinese readers have a deeper understanding of the internal meanings and connotations of the idioms. It can better shorten the gap of meaning in the process of Chinese-English translation and protect the cultural connotation of Chinese idioms. Based on examining English translation examples of Chinese four-character idioms in previous published papers and monographs, the present study intends to summarize the ideas on the English translation of four-character Chinese idioms and conclude the translation strategies and techniques (Zainudin & Awal, 2012; Suastini, 2016).

The research questions of this study are as follows:

- What are the commonly used translation strategies in previous translation examples of Chinese four-character idioms?
- What problems still exist in the practice of translating Chinese four-character idioms?

### **Literature Review**

The study of Chinese idioms began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during which many studies on idioms emerged. The research scope includes the definition, origin, phonetics, grammar, and semantics of Chinese idioms. Ma (1973) firstly examined Chinese idioms as a special lexical unit, which changed the previous research method that only paid attention to the meaning of the idiom. Then, Shi's (1973); Xu's (1980), studies on Chinese idioms systematically introduced the meaning, characteristics, and structure of Chinese idioms.

As special phrases or word groups in Chinese, idioms have attracted a lot of attention in the study of their phonetics, grammar, and semantics, especially the four-character idioms. For example, Wu (1987) believed that the use of four-character frames can make the structure neat and the use of two-tone overlapping can make the sound harmonious, which fully shows the aesthetic feeling of the pronunciation of Chinese four-character idioms. Zhu (2007) argued that Chinese four-character idioms have characteristics of integrity in meaning and stability in structure. Though they are special phrases in Chinese, they are still analyzable in terms of structure and function. Thus Zhu discussed the grammatical functions and applications of Chinese four-character idioms. The results showed that all the four-character idioms play the grammatical roles as lexical but not grammatical phrases in the Chinese language.

In the late 1980s, a group of scholars began to study translation from the perspective of different cultures, which led to a revolution in the field of

translation studies named the “cultural shift”. Some translation theorists, such as Lambert (1991) and Robyns (1994), believe that translation should be regarded as a communication activity between two cultures, rather than as a bilingual activity (Lu, 2012). Besides, Nida (2001); Nida & Taber (2004) proposed the functional equivalence theory, which holds that the translator should not be too constrained in the original text, nor in the equivalence of words, sentences, and grammatical structures between the original and the translation text, but should pay more attention to the response of the target language readers, and try to make the target language readers and the original text readers have the same reaction and feelings after reading the target text and the original text respectively.

Influenced by these translation theories, some researchers (e.g., He, 2016; Mo & Ge, 2012; Sun, 2013; Tian & Xu, 2014; Wang, 2016; Zhang, 2014) investigated the English translation of Chinese four-character idioms. For example, Mo & Ge (2012), studied the translation of Chinese idioms based on relevance theory. They believed that this theory had a great guiding role in idiom translation and discussed the enlightenment of this theory on Chinese-English idiom translation. They also believed that translators using proper translation strategies accurately and successfully could achieve cross-cultural communication.

Sun (2013), discussed the translation of Chinese idioms from the perspective of cultural differences and discussed how translators use translation strategies to better translate idioms from the perspectives of cultural traditions, religious differences, myths and legends, and ways of thinking. In Sun’s opinion, literal translation can only be realized on the premise of the commonness of original and target languages, while translators need to adopt flexible handling methods and free translation to get rid of various limitations when there are personalized differences between two languages.

Shi (2018), studied the English translation of Chinese idioms from the perspective of the translator’s context. Shi believed that there are certain difficulties in translating Chinese idioms into English. Translators often ignore the historical background of idioms, leading to incomplete translations and misleading readers. Therefore, it is suggested that translators should enrich their cultural knowledge, improve their cultural level and communication skills, and master the translation skills involved in translation.

Though these studies proposed various translation strategies and provided pertinent suggestions for translators, there are still some problems in applying these translation strategies to English translation of Chinese four-character idioms. Based on the analysis of the definition, classification, features, and translatability of Chinese four-character idioms, this paper concluded the translation strategies and try to find out existing problems in the process of Chinese four-character idioms translation to answer the aforementioned two research questions.

## Chinese Four-character Idioms

### Definition of Chinese Four-character Idioms

A Chinese idiom is a phrase that has been used for a long time and whose structure is fixed. Most Chinese idioms are composed of four Chinese characters. The compact structure of a Chinese four-character idiom and its incisive meaning are special components extracted from the Chinese language, which are also the concentrated embodiment of linguistic rhetoric and cultural accumulation. But there are also other different explanations in some Chinese dictionaries and other books. An idiom is regarded as some fixed phrases or short sentences established by usage, according to “*Ci Hai*” (Chinese Encyclopedia Dictionary; Xia & Chen, 2010). Most idioms consist of four characters with various structures. Some of them simply contain a kind of certain transferred meaning and can be understood literally, while others can be understood only by knowing their historical background (Zhang, 2011). According to the Modern Chinese Dictionary, idioms are fixed phrases or short sentences established by long-term usage of people which are brief in form and incisive in meaning. Most of them are formed with four characters and have their historical source (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2012).

Based on definitions of idioms given by dictionaries and previous researchers. This paper tries to summarize them and give a comprehensive one: Chinese Four-character idioms are fixed phrases with four Chinese characters that have been used for a long time in Chinese. They are language units with richer meanings and equivalent grammatical functions than words. They are concise, easy to remember, easy to use, and often have emotional colors, including negative and positive meanings, and of course, there are also neutral ones (Kum et al., 2011; Guo et al., 2011; Sugyaningsih & Mardiana, 2017).

### Classification of Chinese Four-character Idioms

According to their origin, idioms can be divided into the following categories.

#### Idioms originated from a fable

Fables are philosophical and artistic with lively language and humor. After the summary of the later generations, some of them have evolved into idioms. There are many such idioms in Chinese: “刻舟求剑”, “郑人买履”, “杞人忧天”, “愚公移山”, “塞翁失马”, and so on. For example, “杞人忧天” was from a fable that described a man of Qi who was haunted by the fear that the sky might fall. This four-character idiom now is used to mean groundless and unnecessary worries.

#### Idioms originated from myths and legends

Many idioms are extracted from ancient myths: “嫦娥奔月”, “女娲补天”, “精卫填海”, “画龙点睛”, “牛郎织女”, and so on. For example, “嫦娥奔月” (*Chang’e flies to the moon*) is an ancient Chinese fairy tale that tells of Chang’e flying to the moon when she is forced to eat an elixir given to her husband.

### **Idioms originated from historical events**

This kind of idioms came from Chinese classical history books. Each idiom is closely related to a historical event: “破釜沉舟”, “毛遂自荐”, “完璧归赵”, “卧薪尝胆”, “指鹿为马”, and so on. For example, “指鹿为马” (point to a deer, call it a horse) refers to a stratagem used by Zhao Gao, a eunuch in the Qin Dynasty (921-907) to usurp the throne by pointing to a deer but calling it a horse and killed those ministers who contradicted him. This idiom is used to mean deliberately confounding right and wrong.

### **Idioms originated from poetic statements**

The rich classical works of China are an important source of idioms. Some are original works of ancient poetry; some are abbreviations of one or two sentences of classical poems; some have evolved into them: “夙兴夜寐”, “怀瑾握瑜”, “筚路蓝缕”, “诲人不倦”, “实事求是”, etcetera. For example, “夙兴夜寐” means be on one’s feet early in the morning and allow oneself no rest until late at night. This idiom originated from *The Book of Songs*, which is the earliest collection of poetry in China. It contains poems from the early Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle of the Spring and Autumn Period (about 11th century to 6th century BC).

### **Idioms originated from the folk oral transmission**

Many idioms are the embodiment of the wisdom of the masses. According to the characteristics and composition of the idiom, a short phrase is used to express a more complex meaning. Some of them are derived from ancient proverbs and ballads, which are still available in the literature today, such as “唇亡齿寒”, “亡羊补牢”, “投鼠忌器”, “桃李不言”, “下自成蹊”, etcetera. However, most of the oral idioms are from unknown sources and have no basis for investigation, such as “有气无力”, “东倒西歪”, “狼吞虎咽”, “半斤八两”, “一干二净”, and so on.

### **Idioms originated from loanwords**

The ancient Buddhist scriptures were translated from the western regions and the modern works were translated from the western seas. Some of their sentences and allusions are widely circulated and shaped into idioms according to the structural features of Chinese. Most of them originated from Buddhist scriptures (Xu, 2003), such as “昙花一现”, “五体投地”, “功德无量”, “阿弥陀佛”, “顶礼膜拜”, and so on.

### **Features of Chinese Four-character Idioms**

Based on a comprehensive investigation of the meaning, structure, and style of Chinese four-character idioms, the following features are concluded.

#### **Integrity in Meaning**

Different from the common fixed phrases in ideographic characters, the meaning of a Chinese idiom is not simply adding meanings of each Chinese character but

has an integrated meaning, which is further summarized based on the theme of each part. For example, “蒙头转向” literally means a person whose head, especially his eyes, is covered by a piece of cloth and then turns around. But the real meaning is that someone loses his or her bearings or is utterly confused (Lu, 2012). “狐假虎威” literally means that a fox takes the advantage of the power and prestige of a tiger, but its real meaning is adorning oneself with borrowed plumes. These examples show that the connotation of a Chinese four-character idiom is always behind the literal meaning. Most idioms are derived from historical stories, myths, fables, or classic sayings, which can be summarized, so they cannot be understood only by the literal meaning of the idiom. Therefore, it is necessary to help readers understand the real meaning by learning the origin and allusion of this idiom, as well as how it evolved.

### **Coagulability in Structure**

The structure of Chinese four-character idioms is often certain. In the long-term use, it has solidified into a whole and its structure cannot be arbitrarily changed. It cannot be added or reduced either. For example, “掩耳盗铃” cannot be replaced with “掩耳偷铃”; “深谋远虑” cannot be replaced into “远虑深谋”; “标新立异” cannot be replaced into “立异标新”, etcetera.

### **Elegance in style**

Most of the four-character idioms are based on ancient literature, and their style is still dignified and elegant. They have significant external features in ancient times and the syntax structure is still visible. These characteristics make Chinese four-character idioms different from common idioms.

### **Translatability of Chinese Four-character Idioms**

It is recognized that the biggest difficulty in translation lies in the specific differences between two different cultures. When translating Chinese idioms, it can be found that the information contained in the source language is different from the information contained in the corresponding idioms or phrases in the target language. In other words, they have differences in social function, emotional factors, and time features. It is precise because the two different languages reflect different national characteristics. Sometimes, the information is familiar to the native people, including the implied meaning of words, emotional factors, and so on, while it is unfamiliar or even incomprehensible to the people who use the translated language. Therefore, the correct understanding and processing of Chinese idioms with distinctive national cultural characteristics have become the primary problem in the process of translation. However, the real meaning, ideological contents, and specific functions of Chinese idioms will be perfectly delivered as long as their meaning is carefully analyzed, grasping the inherent functions of Chinese idioms, making the target language have the same functions as the source language, and enabling the target language readers to have roughly the same feelings as the source language readers.

## **Main methods applied to translation of Chinese Four-character Idioms**

As is mentioned, the meaning of an idiom is not simply the addition of the literal meaning of each Chinese character. One must know a Chinese idiom's origin and emotional color to thoroughly understand the actual meaning of it, then it can be accurately and appropriately used in practical application. Based on analyzing English translation of Chinese four-character idioms in existing published research papers, articles, chapters, and monographs, translation methods or techniques are coded and classified. The following three mainstream translation strategies are concluded: literal translation, free translation, and the combination of literal translation and free translation.

### **Literal translation**

The literal translation is to keep the original content and form of the original text in the translation without violating the translation's language norms, especially to keep the image of a metaphor of the idioms.

### **The extent of application**

Chinese idioms are highly generalized in terms of their structures and connotations, and it is impossible to achieve perfect equivalence between language and form in English translation. However, it needs to be pointed out that since Chinese and English do not belong to the same language family, the ideographic mode and syntactic structure are very different. English is a dominant language, which is logically expressed in word and sentence structure. Chinese is a recessive language, and the most important feature of Chinese structure is to emphasize the meaning rather than the form. The grammatical and semantic information is not embodied by strict morphological changes but can be combined to form sentences and segments, as long as the semantic collocation in the context is reasonable and follows structural rules. Therefore, Chinese-English translation cannot achieve a complete one-to-one correspondence between grammatical forms and syntactic units. Because literal translation first considers the language structure of the source language, the translation must have the language habit and expression characteristics of the source language.

### **Examples**

“啼笑皆非” can be translated into “not know whether to laugh or cry”. This is a typical literal translation, which accurately reflects the idiom of the literal meaning (Di, 2016), but for “啼”, Chinese readers won't be able to put it with the “cry”, the method of literal translation still needs to be further decomposed into “sense group” of idioms to make the necessary explanation: that is, “啼” cry, “笑” laugh, “皆” both, “非” not. Thus, literal translation, following the idiomatic English language structure, explains the overall meaning of the idiom and adds a sense group to explain the characteristics of the linguistic features of Chinese idioms. The other similar translations are as follows:

- “情不自禁”: can't help doing something;  
 “迥然不同”: to be obviously different;  
 “不寒而栗”: to shiver without being cold;  
 “惩一儆百”: to punish one to awe one hundred;  
 “惨不忍睹”: too horrible to look at;  
 “急于求成”: to be eager to succeed;  
 “各个击破”: to destroy one by one;  
 “门庭若市”: the courtyard is as crowded as a marketplace;  
 “打破常规”: to break through conventionalities;  
 “人财两空”: to lose both men (or women) and money (or wealth).

### Free translation

Free translation is a translation strategy in contrast to literal translation. The meaning of an idiom is not in its literal meaning but its implicit meaning. Chinese characters are ideographic characters, and a single word can express many meanings. Idioms are the refinement and concentration of Chinese, which contain rich historical culture. If the translation is a simple literal translation, it cannot reveal its connotation correctly. Chinese idioms and English idioms are unique phenomena in two languages, carrying their rich cultural information, and their translation process is essentially a “cultural transplant process” (Di, 2016). This requires translators to dig out the core meaning behind Chinese idioms as much as possible in the process of translation, and then carry out the transformation.

### The extent of application

The translation is free from the influence of the language structure of the source language. It may focus on the interpretation and explanation of the meaning of idioms. Therefore, the English translation must be based on the language expression habits of English. This translation strategy is conducive to readers to comprehensively understand idioms as much as possible, but it will cause obstacles in their practical application, such as pragmatic errors caused by different parts of speech.

### Examples

The following are some specific examples of free translation. For example, “成竹在胸” consists of two parts, namely, “成竹” and “在胸”. Their meanings are the existing image of bamboo and inside one's chest respectively. As a whole, its literal meaning is “there is an existing image of bamboo inside one's chest”. Such a translation is very difficult for non-Chinese readers to understand. So, the English translation of “成竹在胸” has to be replaced by “to have an idea in one's mind”. The other similar translations are as follows:

- “举案齐眉”: a married couple love and respects each other for life;  
 “泰然处之”: take something calmly;  
 “说三道四”: make irresponsible remarks;  
 “乱七八糟”: in a mess;



- “朝三暮四”: to be changeable;  
 “手忙脚乱”: in a flurry;  
 “谢天谢地”: thank goodness;  
 “白头到老”: remain a devoted couple to the end of their lives;  
 “鸡毛蒜皮”: trifles; trivialities;  
 “开门见山”: come straight to the point;  
 “如日中天”: at the apex of one’s power, career, etc.

### **The combination of literal translation and free translation**

Literal translation plus free translation, as it implies, is a combination of the two strategies in the translation of Chinese idioms.

### **The extent of application**

Chinese idioms are concise with profound implications. Some of them contain specific emotions and are used in special contexts. On the one hand, literal translation cannot express the metaphor and what the idioms mean behind their literal meaning. Besides, sometimes the English translation of literal translation cannot reveal the profound connotations of Chinese idioms. On the other hand, the free translation will lose the harmonious structure and the culture behind the Chinese idioms. Thus, for translating some Chinese idioms, the combination of literal translation and free translation will preserve the vivid images and beautiful structure of the idioms and express their metaphor meaning can cultural connotation at the same time (Volkova, 2014; Asgarian, 2013; Chen et al., 2002).

Although some of the translation strategies are manually identified as literal translation or free translation, both literal translation and free translation are interdependent. Specifically, there are similarities and differences between languages. With the development of cultural globalization, the cultural independence of language is gradually weakened. Therefore, in the case that neither literal translation nor free translation can play a role, the combination of them becomes necessary.

### **Examples**

The following are some specific examples of the combination of literal translation and free translation. For example, “东施效颦” literally consists of three parts, namely, “东施”, “效” and “颦”. “东施” is an ugly woman’s name called “Dongshi” and the other two parts mean “to imitate” and “frown” respectively. As a whole, it literally means “Dongshi imitates someone frowning”. Obviously, such a translation hardly makes any sense to foreigners. So, it has to be replaced by “the ugly woman Dongshi trying to imitate the frowning beauty”. The other similar translations are as follows:

- “后顾之忧”: fear of disturbance in the rear; trouble back at home ;  
 “燃眉之急”: as pressing as a fire singeing one’s eyebrows;  
 “六亲不认”: repudiate all of one’s relatives-ruthless;

“讳疾忌医”: hide one’s sickness for fear of treatment conceal one’s faults for fear of criticism;

“千钧一发”: a hundredweight hanging by a hair, in imminent peril;

“金枝玉叶”: The descendants of royal families;

“闻风而起”: to rise upon hearing the news;

“车水马龙”: an incessant stream of horses and carriages ;

“逼上梁山”: to be compelled to do something against one’s will;

“包罗万象”: to cover and contain everything.

### **Problems in translation of Chinese Four-character Idioms**

Most translation theorists believe that translation is a process of transforming a foreign language or a second language into a native language. However, as the market demand is increasing, and according to these demanding requirements, translators do not translate it with the same effect as their native language. This is what Newmark (1987) calls a “service translation” (Xu, 2014). The translation of the Chinese four-character idiom is more of a headache for translators. The first difficulty in translating a Chinese four-character idiom into English is how to translate an authentic Chinese expression into English without distortion. There are various types of Chinese four-character idioms, some of which are easy to be translated literally, but four-character idioms that defy conventional logic are hard to be translated. The second difficulty is how to provide a reasonable explanation for a particular phrase. When the connotation of the Chinese four-character idiom is not completely consistent with its literal meaning, as well as when the Chinese four-character idiom and its English counterpart appear similar on the surface but express completely different meanings, the translated Chinese four-character idiom can be easily misinterpreted. Some problems in the translation of Chinese four-character idioms will be discussed below.

### **Poor acceptance by foreigners**

The literal translation preserves the general form, structure, and metaphor of the source language, but this faithfulness to the source language only conveys the superficial literal meaning. Because of cultural barriers and the lack of necessary adjustments, foreigners are bound to be confused or unaware of what it means. Therefore, the acceptability of foreigners becomes an unsatisfactory condition. In short, when translating idioms, some cultural elements with special problems often appear.

### **Loss of cultural elements**

In Chinese culture, an idiom is a kind of idiomatic phrase, which is invented and accumulated by people in the long process of life and production. It has such characteristics as concise terminology, incisive meaning, and cultural carrier with rich connotation. Chinese idioms have distinct cultural characteristics, which will make English translation of Chinese four-character idioms more difficult when lacking cultural elements. It requires a translator must fully understand the Chinese and western cultural differences. Otherwise, the translation of Chinese idioms and cultural missing problems may come up. Chinese four-character

idioms convey the most typical contents and can help foreigners have a better understanding of the traditional Chinese idiom culture. However, even applying the combined translation strategy of literal and free translation, some cultural elements in Chinese four-character idioms may lose in the process of translation. Taking the four-character idiom “东施效颦” again, it is translated into English as “the ugly woman Dongshi trying to imitate the frowning beauty”, but the culture and stories behind the woman’s name Dongshi are still unknown to the non-Chinese readers. This is an inherent regret and pain point in translation.

### **Unbalanced cultural status**

To solve the aforementioned two problems, annotation is a solution. The combined translation strategy with annotation is not only faithful and complete in maintaining cultural elements of the original text, but also helps readers better understand idioms through annotation. With these two advantages, this method seems to be the best way to solve the above problems. However, there is still a hidden problem called the unbalance of cultural status. When readers learn Chinese idioms, they only want to know their meaning and usage, but few people want to know the relationship between extended meaning and connotation meaning to further understand Chinese traditional culture. In addition, English language learners express greater enthusiasm for foreign cultures than Chinese language learners. The unbalance of cultural status does harm the process of spreading Chinese traditional culture in the world cultural exchange (Chen et al., 2015; Tou, 2000; Li et al., 2022; Wu, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

The four-character idiom is an indispensable part of Chinese, which concentrates the essence of Chinese. Therefore, it is necessary to study the English translation of the four-character idiom so that more foreign readers can understand the beauty of Chinese. This paper introduces the definition, classification, features, and translatability of Chinese four-character idioms, as well as the difficulties in translating them into English. Chinese Four-character idioms are fixed phrases with four Chinese characters that have been used for a long time in Chinese. They are language units with richer meanings and equivalent grammatical functions than words. They are concise, easy to remember, and easy to use. Chinese four-character idioms can be classified into the following six categories based on their origin: idioms originated from fables, myths and legends, historical events, poetic statements, folk oral transmission, and loanwords. They have the following three features: integrity in meaning, coagulability in structure, and elegance in style.

Based on this understanding of Chinese four-character idioms, three commonly used translation strategies are concluded: literal translation, free translation, and the combination of literal and free translation. Finally, problems still exist in the current English translation of Chinese four-character idioms, such as poor acceptance by foreigners and loss of cultural elements. Though these problems can be solved to some extent by using annotations to the translation, other problems still exist, such as unbalanced cultural status. Many translation theories have emerged in the literature, based on which, translation strategies, methods, or techniques other than the mentioned three ones have also been

proposed. In the future study, how other translation strategies are applied in translating Chinese four-character idioms should be studied.

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