

## A Study on the English Translation of *Shupu* From the Perspective of Thick Translation

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### Abstract

As an integrated part of its traditional culture, Chinese calligraphy exerts positive implications in the “going global” of Chinese culture. Recent years have seen increasing studies on *Shupu* written by Sun Guoting, a representative book on Chinese calligraphy history. Under the guidance of Anthony Appiah’s thick translation theory, taking Pietro’s English version of *Shupu* as an example, this paper will explore two categories of thick translation strategies in the English version of *Shupu*: the explicit strategy including footnotes and bracketing and the implicit strategy by in-text interpretation and amplification, in the hope of verifying the feasibility and applicability of thick translation in cultural classic translation and its significance for Chinese cultural transmission.

**Key words:** *Shupu*; Thick translation; Cultural transmission

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### INTRODUCTION

As an embodiment of Chinese culture and national image, calligraphy represents one of distinctive arts of China, serving as a powerful vehicle driving Chinese traditional

culture to go abroad. Recently, an increasing number of scholars at home conduct relevant studies on books of calligraphy theories, among which *Shupu* written by Sun Guoting, a highly-reputed calligrapher in Tang dynasty, is a typical representative. Up till now, there have been three English versions of *Shupu*, including Sun Dayu’s version in *A Collection of English Translation of Ancient Chinese Classical Prose*, Frankel and Chang’s co-translated version published by Yale University Press, as well as Pietro’s version from Italian Haider International Books Center. Translation strategies employed in these three versions vary from each other. Sun Dayu mainly adopts domestication method as he seeks to reproduce the prosaic style of the original text, resulting in his translated text abounding in literary skills but failing to represent and spread the essence of original culture. The co-translated version by Frankel and Chang, on the other hand, ignores aesthetic function due to their commitments to deliver entire information of the ST. Nevertheless, the chosen version of this paper grasps the source text’s meaning and elaborates almost all the calligraphy terms and cultural allusions with accurate and in-depth annotations, by means of all thick translation strategies. Until now, most studies are relevant to Sun’s version or Frankel and Chang’s version, while those on Pietro’s are scanty. Therefore, this paper will analyze Pietro’s version from the perspective of thick translation theory, in the respects of explicit and implicit strategies, hoping to offer guidance for the translation of classics on calligraphy theory.

### 1. THICK TRANSLATION THEORY

Thick translation, also known as thick contextualization, originally derives from thick description put forward by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who considers that thick translation can be used in the observation and interpretation of other cultures. On the basis of thick description, Anthony Appiah further proposed the

concept of “thick translation” in his article entitled *Thick Translation*, where he defined it as “translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context” (Appiah, 2000, p.427). All these endeavors will facilitate appropriate understanding and deeper respects for other cultures. As such, Anthony Appiah generalized the means of thick translation, namely, by adding annotations and glossaries the ST is put in diversified cultures and language background, so as to illustrate the hidden information behind the ST and reveal non-literal intentions to the readers. Later, Hermans, a Britain translator, reaffirmed the significance of thick translation in a way of analyzing translation practices of three renowned translators.

At home, the notion of thick translation can be traced back to Tan Zaixi, who is the first to translate the “thick translation” into “Zeng Liang Fan Yi” (增量翻译) in *Dictionary of Translation Studies* (Tan, 2005). Since then, Chinese scholars further developed thick translation through probing into its applications in practical examples. Martha P.Y Cheung (2007) illustrated the significance of four techniques employed in the compiling of a book entitled *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse*, such as adaptation, footnotes, commentaries and transliteration, which enriched the number of its strategies. In the paper *Translation Studies from the Perspective of Cultural Anthropology*, Sun Ningning (2010) held the view that the essence of translation lies in paraphrasing and interpreting, which can be accomplished through annotations and commentaries. Later, enlightened by the paratext theory of Genette, Wang Xueming and Yang Zi (2012) classified thick translation into two categories, namely, the in-text thick translation and thick translation outside the text. Also, they concluded six forms of annotations and their functions in the essay *The Types and Functions of Thick Translation in English Translation of Chinese Classics*. Lan Hongjun (2013) in his paper *Comments on Cheung’s Work New Approaches for Chinese Translation Studies*, clarified the implications of appendix and footnotes which delivered background information to the ST. In the paper *Further Discussion of Theory and Method of Thick Translation*, Huang Xiaofan (2014) argued that the selection of its strategies is related with practical contexts. In another word, except for footnotes and commentaries, the information of the source culture can be explained according to detailed cases. Cao Minglun (2014), in his article *Comments on the Application of Implicit Thick Translation*, discussed the actual application of thick translation means in distinctive texts while pointing out the criterion of annotations. Moreover, he broadens the strategies of thick translation and divides them into explicit and implicit aspects.

This paper will analyze the thick translation strategies in Pietro’s English version of *Shupu* in the respects of

both explicit and implicit ones. Explicit thick translation involves footnotes and bracketing while that of implicit merges supplementary information into the ST with in-text paraphrases and amplification as its means.

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## 2. INTRODUCTION OF SHUPU

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*Shupu*, a book written by a calligraphy theorist Sun Guoting, is not only a facsimile of cursive script for those calligraphy passionate, but also emerges as a calligraphy classic that exerts profound influence on Chinese calligraphic history. Abundant in clear and exhaustive expressions, *Shupu* is one of prose masterpieces with aesthetic function. It involves descriptions on many concepts of rich Chinese culture, such as calligraphy terms, script styles, creation techniques, aesthetics and so on. In this sense, it falls into the informative text type. Apart from extensive quotations of allusions, the author also elaborates his unique insights into calligraphy through exemplifying anecdotes about ancient calligraphers. An inspiring view on calligraphy, contemporary rules should not be violated while learning from ancient sages and vice versa, put forward by Sun Guoting in his works is seen as an underpinning for calligraphy aesthetic theory. Many calligraphy learners still benefit from arguments in this book. Such being the case, *Shupu* is a representative works on calligraphy theory which has gained wide recognition.

*Shupu* is a short book completed in only 3500 characters. Its manuscript believes to be the handwriting in cursive script by Sun Guoting. It is composed of six chapters, including The History of Calligraphy, The Recognition of Script, The Appraisal on the Outstanding Handwriting, The Description of Strokes, and The Exhortations to Calligraphy Learners and The Advises to the Like-minded. Due to its positive implications for Chinese calligraphy and its function as a reference for calligraphy theoretical studies, *Shupu* has acquired extensive attention among the general public.

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## 3. CASE ANALYSIS

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### 3.1 Explicit Translation

Explicit thick translation is defined as an obvious explanatory annotation added to the TT to make the ST understandable when the ST fails to deliver accurate information because of large amounts of words or sentences with diversified cultural intentions. There are two major ways of annotations, including bracketing within the text and footnotes outside the text. It aims to locate the TT in the background of other cultures and merges the hidden information with translator’s intention, reducing the ambiguity and possibility of misunderstanding. The strategies employed in Pietro’s version include footnotes and in-text bracketing.

### 3.1.1 Footnotes

Footnotes are usually put at the bottom of a page to illustrate the background knowledge of other cultures. For explanatory information within the text may destroy the logicity and coherence of reading. Thus, when it comes to the translation of concepts with dense cultures, translator tends to adopt the method of footnotes.

**Example1:**况乃假托神仙，耻崇家范，以斯成学，孰愈面墙。

**English Version:** Wang Xianzhi went still further. When, ashamed to acknowledge that he had acquired the secret of his art through family tradition, he falsely claimed to have received it from immortals. Is perfecting one's study through this any better than facing a wall? (Pietro, 2011, p.44)

**Footnotes:** An allusion to a passage in *Shu Jing*, section 'Zhou Guan': He who does not study is like a man who turns his face to the wall, so that he cannot see anything.

**Analysis:** This sentence means that embracing arrogant attitude toward learning like Wang Xianzhi, a prominent calligrapher who overstates that his excellent ability in calligraphy comes from immortal's instruction, is no better than standing to the wall. The “面墙” of the ST stems from a passage in *The Book of Documents*, with the implication that a person who does not learn political affairs is similar to an illiterate. Once political affairs draw upon, he or she will have no other choices but confusion. Sun Guoting applies this allusion to imply those myopic and magnificent people, emphasizing the importance of a humble learning attitude. So “面墙” here refers to the absence of learning. If the translated text omits the allusion, readers will be confused about the source culture and even misunderstand the original meaning as a result of their discrepant cognitive contexts. Worse still, readers are not able to figure out real implications of the utterance and logical relations between sentences. However, Pietro's version adopts the method of literal translation of “面墙” into “facing a wall”, and then adds footnotes to describe the origin of allusion and its general plots, which contributes to the credibility of annotations. Therefore, footnotes not only discloses the source culture, but also makes readers accessible to cultural deposits of the ST while comprehending its literal meaning.

### 3.1.2 Intext- Bracketing

Intext bracketing means that explanatory information added with brackets is put directly in the text. For the frequent occurrence of history figures in the ST who are unfamiliar to the target readers, Pietro made a brief elaboration on this relation. While translating some calligraphy terms, he even tried to search for its English equivalents according to the context. But for fear of misunderstanding and misreading, translators are responsible to further explain these terms in ways that help readers appreciate the meaning conveyed by the ST.

**Example 2:**且元常专工于隶书，伯英尤精于草体，彼之二美。而逸少兼之。

**English Version:** In fact, [Zhong] Yuanchang was specifically skilled in the clerical writing, and [Zhang] Boying especially excelled in the cursive script. As for their two [distinct] aesthetic splendors, then, [Wang] Yishao compromises both. (Pietro, 2011, p.43)

**Analysis:** The original sentence means that Yuanchang (Zhong You) is adept at regular script and Boying (Zhang Zhi) is excellent in cursive script, while Wang Xizhi performs well in both. Three calligraphers are mentioned in this sentence by their zi: Yuanchang, Boying and Yishao, a courtesy name given to a young man on his coming of ages, which corresponds to their formal names: Zhong You, Zhang Zhi and Wang Xizhi respectively. The ancient China has witnessed the prevalence of surname culture. Except for formal names, calligraphers can also be called with their surnames, courtesy names or official titles. In another word, the same person may appear with several different names. In *Shupu*, Sun Guoting may present the same calligrapher with his surname, courtesy name or official title. For instance, Zhang Zhi is mentioned with his surname Zhang, his courtesy name Boying or his surname coupled with courtesy name Zhang Boying. As such, it is indispensable for translators to cotton on the surname culture and provide more accurate information to the targeted readers. When it comes to the translation of names, Pietro resorts to literal translation together with in-text bracketing, which is considered to be a satisfactory method as it both retains the original forms of names and clarifies relevant figures. Suppose these annotations were neglected, readers would mistake Yuanchang and Boying for other people, and confused at the relations of those calligraphers mentioned. In this regard, the method of in-text bracketing helps retain the distinctive culture of ancient China while corresponds with the TT to readers' expectations.

### 3.2 Implicit Translation

Implicit thick translation requires that supplementary information integrates into the text without any apparent punctuation, making the TT understandable and smooth. Generally, the extended information is expressed in the forms of apposition and prepositional phrases, the purpose of which is to uncover the fundamental meaning to the readers while guaranteeing readability and fluency of the TT. Besides, implicit thick translation effectively avoids the information loss. Though it is a fact that some words may be added or deleted, the original meaning conveyed by the ST remain unchangeable. Instead, the conveyed meaning turns out to be felicitous and clear. The English version of *Shupu* by Pietro mainly employs the strategies of paraphrasing and amplification to achieve the purposes above.

### 3.2.1 Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing refers to those non-literal explanatory information added to the text to elaborate contextual meaning of the ST, through which the TT becomes more closer to the ST. (Caominglun, 2014, p.112) If literal translation coupled with annotations generates a tedious TT, especially in literary translation, paraphrasing believes to be an effective way for compensation.

**Example 3:** 然张精熟，池水尽墨。

**English Version:** Yet, Zhang Zhi was an expert and skilled, and practiced calligraphy to the extent that his pond was full of ink. (Pietro, 2011, p.42)

**Analysis:** The original sentence shows that Zhang Zhi remains committed to practicing cursive scripts with his proficient skills. His pond was once turned into black because he used it so often to wash his brushes. The saying“临池学书，池水尽墨” is quoted to describe the arduous attitude of Zhang Zhi for the pond whereby he washed brush pens turned black. According to *The Four Configurations of Scripts* by Wei Heng in Jin dynasty, Zhang Zhi shows extensive preference to cursive script and the way he practices the calligraphy is different from common people. He practices his art in various cloths which were then dyed and tailored. Further, it is his persistence in practicing calligraphy by the pond that makes the ink-like water. Hence, future generations refer to the calligraphy learning as 临池. As a matter of fact, history does not lack the examples about calligrapher's diligent practices, such as the allusions of “Practicing Calligraphy on Red Leaves” from Zheng Qian in Tang dynasty and “Using Banana Leaves to Practice Calligraphy” from Huai Su. One obstacle of translation lies in clarifying the relation between diligent learning and the black pool. Given that foreigners are acquainted with hard-tipped pens other than brush pens typical of Chinese features, Pietro employs paraphrasing method to thicken the context of the ST. “practiced calligraphy to the extent that” supplemented by Pietro fully uncovers the reason behind the darkening pool and illuminates the contextual implications. Due to the conciseness of the source language, translators must be endowed with a responsibility to convey the original meaning to the readers who are not dedicated to Chinese calligraphy.

### 3.2.2 Amplification

Amplification aims to make the expression more reasonable and logical in a way of adding some contextual information unfamiliar to the readers. As one of techniques in thick translation, amplification is generally used to reduce the misunderstanding resulting from information vacancy, compensating for cultural gap of the TT.

**Example 4:** 违而不犯，和而不同。

**TT:** One should depart from the rules without violating them and harmonize brushstrokes without uniforming them. (Pietro, 2011, pp.59-60)

**Analysis:** This sentence means that many dots or lines recurring at the same time should be written in various forms without violating aesthetic standards. Take the character of *chuan* (川) in Chinese as an example, the three vertical strokes parallel with each other have to be written with different length and inclination. The vision of “harmony in diversity” origins from *The Analects of Confucius* with the meaning that friends should advocate a harmonious relation instead of blind echo. While in calligraphy, it highly summarizes the standards of a convention in art creation. In this sense, another layer of meaning connected with calligraphy theory is added to the philosophical thought. If just translating “和而不同” directly into its literal meaning “harmony in diversity”, readers may confuse about its intention. So it is urgent for translators to amplify the relevant information, revealing the underlying information to the readers from the calligraphy dimension. Pietro's version provides the relevant details to the readers while maintaining the structures of the ST. The authentic meaning is that the recurring strokes in the same character should appear in distinctive forms. In this way, amplification method makes up for the cultural gap in translation.

## CONCLUSION

Pietro's translation of *Shupu* adopts various flexible strategies of thick translation, including footnotes, in-text bracketing, paraphrasing and amplification, to elaborate the relevant concepts in the ST. These proper annotations serve as guidance for the implementation of thick translation strategies. Therefore, thick contextualization is an effective way to reveal cultural information to readers who will in return show due respects and understanding for Chinese culture.

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