

# A Study on Chinese History Museum Text Translation from the Memetic Perspective: Taking the English Translation of Nanchang Relic Museum of Haihunhou State of Han Dynasty as an Example

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## Abstract

This paper aims to probe into the English translation discourse and strategy on the basis of memetic theory. It collects and compiles publicity materials and their English translations from Nanchang Relic Museum of Haihunhou State of Han Dynasty. By applying memetic theory to classify translation memes, it analyzes translation strategies based on these classifications and identifies distinct characteristics associated with each type of meme mentioned. It also rectifies any inappropriate translations, thereby offering a new perspective for studying the museum's promotional materials that engage translators as well as enhancing the promotion of Chinese culture worldwide.

**Key words:** Memetic theory; Chinese history museum translation; C-E translation

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the excavation of the Marquis of Haihun's tomb, belonging to Liu He, nearly 20,000 cultural relics have been unearthed in 2015, showcasing the opulence and grandeur of the Han Dynasty. These artifacts encompass a wide range including bronze wares, bamboo and wood lacquerware, jade objects, gold items, wooden tablets, and bamboo slips; all reflecting the prosperous reigns of Emperor Wu, Emperor Zhao and Emperor Xuan. The items vividly depict the aristocratic lifestyle during the Western Han period while possessing immeasurable cultural and historical values. To date, no other excavated tombs of Western Han feudal princes or their consorts have surpassed the number of burial goods discovered from the Marquis of Haihun's tomb (Peng, 2020). Meanwhile, the archaeological site of the Han Dynasty Haihu Principality is the largest, best-preserved, most complete, and richest Han-era feudal principality capital site discovered in China (Li, 2016). The Haihu Ruins Museum was designated as a national first-class museum by the China Museum Association in 2024. The excavation of Liu He's tomb has garnered significant attention, and scholars have conducted extensive research on this subject matter. However, relevant translation studies are very limited, with only 11 papers found in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure database as of June 2024. Given the growing interest among foreigners to learn about China's historical museum, the English translation of the Nanchang Relic Museum at Haihunhou State from the Han Dynasty holds great significance for disseminating Chinese culture and promoting Jiangxi.

## 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF MUSEUM TEXT TRANSLATION

Museums serve as the embodiment of a region's history and culture, often providing English translations of

museum texts to facilitate foreign visitors and promote the dissemination of local culture.

The textual materials found in museum exhibitions are informative in nature, with their translations characterized by two key aspects: (1) communicative effectiveness and (2) information accuracy (Reiss, 2004). Beyond the displayed items, museums unveil cultural and historical significance through a series of intricate steps such as site exploration, excavation, cleaning, recording, identification, and sampling conducted by archaeologists before being presented to visitors. This information has undergone rigorous verification by experts; hence translators must ensure precise translations for exhibition texts (Zhu & Yang, 2017). This also determines the extent to which international visitors can effectively comprehend the historical and cultural content. In addition, during the translation process, it is crucial to consider that certain concepts, which are commonly understood by Chinese visitors, may appear to be obscure and challenging for foreign visitors due to their different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, specific measures should be implemented to ensure optimal communicative effectiveness in translation. Translators should strive to render translations that are both readily acceptable and easily comprehensible for foreign readers. Existing domestic research on museum or cultural relic translation primarily revolves around skopos theory, communicative translation theory, domestication and foreignization approaches. The research focuses mainly on museum commentaries, exhibition texts, names of cultural relics, introductions of cultural relics and exhibition panels as well as museum introductions. The research content predominantly includes translation strategies, current status quo of translations, translation analysis techniques, English translation standards along with characteristics and principles of translations.

## 2. MEMETIC THEORY

Memetics, based on Darwin's theory of evolution, refers to a theory that explains the laws of cultural evolution. The core concept of "meme" was first introduced in the book *The Selfish Gene* by biologist Dawkins in 1976, which refers to "the imitated thing", representing the unit of cultural transmission or imitation. The word "meme" derived from the word "gene", and Dawkins hoped that it could describe cultural evolution in a similar way to how genes describe biological heredity. However, the difference is that the transmission of culture occurs through imitation from one person's brain to another, rather than through biological inheritance. He believes that culture is similar to biography to some extent for they both experience evolution (Dawkins, 1976). His student Blackmore pointed out anything that propagates by imitation in a broad sense can be called a meme (Blackmore, 1999). Andrew Chesterman first introduced

the theory into translation. He mentioned that meme propagates by imitation in one culture, with language as its main carrier. If it propagates across language, however, it relies on translation. Translation can also be regarded as imitation of sense of source text, propagating to another language culture. In his opinion, during translation every meme is a replication and heredity to a previous meme, and there is also variation, i.e.  $A \rightarrow A + A'$  (Chesterman, 1997). In this process, translation meme develops. In translation, therefore, various transformation can be regarded as memes, since memes do not confine to direct imitation.

Memetics places emphasis on the imitation of cultural transmission, while also acknowledging its dynamic nature. Translators have a responsibility to carefully consider differences and similarities in key aspects such as history, society, and culture, and adapt memes accordingly. When translating museum texts, it is essential for translators to familiarize themselves with relevant artifacts and historical context in order to effectively convey the essence beyond mere objects. Despite extensive research conducted on this particular museum, there has been limited exploration from a memetic perspective. In this vein, this paper aims to analyze and elucidate the role of memes in the translation of museum texts, encompassing their imitation and variation.

## 3. MEMETIC TYPES OF RELIC MUSEUM OF HAIHUNHOU STATE TEXT

### 3.1 Corpus Collection

Before writing this paper, a total of 362 series of data were collected from the Golden Haihun Exhibition Hall, Meet Haihun Exhibition Hall, Scholarly Haihun Exhibition Hall, and Vermilion Lacquer Exhibition Hall in the museum. In these halls, the introduction of relics only includes translations of relic names, while the entire museum introduction has been translated. The latter encompasses themes for each hall, periods covered, characteristics exhibited, purposes served, and achievements made. Following classification efforts, relevant memes have been incorporated.

#### (1) Phonetic meme

Phonetic meme, just as its name implies, refers to the practice of translating according to the pronunciation of the source text. In the context of this paper, it specifically pertains to translating Chinese characters into English using Mandarin pinyin. Given China's rich cultural heritage and numerous objects that lack corresponding name in the Western world, employing a phonetic meme approach is deemed acceptable as it encapsulates their profound meanings.

**Example 1** : 北宋乐史《太平寰宇记》关于海昏侯国封地的记载

Official translation: Records of the Enfeoffment of Haihun Principality in the Taiping World-Wide Record by Yue Shi in the Northern Song Dynasty

The Taiping World-wide Record was one of the historical records about Haihunhou State exhibited in the hall. In translation, the phonetic name of the state, i.e. HAIHUN, was retained and followed by PRINCIPALITY to convey its meaning. By introducing unfamiliar memes, readers' cognitive processes are activated, leading to a sudden comprehension and subsequent familiarity with the meme. Utilizing phonetic memes facilitates cultural propagation and enables translations to preserve language value, cultural value, and social pragmatic value equivalent to those of the source text (Zhao, 2008). This approach also adheres to conventions for translating place names into English.

**Example 2:** 游客服务中心设计采用遗址出土的玉璧元素，从高空俯助像一枚环形玉扣，意为“瑗壁礼天”。

Official translation: The design of the Tourist Service Center adopts the jade element unearthed from the relics. From a high altitude, it looks like a ring-shaped jade clasp, which means Yuan Bi Li Tian.

Yuan is a kind of jade with a large circular aperture, and when the width of the jade piece is twice that of the aperture, it is called Bi. The term Yuan Bi Li Tian originates from *The Book of Rites* (Dai, 2016), which refers to worship using square bricks representing heaven and Huangzong (a straight strip utensil) symbolizing earth. As English readers may not be familiar with these rituals, a phonetic meme was used by the translator to convey cultural connotations. However, providing an explanation such as “Yuan Bi Li Tian” meaning “to show respect to Heaven” would effectively convey its intended meaning.

**Example 3:** 裹(niǎo) 蹠(tí)金、麟趾金

Official translation: Niaoti Golds and Linzhi Golds

Gold ware is one of the most fascinating relics in the museum, representing Liu he's distinguished status. The pronunciation of the two concepts, niaoti gold and linzhi gold, has been provided in brackets as they are unfamiliar and even obscure to Chinese visitors. According to the museum's introduction, some scholars suggest that these two types of gold were crafted in the form of auspicious animals (Tian'ma and Qi lin) according to Chinese traditional culture. However, providing a detailed explanation of these animals would make the translation excessively lengthy and potentially confuse readers. This phonetic meme can be “Niaoti Golds and Linzhi Golds (in the Shape of Auspicious Animals' Foot)”, which conveys connotation and could be easily understood. Similar texts from the museum are:

“河北定州中山怀王刘修墓麟趾金Linzhi Gold Unearthed from Tomb of Liu Xiu, King Huai of Zhongshan Principality, Dingzhou, Hebei Province”

“江苏盱眙南窑庄窖藏西汉裹蹠金Niaoti Golds Depot of the Western Han Dynasty in Nanyaozhuang, Xuyi, Jiangsu Province”

“江苏盱眙(xu yí)战国楚‘郢爰’□钣Gold Plate of “Ying Yuan” in the Warring States Period of Xuyi, Jiangsu Province”. There is only a phonetic meme for 郢爰, but it is better to provide its explanation behind. In fact, it refers to gold coin of Chu state. The translation can be revised as “Yingyuan (Money)”.

**Example 4:** 青铜匜(yí)

Official translation: Bronze Yi (Dipper)

“匜”was explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as a utensil for scooping water in washing, originally it refers to water container with a handle. Such translation adds an explanation behind the phonetic meme, keeping cultural features and proving its meaning at the same time. But dipper is different from Yi, because dipper generally refers to ladle. It can be revised to “Bronze Yi (Hand Wash Utensil)”. Though this version is longer, it is more precise. Similar examples in the museum included:

“鞞形玉佩 She (Thumb Ring)-Shaped Jade Pendants”,

“青铜鍤(xuān) Bronze Xuan (a Small Basin)”,

“‘昌邑食官’铭文青铜鍤 Bronze Xuan (Small Basins) Within Scriptures of ‘Food Officers of Changyi’”.

## (2) Literal meme

According to memetics, although the source language and target language are distinct, there are instances where a meme from the source culture can align with a similar meme in the target language, resulting in similar effects and pragmatic outcomes on hosts (Xu & Gao, 2012). Despite their different origins, both Chinese culture and Western culture belong to humanity and share resemblances. In such cases, translators do not need to extensively modify memes but rather utilize their original sense.

**Example 5:** 漆髻(shà)(复制品)

Official translation: Lacquer Long-Handle Fan(replica)

In *Shuowen Jiezi*, the character “髻” is defined as a feather ornament specifically used for adorning coffins. According to historical records, the emperor would possess eight of these ornaments, feudal lords would have six, nobles would have four, and scholars would have two. The character itself consists of the radical “羽”(feather) and the phonetic component “妾”(qie). Interestingly, its prototype can be traced back to a long-handle fan that was utilized by individuals during their lifetime. This practice reflects ancient Chinese beliefs which regarded death as an integral part of life; thus personal belongings were minimized and transformed into burial items intended for future use underground. By directly conveying its original meaning while maintaining similar semantic effects, this translation enables readers to comprehend it effectively.

For texts can be translated literally, translators do not need to choose other types of memes. There are many examples of this type in the museum: “青铜铃铛 Bronze

Bell”, “漆鼓槌 Lacquer Drum Stick”, “漆案玉饰件 Jade Ornament of Lacquer Table”. Literal meme is quite common among types of memes.

### (3) Abridged meme

Many idioms and sayings in Chinese contain two parts expressing the same meaning, in order to emphasize or pursue formal symmetry, or create a sense of rhythm in language. For example, for “左顾右盼” (looking around)、 “纷至沓来” (coming in flocks)、 “千军万马” (a vast army), the first two characters all convey the same meaning as the last two. When these words are translated into English, it is sufficient to translate one part or the overall meaning. Translating both two parts is not necessary, as it does not further enlighten its readers any more.

**Example 6:** 第一代海昏侯刘贺，由王而帝，由帝而民，由民而侯，跌宕起伏，世所罕见。

Official translation: Liu He, the first Marquis of Haihun, ascended the throne from a kinglet to an emperor, was deposed as a civilian, and then became a marquis again. His ups and downs are practically nowhere to be found in history.

This paragraph introduces Liu He’s legendary life experiences, where the Chinese phrase “跌宕起伏” conveys a sense of volatility and fluctuation. Specifically, the expression “跌宕” signifies rich changes with twists and setbacks, similar to “起伏”. Therefore, this four-character idiom should be comprehended and translated as a whole to describe something that is dynamic and unpredictable. Metaphorically, it can also refer to the fluctuations in music tunes or the twists in a story plot. In translation, conveying the essence of one part is sufficient; hence, this expression is consciously rendered as ‘ups and downs’ without any redundant repetition.

### (4) Liberal meme

As Chinese culture has a deep foundation, there are many expressions in Chinese including allusions or metaphors and substitutions (or both). Their meaning is far from the literal meaning. Translators do not need to strictly stick to their literal sense when translating such texts, but to delve into the text to uncover the true significance.

Example 7: 整体形态圆融流通、虚实相生。

Official translation: The overall form is circulating harmony, and the real and the virtual coexist.

The text is from introduction of the design of museum of Haihun State service center for tourists. In Chinese version, “圆” refers to completeness, and “融” refers to integration and harmony. The word “圆融” concludes following meanings:

- In Buddhist terminology, it refers to overcoming rigidity and achieving perfect integration;
- Flexibility;
- Similar to “圆通”, which indicates clarity and fluency in expression.

Here, the first meaning is more relevant. “流通” means

circulation and unimpeded flow. The translation does not focus on the specific meaning of “圆融流通”, but instead presents the overall imagery of these four characters in the context. Meanings such as integration, perfectness and harmony are concluded in the description of the building, showing a sense of soundness and peacefulness. Translating in this way is conscious and understandable. However, the author suggest that this sentence can be translated as such, “The overall form is circulating harmonious, and the real and the virtual coexist.” Because adjective “harmonious” is more suitable to modify a state.

### (5) Brief meme

The process of translation is not merely a mechanical task of word-for-word code switching. When converting a meme into another language, it is necessary to eliminate any surplus content. For instance, in Chinese, category words like “情况” (situation), “问题” (problem), and “状态” (state) are often added to enhance meaning. However, the decision of whether these words should be translated into English requires further consideration. It is acceptable to make selective choices in English translation that effectively convey the intended meaning since many English words also possess abstract connotations. This aspect relates to the variations in thinking patterns between Eastern and Western cultures; however, an extensive discussion on this matter will not be provided here.

#### Example 8 : 漆器源流

Official translation: The Development Path of Lacquerware

This part of exhibition text is from the final part of the Vermilion Lacquer Exhibition Hall of the museum, which supplements the content of the whole hall. Thus, it exerts a great influence on visitors’ impression on the museum. “源流” refers to the source and tributaries of water, metaphorically referring to the origin and course of matters, which is expressed in a literary manner. In its translation, Development is used to connote the overall process. Since the meme is conveyed to readers’ brains, the word PATH is redundant and need to be deleted.

## 4. CONCLUSION

With imitation as its core, memes are mainly concerned with the dissemination and variation of culture. Museums, being crucial institutions for spreading and preserving culture, provide an ideal platform to combine these two elements. This study adopts a memetic perspective to analyze selected examples from the museum text and its translation at Nanchang Relic Museum of Haihun State during the Han Dynasty. The analysis encompasses various levels of variation including phonetic memes, literal memes, abridged memes, liberal memes, and brief memes. Additionally, this paper aims to rectify imperfect translations. In an era that places increasing emphasis

on cultural heritage protection and inheritance, studying museum text translation holds significant value in terms of providing new insights into information replication while promoting innovative transformations within traditional culture. Translators need to take a great number of factors into consideration such as different language usage, cultural nuances, thinking patterns, and expression habits when selecting appropriate meme types. This research contributes not only to showcasing Haihunhou State's historical significance but also to disseminating Chinese culture globally while enriching the field of memetics.

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