



# On the Characteristics of Chinese Calligraphy Terms and Their Translation

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**Abstract:** Chinese calligraphy is an artistic treasure of the Chinese nation, and enjoys more and more fans in the international community as Chinese culture “goes global”. Therefore, it is especially important to study Chinese calligraphy translation. This paper intends to explore the characteristics of Chinese calligraphy terms, translation principles and strategies, emphasizing that translators should fully consider the cultural connotation of calligraphy terms and the acceptability of target audiences, so as to adopt flexible and effective translation strategies to help Chinese calligraphy art successfully “go global”.

**Keywords:** Chinese calligraphy term; Translation principle; Translation strategy

## 1. Introduction

Chinese calligraphy art is a miracle in the development of Chinese civilization for 5,000 years. It is called the four quintessence of Chinese culture together with Beijing opera, martial arts and acupuncture. As a unique artistic form native to China, calligraphy is bound to be closely related to Chinese traditional culture, especially traditional philosophy. It is the spiritual lifeblood of Chinese civilization such as “Confucianism”, “Taoism” and “Buddhism” that gave birth to Chinese calligraphy and its unique aesthetic values, which are unique in the world.

Apart from cultural differences and the depth of communication, with Chinese culture going global, and the increasing influence of Chinese calligraphy in the world, the spread and communication of Chinese calligraphy to western countries has become an indisputable fact and one of the unavoidable topics in contemporary calligraphy circles.

For this reason, translators must fully consider cultural factors in the process of translating Chinese calligraphy terms, and on the basis of improving their own cultural and artistic accomplishment, summarize and perfect translation strategies of calligraphy terms in practice, so as to preserve the cultural connotation of calligraphy terms to the greatest extent, and carry forward the long-standing calligraphy culture of China.

## 2. Literature review

The CNKI database has published papers related to the translation of Chinese calligraphy terms. It has greatly enlightened the study on the characteristics and translation strategies of calligraphy terms at home and abroad and provided translation strategies and theoretical basis for the study of calligraphy terms in this paper.

### 2.1 Previous studies of the translation of Chinese calligraphy terms

Previous studies of the translation of Chinese calligraphy terms are as follows:

Some scholars analyze and study the English translation of familiar basic calligraphy expressions and discuss the translation strategies of commonly used words. Some scholars emphasize it is necessary to study the translation of Chinese calligraphy terms from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, by discussing the influence of cultural differences on the translation of the Chinese calligraphy terminologies and its strategies. Here are some leading scholars on the translation of Chinese calligraphy terms.

Yang Xiaobo (2017) discusses the translation strategies of the five styles of “seal script, official script, regular script, line script and cursive script”. And also she divides seal script (篆书) into ancient style of calligraphy (大篆) and fewer-stroke seal character (小篆), and she talks about the misunderstanding in seal script; on one hand seal script has some connection with seal cutting (篆刻), but seal script is by no means a subsidiary of seal cutting. On the other hand, seal script does not use “big” or “lesser/small” points; they are the ancient style of calligraphy and fewer-stroke seal character.

Gu Yi, Ma Yue (2016) in *Problems and Countermeasures in Translating Explanatory Words for Calligraphy Exhibition — Taking Xi'an Forest of Steles Museum as an Example* argues that it is obviously wrong to translate Zhang Xu's book method of “not deviating from the rules” into “without exceeding the pattern”.

Wang Shuo (2016) discusses that if Chinese calligraphy is to go global in the international community, it needs the spread of culture. So he focuses on the English translation of calligraphy from the aspects of calligraphy name, characteristics, calligraphy style creation and aesthetic standards by considering the cultural differences.

## 2.2 My perspective of the translation of Chinese calligraphy terms

Based on the previous studies of the translation of Chinese calligraphy terms, this paper will explore the characteristics of Chinese calligraphy terms and their translation principles as well as translation strategies based on the analysis and appreciation of some case studies in terms of the different schools of Chinese calligraphy, the Chinese calligraphy terms of writing skills and the aesthetic commentary terms.

## 3. Characteristics of Chinese calligraphy terms

In the following part, this paper will focus on the characteristics of Chinese calligraphy terms with examples.

### 3.1 Being abstract

As Chinese calligraphy is a professional art in terms of its writing skills and styles as well as the aesthetic appreciation of the masterpieces, which is deep rooted in Chinese culture and philosophy, whose terms have been greatly influenced by the profound Chinese culture and philosophical values, and have integrated into Chinese cultural and philosophical systems, therefore, Chinese calligraphy terms are abstract and not easy to understand the implied meaning.

For example, “大拙而大巧” is quite similar to “大巧若拙”, which is closely related to Chinese philosophical values. This aesthetic term to appreciate the masterpieces of Chinese calligraphy is quite difficult to express the implied meaning to the target language. Here are some possible translated versions: unsophisticated charm, or archaic simplicity, or extreme gracefulness rests in extreme awkwardness.

### 3.2 Being concise

As the Chinese calligraphy terms are widely used to express the writing styles, skills as well as the aesthetic appreciation of this oriental artistic form, it is, generally speaking, concise and simplified. Here are some examples.

“气”(“*Qi*”) is widely used by ancient and modern Chinese calligraphers in their writings. Ying zhi (2016) once commented in his analysis of the English translation of the word “momentum” in Chinese calligraphy. It is necessary to use a certain amount of pen power when creating new calligraphy works. Third, as far as the whole picture is concerned, works with “*Qi* potential” can inject the whole picture into pieces, showing a refined and condensed artistic conception, which is translated into “vigorous”, “momentum”, and “spontaneous”.

In conclusion, as a qualified translator, one shall keep in mind those characteristics of Chinese calligraphy terms, and renders the implied meaning of them into the target language, that is, the Chinese calligraphy term translation requires professional simplicity, clarity and understandability.

## 4. Translation principles of Chinese calligraphy terms

In the following part, the translation principles of Chinese calligraphy terms are discussed.

### 4.1 Rendering the cultural connotations and implied meanings

It is the untiring efforts of these Chinese scholars and artists that have gradually aroused the interest of western scholars in studying Chinese calligraphy and built a bridge for the academic exchange between China and the West. It should be noted that, Therefore, the misreading of Chinese calligraphy caused by words in different dictionary writings may be even greater. That is to say, a qualified translator should take the cultural and historical context into consideration and fully render the original cultural connotations of the Chinese calligraphy terms into the target language. However, if the translator has no practical experience in Chinese calligraphy and cannot understand and express the implied meaning of those Chinese calligraphy terms, the meaning will deviate and the implied meaning will get lost. Therefore, only by mastering the cultural differences and professional knowledge of Chinese calligraphy and accurately grasping the implied meaning of the original text can Chinese calligraphy terms be effectively rendered and successfully “go global”.

Here is an example. 观夫垂露悬针之异，奔雷坠石之奇。

Consider the differences between the *xuan zhen* (“suspended needle”) and *chui lu* (“hanging dewdrops”) scripts, the marvels of rolling thunder and toppling rocks. Although the Chinese calligraphy terms is abstract and difficult to understand, if the qualified translator acquires a theoretical knowledge of Chinese calligraphy and masters certain techniques, and keep in mind the cultural differences, one can offer a sound translation of Chinese calligraphy terms by rendering the cultural connotations and implied meanings of the original.

### 4.2 Focusing on the target readers’ acceptability

As a qualified translator, one shall not only translate the cultural connotations and implied meanings of the original text but also focus on the acceptability of the potential target readers or audiences, that is, make ourselves understood. Let’s say, if the target readers are “experts and scholars” who have acquired considerable professional artistic knowledge and have a good understanding of their cultural connotation, the translator may as well choose the literal translation. However, as the Chinese calligraphy terms are so abstract, concise, and difficult to understand even to many readers who are Chinese native speakers, therefore, the translator shall be flexible to choose free translation of those Chinese calligraphy terms by adding some explanation.

Here is an example. “中锋” is also translated into “center”, but if the potential target readers cannot understand, the translator shall add some key information to make himself or herself understood, that is, “中锋” (*Zhong feng*), also known as “center”, means “keeping the main front of the pen in the middle of the stippling to distinguish it from the partial front.” Although the center stroke must be “straight”, it is not the so-called vertical brush tip, which easily misleads readers into touching paper with the sharp edge. In fact, when the center moves the pen, the front of the pen is pressed down, and the pen is moved after being pressed at right angles and the tip of the pen is always kept in the middle of the stroke.

Therefore, as a qualified translator of the Chinese calligraphy terms, one shall be flexible to strike a balance between the renderings

the cultural connotations and implied meanings and the target readers' acceptability so as to contribute to the success of the Chinese calligraphy "go global".

## 5. Translation strategies of Chinese calligraphy terms

Any translation, especially cultural translation, cannot reproduce the original information intact, so it is necessary to choose which information to give priority to. In other words, according to the purpose of translation and the function of the text, the background information of the original text should be added and lost in order to achieve the purpose of effective communication. Background information should be added during translation. The original text is longer and the structure is more complicated, so the core information should be refined in translation.

### 5.1 Literal translation

This is the commentary in both Chinese and English for Su Shi's calligraphy work *Letters to Seasons* in Song Dynasty in Taipei Palace Museum. The word strong is mostly a commendatory word. Although there is no recognition of "vigorous" as a calligraphy term, it is still acceptable in view of the fact that most museum calligraphy exhibition visitors are ordinary visitors who are not familiar with Chinese calligraphy culture. However, the literal translation of "the calligraphy here is strong" is somewhat abstract, and it is suggested to translate it into "the brushwork is strong" or "the calligraphy displays the force fullness for the strong and vigorous lines".

Yang Xiaobo (杨晓波, 2018) studied Eight-character method (永字八法). He translated dian (点) into dots, heng (横) into horizontal lines, zhi (直) into vertical lines. They are the literal translation. It's in a very direct way.

Mud seal (泥封) is also called "sealing mud". From the Warring States Period to the Qin and Han Dynasties, China practiced a simple document. During the transmission, in order to prevent secrets from being lost, the hair was sealed with a rope and a mud box was added at the end or crossing of the rope. Clay is sealed in the box, and then the seal is used to print the seal on the clay block. This is called "sealing mud". After the Wei and Jin dynasties, with the wide application of paper and silk, seals lost their dull and tasteless seals and border styles with natural beauty, which are still the reference for seal cutting creation.

### 5.2 Free translation

Free translation does not mean that the original meaning can be changed at will.

But on the basis of literal translation to polish and adjust the language, make the translation of calligraphy terms more accurate, by only using different translation forms to express the same meaning. By using free translation, it is not only conducive to improving the country's cultural soft power, but also conducive to enhancing the Chinese nation's own identity, shaping its image and maintaining its inherent cultural identity, so that calligraphy terms can be widely spread. Here are the free translations of Chinese calligraphy:

"folding front" (折锋) in *Chinese Dictionary of Calligraphy* is: "It refers to the method of using a pen to gain momentum when writing a book. The strokes of the pen follow the angles and angles, and draw the dots of the square, which is called "turning to form a square."

This kind of translation method can make people understand cultural connotations and better understand the hidden meaning and significance of calligraphy according to culture and context. However, if free translation is required for each calligraphy term, it will complicate calligraphy terms and reduce the fun of calligraphy lovers. Therefore, it is particularly important to correctly handle the advantages and disadvantages of free translation.

"行楷得晋唐雄劲笔意，草书学怀素。" Translation: "In semi-regular script, he achieved the majestic manner of the Jin and Tang dynasties. In cursive script, he studied the style of Huai Su."

This is a commentary in both Chinese and English for Xianyu Shu's running script work *The True Story of Running Grass* in Yuan Dynasty. Although the word "majestic" embodies masculinity and magnificence "qi", but does not reflect the basic semantic and aesthetic characteristics of "jin". Majestic is often used to describe the grandeur of mountains and rivers, such as "A photograph of this majestic scene doesn't actually exist: the painting is an invention" (from COCA Corpus).

### 5.3 Transliteration

Transliteration is the direct translation according to the pronunciation of words. When translating calligraphy, the transliteration method is often used. We can translate into the target language according to the pronunciation of the source language by choosing a similar pronunciation.

If the target audience is an "ordinary reader" who is still in the primary stage of cultural transmission, lacks professional knowledge of calligraphy, and has little knowledge of Chinese language and culture, the adoption of transliteration is not the top priority.

After a long period of publicity and cross-cultural communication, this method can make people understand the terminology culture concisely and clearly, easy to understand, simple and easy to remember. However, it will also make people more inert and not understand the cultural meaning contained in each calligraphy term. Therefore, it is especially important to correctly handle the advantages and disadvantages of transliteration.

Yang Xiaobo (杨晓波, 2018) studied eight-character method (永字八法) of Chinese calligraphy terms, and translated "pie" (撇) into pie, means stroke moving from the upper right to the lower left, "na" (捺) into na, means stroke moving from the upper left to the lower right, slightly curved, like a flattened letter S. "tiao" into "tiao", "ti" into "ti", means stroke moving down vertically, then to the right horizontally, then straight up, like this: 丄.

Shun Bi (顺笔): refers to the method of moving the pen according to the stroke direction and sequence of different book bodies when writing.

Bi Shun (笔顺): also called "Bi Xu". What is Bi Shun? Habit refers to the sequence of strokes in writing. Writing with the right hand, not only Chinese characters, that is, people of all ethnic groups in the world, are the same. The writing habit of Chinese characters is that each stroke of each character goes up and down first, left and right first, and if it is written upside down, it goes down

first: when writing a pen, one's own hand and pen cover the next stroke, which is extremely inconvenient to write. The word "shun" means convenience.

Through out their magic strategies in different way, we can see the concise, flexible, convenient, feature in our Chinese calligraphy translation strategies.

As a representative art of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, Chinese calligraphy can be regarded as one of the quintessence of Chinese culture. English translation of those Chinese calligraphy terms should adopt corresponding modes, pay attention to the different needs of the target audience, objectively analyze the communication stage, and adopt flexible English translation strategies.

## 6. Conclusion

Chinese calligraphy, as one of the quintessence of Chinese culture, contains an important value to promote Chinese culture. Due to the irreplaceable nature of this traditional culture, Chinese characters have become the only "messenger of communication". It is precisely because they shoulder such a heavy responsibility of cultural transmission that traditional Chinese calligraphy has such a high position in China's history and culture.

Chinese calligraphy is an artistic treasure of the Chinese nation, and enjoys more and more fans in the international community as Chinese culture "goes global". Therefore, it is especially important to study Chinese calligraphy translation. This paper explores the characteristics of Chinese calligraphy terms, translation principles and strategies, emphasizing that translators should fully consider the cultural connotation of calligraphy terms and the acceptability of target audiences, so as to adopt flexible and effective translation strategies to help Chinese calligraphy art successfully "go global."

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