
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transmutation, Motivations, and Normative Construction of Transliteration Strategies for Chinese Food Specialties from the Perspective of Cultural Confidence

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ABSTRACT

The English translation of names for Chinese food specialties serves as a critical interface for cross-cultural communication and the development of national soft power. Using “cultural confidence” as a theoretical lens and employing a combined diachronic and synchronic research methodology, this paper systematically examines the phased transmutation of transliteration strategies for Chinese food specialties—moving from “domestication-led” to “hybrid exploration” and finally to the “rise of transliteration.” The study finds that this evolution is not an isolated linguistic phenomenon but a result of the combined forces of national strategic guidance, shifts in social psychology, the revolution in communication media, and the internal laws of linguistics. It marks a shift in China’s external cultural discourse practice from “self-adjustment” to “subjective construction.” The popularization of transliteration strategies is essentially a discourse power practice that anchors Chinese phonetic symbols and their underlying cultural systems directly into the global cognitive landscape. Addressing current issues such as inconsistent standards, over-transliteration, and a lack of interior interpretation, this paper innovatively constructs a “pyramid-style three-level normative model” based on cognitive load and stages of cultural dissemination. Furthermore, it proposes specific implementation plans, such as establishing a dynamic translation database and advocating for multi-modal presentation, aiming to provide theoretical support and practical paths for building an external translation system for Chinese food culture that balances cultural fidelity with communicative effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

Cultural confidence; Chinese food specialties; Transliteration; Transmutation; Normalization; Cross-cultural communication; Translation discourse

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1. Introduction

Culinary culture serves as a vital “edible calling card” for national soft power (Kong, 2015). Historically, Chinese food translation leaned heavily toward “domestication” due to cultural power disparities, leading to “cultural aphasia” where unique connotations were lost—e.g., “Mantou” being reduced to “steamed bread” (Wang Bin, 2010). However, the “cultural confidence” strategy has shifted the translation meta-narrative from reader-centered adaptation to subjective construction (Huang Youyi, 2021), evidenced by the rising global use of transliterations like “Jiaozi” and “Malatang.” While micro-techniques are well-documented, research lacks a macro-diachronic analysis of this transmutation. Consequently, this paper investigates the historical trajectory, multi-dimensional motivations, and normative frameworks of transliteration strategies. By integrating interdisciplinary theories, it reveals the logic of transliteration as a practice of cultural discourse power, providing a hierarchical model for the international promotion of Chinese culture-loaded terms.

2. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Confidence and the Construction of Translation Discourse

"Cultural confidence" constitutes a meta-narrative in translation that transcends mere "information transfer" toward active "meaning sharing" and "cultural manifestation" (Yun Shan, 2010). A critical dialogue with Lawrence Venuti's (1995) theory clarifies this shift: unlike Venuti's "foreignization" which stems from a "resistant" posture against hegemony, China's "cultural confidence" represents a "constructive" posture of a subject culture seeking equal dialogue after rejuvenation. It demands that translation serve as an active constructor of Chinese values rather than a one-dimensional adaptation.

Under this framework, transliteration gains new significance. No longer a "last resort" for culture-specific items (Aixelá, 1996), transliteration based on Hanyu Pinyin asserts the "naming right" of the source culture. Replacing "Steamed Bun" with "Baozi" implants Chinese phonetic symbols as direct cultural signifiers, guiding the audience to perceive objects through the source culture's logic. This shift from "being defined by others" to "naming by oneself" manifests cultural subjectivity and achieves a fundamental transformation of discourse power at the linguistic level.

3. Diachronic Transmutation of Transliteration Strategies for Chinese Food Specialties

The first stage aimed for cultural adaptation and minimal communication; translation served limited cross-cultural contact, often using familiar Western concepts for analogy or description, resulting in significant loss of cultural information. The second stage, accompanying the Reform and Opening-up and deepening international exchange, saw transliteration emerge as a supplementary tool, characterized by a transition where domestication and foreignization strategies were mixed, and Wade-Giles and Hanyu Pinyin coexisted. The third stage followed "cultural confidence" becoming a national strategy, where transliteration rose from a supplementary, marginal strategy to a dominant, explicit one. This shift has formed a resonance across official texts (e.g., national standards, international event menus), commercial practices (high-end catering brands), and mass media (social media platforms), marking a collective consciousness of cultural expression.

4. Multi-dimensional Motivations for the Rise of Transliteration

The contemporary rise of transliteration for Chinese food specialties is the result of multiple driving forces : First:Top-level Drive from National Narratives and Policy Guidance. National strategies such as "Promoting Chinese Culture Globally," "Enhancing National Cultural Soft Power," and the "Belt and Road Initiative" provide clear policy orientation and resource support for cultural subjectivity in translation. For example, the Guidelines for the Use of English in Public Service Areas national standards and the English edition of Chinese Cuisine consciously use transliteration as an important means of preserving cultural characteristics, confirming and promoting it at the institutional level. Second: Internal Shifts in Social Psychology and Cultural Identity. With the rise of China's international status, national cultural pride has significantly increased. Catering practitioners, media professionals, and the general public no longer view the retention of original names as a "communication barrier"; instead, they see it as a mark of cultural authenticity and uniqueness. This shift in social psychology—from "cultural inferiority" to "cultural consciousness" and finally to "cultural confidence"—is the social soil in which transliteration strategies are widely accepted and actively applied. Third:Revolution in Communication Media and Evolution of Audience Perception.The rise of digital media, especially visual and social platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, TikTok), has radically changed the path of cultural dissemination. On these platforms, concrete videos and images combined with short transliterated hashtags greatly reduce the reliance on lengthy textual explanations. For instance, under the "Malatang" hashtag, users understand the food through intuitive cooking processes and finished product displays; the transliterated word "Malatang" itself becomes an easily remembered and shared cultural symbol. Simultaneously, globalization has fostered "cosmopolitan diners" who are open to and even interested in learning about foreign cultures; they are more willing to accept and try authentic names.Last: Realistic Logic of Linguistics and Brand Economics. From a linguistic perspective, high-frequency culture-specific items entering the target language vocabulary through phonetic borrowing is a universal law of language contact (e.g., "sushi" from Japanese, "croissant" from French). From a branding and economic perspective, a unique and distinct transliterated name (such as "Heytea" for "Xicha") is more conducive to building brand equity, protecting intellectual property, and establishing competitive differentiation, prompting market entities to actively choose and reinforce transliteration strategies.

5. Current Problems and the Construction of a Normative Path

Despite the momentum of transliteration, challenges persist: (1) inconsistent standards (e.g., doufu vs. tofu); (2) over-transliteration causing cognitive overload; and (3) a cultural "vacuum" lacking essential context. To address these, this paper proposes a "Pyramid-style Three-level Normative Model" balancing cultural fidelity with cognitive accessibility: Core Layer (High Recognition): Use direct transliteration (e.g., Jiaozi, Goji Berry) to consolidate their status as established proper nouns. Middle Layer (Cognitive Construction): Adopt a hybrid "Transliteration + Description" mode (e.g., Malatang [Spicy Hot Pot]) to balance cultural heterogeneity with comprehensibility. Peripheral Layer (High Cultural Load): Utilize creative or descriptive translation with transliteration in parentheses (e.g., Buddha Jumps Over the Wall [Fotiaoqiang]) to stimulate interest without sacrificing clarity.

To support this model, two recommendations are proposed: First, establish a "Dynamic Database of Chinese Culinary Culture Keywords" led by authoritative bodies to provide standardized translations and cultural annotations. Second, formulate

"Guidelines for Multi-modal Presentation" for catering, advocating for a "Transliteration + Poetic Description + Visuals" model to achieve multidimensional cultural delivery.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

This study demonstrates that under the "cultural confidence" narrative, the English translation of Chinese food has shifted from a "technical means" to a "discursive practice" manifesting cultural subjectivity. Driven by national strategy, social psychology, and media evolution, this transmutation reflects China's identity shift from "passive adaptation" to "active construction." The global circulation of terms like "Jiaozi" and "Malatang" exemplifies the successful output of "speakable" cultural symbols. The "Pyramid-style Three-level Normative Model" provides a flexible framework for translation, advocating for strategic cultural confidence balanced with audience perception. True confidence involves not only "speaking our own words" but ensuring they are understood and appreciated.

Future research should utilize digital humanities for big data analysis of global menus to map the effectiveness of transliteration strategies, and conduct longitudinal studies on the evolution of normative translations (e.g., "Gongbao" vs. "Kung Pao"). Such research will ensure that the external communication of Chinese culinary culture becomes a more effective bridge between China and the world.

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