
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study of English Translation of Chinese Ceramic Cultural terms: A corpus-based approach

Junyu Lu¹ and Guoping Wang²

^{1,2}*School of International Culture and Communication, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen, China*

Corresponding Author: Junyu Lu, **E-mail:** 1405827447@qq.com

| ABSTRACT

This article employed self-building corpus to explore the strategies and methods of translating Chinese ceramic cultural terms. Firstly, the translator rendered the Chinese ceramic terms preferably into their literal or conceptual equivalents in English, during which the methods of literal translation, transliteration and free translation were utilized. However, the English translations of Chinese ceramic terms were also diversified and suffered from deviations from source-target equivalence for both intralinguistic and interlinguistic reasons. The intralinguistic reasons include polysemy of Chinese Ceramic terms and terminological variations in Chinese ceramic texts, and the interlinguistic reasons include different cohesive patterns between English and Chinese and determinologization as result of the adaptation of the target audience from experts for the source text to laymen for its English translation. These intralinguistic and interlinguistic reasons accounts for the methods adopted by the translator in English translation of Chinese ceramic terms including the zero translations of Chinese ceramic terms and explanations of Chinese ceramic terms with general language in English.

| KEYWORDS

Chinese ceramic cultural terms; translation; corpus-based approach

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 30 April 2026

PUBLISHED: 06 May 2026

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2026.5.1.7

1. Introduction

The English translation of Chinese ceramic cultural terms was discussed from the very beginning in the translator's notes in the English translations of Chinese ceramic classics by English scholars (e.g. Bushell, 1910, p.vii-xx), and it has drawn wide attentions in recent years among Chinese scholars (e.g. Lu Junyu, 2016, p105-109). However, all of the studies are mostly theory-driven and based on a limited number of cases. This research aims to explore the strategies and methods of translating Chinese porcelain terms by employing self-building corpus, and hopefully sheds new light in this field.

2. Related work

Bushell (1910, p.vii-xx) distinguished between the notions of porcelain and ceramic in the translator's notes of English translation of Tao Shuo, which would be among the earliest discussions of English translation of Chinese ceramic terms. Later, Sayer (1951, p.xvi-xvii) discussed the translation of “青” and terms of Chinese Weights and Measures. In recent years, the discussions of translation of Chinese ceramic terms has been diversified among Chinese scholars. Lu Junyu (2016, p105-109) had a detailed analysis of translation of the pivotal Chinese ceramic notion “青” in Chinese ceramic classics. Ou Bingfei (2018, p87-90) discussed the translation of Chinese ceramic cultural terms from the perspective of conceptual construction. The translation of Chinese ceramic terms has been also elaborated from the angel of cultural construction and dissemination (e.g. Feng Huiyi & Xu Mingwu, 2023, p86-92). All these studies have provided enlightening rational understandings of translation of Chinese ceramic cultural terms which are, however, to be testified by quantitative research.

3. Resources

3.1 Corpora

Two types of corpora were built for this study: monolingual corpora of Chinese (the source text) and English (the target text); parallel corpus of the above-mentioned texts aligned on sentential basis. The Chinese source text is excerpted from *The History of Chinese Ceramics* (《中国陶瓷史》) written by Fang Lili (2013), a renowned scholar from Chinese National Academy of Arts specialized in Ceramic art anthropology, and the target text from its English translation (Fang Lili 2023) which is products of the project sponsored by Chinese Fund for the Humanities and Social Sciences and published by Springer, one of the worldwide-renowned academic publishers. The two texts are totaled in 364,426 tokens (224919 Chinese tokens and 139507 English tokens).

3.2 Research tools

The corpus tools utilized in this study include CorpusWordParser, WordSmith Tools 9.0, ABBYY Aligner, and ParaConc. The Chinese source text was tokenized using CorpusWordParser before it was performed with wordlist program of WordSmith Tools. The parallel corpora are aligned on the sentential basis using ABBYY Aligner and searched in ParaConc for investigating the translation methods of the ceramic terms.

4. Methodology

The current research aims to explore the English translation methods of Chinese ceramic cultural terms employing the self-building corpora. Therefore, the following steps were followed.

Step 1: Preparing for the texts: The two texts are available in PDF which have to be converted first into .docx format, then into .txt format in WPS office. The text conversion for the first step was to remove graphs, tables, pictures, footnotes, and other linguistic noises, during which several “searching” and “replacing” actions with regular expressions were applied. For instance, some of the spaces following the punctuation marks were missing after PDF texts were converted into .docx texts in English, and, to add all the necessary spaces efficiently, the regular expression “[.,;!?])([a-zA-Z])” and “\1 \2” were inputted in the search box and the replacement box respectively, and were then executed. After the .docx texts were thoroughly cleaned, they were saved in the .txt format within WPS office.

Step 2: Tokenising the Chinese texts: Unlike the English texts which naturally distinguishes word units by space, the Chinese texts had to be segmented in words by using CorpusWordParser before they were loaded on WordSmith Tools. To ensure tokenising the Chinese texts more accurately, CorpusWordParser was loaded the UserWordList in which 2038 Chinese ceramic terms from *Jianming Taoci Cidian* (Wang Qingzheng, 1989) were listed before word segmentation was performed.

Step 3: Aligning the Chinese source texts and the English target texts: The Chinese source texts and the English target texts were loaded on ABBYY Aligner to produce the aligned parallel corpus files during which the two types of texts were automatically aligned and manually adjusted. The aligned parallel corpus files were exported in TMX format which were converted into the plain text format before being loaded on ParaConc in the next step.

Step 4: Loading the corpus files on WordSmith Tools and ParaConc: The tokenised Chinese texts were loaded on the WordList program of WordSmith Tools during which the frequency function was used to select the top 8 ceramic terms ranked highest frequency (see table 1). The aligned parallel corpus files were loaded on ParaConc and 8 ceramic terms selected above were searched to investigate their translation methods (see table 2).

Table 1 The top 8 ceramic terms ranked highest in the Frequency Word List

N	Word	Frequency	Percent	Texts	Text%	Dispersion
1	青花（瓷）	806	0.63	1	100	0.70
2	民窑	348	0.27	1	100	0.63
3	官窑	217	0.17	1	100	0.58
4	五彩	155	0.12	1	100	0.69
5	纹饰	149	0.12	1	100	0.72
6	粉彩	136	0.11	1	100	0.41
7	造型	105	0.08	1	100	0.72
8	外销瓷	91	0.07	1	100	0.72

It is worth noting that the frequency ranked list displayed in table 1 was rearranged after the words of non-ceramic notions such as functional words and words for general use were removed from the Frequency Word List.

Table 2 The statistics of English translation of the 8 ceramic terms

The Chinese source texts		The English target texts		
Chinese terms	Frequency*	English translations	Frequency	%
青花（瓷）	807	blue and white (porcelain)	546	67.66
		blue	69	8.55
		others	192	23.79
民窑	384	private kiln(s)	320	83.33
		others	64	16.67
官窑	248	official kiln(s)	215	86.69
		others	33	13.31
五彩	170	wucai	152	89.41
		others	18	10.59
纹饰	150	pattern(s)	51	34.00
		decoration(s)	47	31.33
		motif(s)	46	30.67
		others	6	4.00
粉彩	136	famille-rose	118	86.76
		others	18	13.24
造型	99	design(s)	59	59.60
		shape(s)	18	18.18
		others	22	22.22
外销瓷	91	(Chinese) export porcelain	37	40.66
		export(s) /exported	33	36.26
		others	21	23.08

* Some frequency numbers in Table 2 are different from those in Table 1 due to the different corpus files processed respectively.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Equivalent Terms in English for Chinese Ceramic Terms

Cabré (2010, p359) proposed that, facing terminological problems, what a translator should do first is not to find a strategy to ensure equivalence, but to find an equivalent term. In other words, the optimal practice for terminological translation is to find the equivalent terms between the source language and the target language. León Araúz & Cabezas García (2020, p210-247) distinguished the understandings of equivalence among terminologists and translators: terminologists usually understand equivalence at the term level, while translators look for correspondence at the sentence or text level. In other words, terminologists look for direct (literal) equivalents in the interlingual contexts, while translators highlight functional equivalence and bring the translation variation reflecting different conceptualizations under the discussion of equivalence. In this study, equivalence is postulated in between, and, therefore, the equivalent terms include the following two situations: one is that the source terms are rendered into the direct (literal) equivalents in the target language just as the view held by terminologists (hereinafter referred to as “literal equivalent”); the other is that the source terms are rendered into the functional equivalents which denote the same concept in the target language (hereinafter referred to as “conceptual equivalent”). The literal equivalents are usually produced by the translation method of literal translation and are, therefore, easily identified. The conceptual equivalents are not literally transparent and are identified with help of terminographic resources such as terminological databases, glossaries and dictionaries in which terminological concepts are defined.

As shown in table 2, most cases among 6 out of 8 Chinese ceramic terms are translated into their English equivalent terms which can be grouped into two types of equivalents. Over 80 percent of “民窑” and “官窑” are literally translated into private kiln(s) (83.33%) and official kiln(s) (86.69%) respectively which are literal equivalents with the source terms. 40.66 percent of “外销瓷” in the corpus is rendered into their literal equivalents, namely, (Chinese) export porcelain. Majority of “青花(瓷)” (67.66%), “五彩” (89.41%) and “粉彩” (86.76%) are translated into their conceptual equivalents in English. They are blue and white (porcelain), wucai and famille rose respectively which are included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with their definitions consistent with their Chinese counterparts. Their definitions are listed as follows:

Blue and white: marked with or characterized by a pattern of blue intermixed with white; spec. designating a type of (originally Chinese) porcelain decorated in this way.

Wucai: (also Wu ts'ai) polychrome; polychrome decoration in enamels applied to porcelain; porcelain with polychrome decoration esp. of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Famille rose: (also called fencai or ruancai) (A type of) Chinese porcelain, chiefly of the 18th and 19th centuries, decorated in coloured overglaze enamels, of which the predominant colour is rose-pink; also: the enamel or colour typical of such porcelain.

As can be seen from the definitions, these English terms are conceptually equivalent with their Chinese counterparts. Besides, the literal equivalent of 外销瓷, (Chinese) export porcelain, is, not as an entry though, also included in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The above-mentioned English ceramic terms included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are evidently widely accepted among English readers and, therefore, are preferably chosen by the translator.

As also shown in table 2, the English translations of the eight Chinese ceramic terms are diversified and suffer from deviation from source-target equivalence. Li (2023, p355-356) discussed the relationship between (term) variation and deviation in the interlingual contexts and proposed that the study of deviation would be more concerned with the source-target relationship in translation than that of variation. Terminological deviations in Chinese ceramic translation occur for four main reasons which will be discussed in the next section.

5.2 Terminological Deviations in English translations of Chinese Ceramic Terms

5.2.1 Polysemy of Chinese Ceramic terms

One of major reasons for the diversity of the English translations for Chinese ceramic terms results from the polysemy of the terms. Terminological deviations caused by polysemy of the terms reflects the different conceptualizations and modulation of the same concept (León-Araúz & Cabezas-García, 2020, p236). “青花(瓷)”, for instance, has two uses in Chinese ceramic texts. One usually appears as head of a construction designating a type of porcelain characterized by a pattern of blue intermixed with white as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and can be translated with its equivalent “blue and white (porcelain)”. The other generally appears as modifier of a construction highlighting the blue decoration on the white ground of the porcelain, which is, as a term, not fully recognized by the English world as reflected in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The latter meaning of “青花” is translated into *blue* as in the phrases of “cobalt blue materials” (for “青花料”) and “blue color and bright glaze” (for “青花和颜色釉”). 8.55 percent of qing hua in the corpus is translated in this way.

5.2.2 Terminological Variations in Chinese Ceramic Texts

Many studies demonstrate that terminological variations in the source text are reflected in the target text. Fernández-Silva & Kerremans (2011) affirmed that source language terminological variants in Galician are reflected in the English terminological translations. By means of quantitative and qualitative comparisons of term variants and their translations in a parallel corpus of EU texts, Kerremans and Temmerman (2016) verified that terminological variation in English source texts is also reflected in the French and Dutch translations.

Among the eight Chinese ceramic terms, the terminological deviation of “纹饰” and “造型” in English can be explained by their terminological variations in Chinese. “纹饰” in the Chinese source text has such variants as “纹样”, “花纹” and “纹” which are synonyms with “纹饰” in certain contexts. This indicates that “纹饰” is, as a term, standardized at low level and its meaning is easily modulated by the contexts. Therefore, no terminological equivalents are found for “纹饰” in English and its English translations are evenly diversified into three variants: pattern(s) (34%), decoration(s) (31.33%) and motif(s) (30.67%). The meaning of the three variants is closely related—decoration(s) is the hypernym of pattern(s) and motif(s), and they are used in different situations: pattern(s) or motif(s) often co-occurs with decoration(s) or its synonym in one sentence, and, otherwise, decoration(s) is employed. Typical examples are as follows:

Example 1

TT: Clouds are one of the most ancient and most common decorations among the traditional patterns.

Example 2

TT: In the 1720s, Horoldt developed new varieties of glaze, techniques and decorations, including Chinese portraits.

In example 1, patterns, the English translation of “纹饰”, co-occurs with its hypernym decorations while “纹饰” is rendered into decorations in example 2 where the context of decoration is absent. Similarly, the terminological variants of “造型” include “形制”, “形状”, etc. in the Chinese source text and this is reflected in the English target text: its English translations are also diversified into design(s) (59.6%) and shape(s) (18.18%).

5.2.3 Different cohesive patterns between English and Chinese

Kerremans and Temmerman (2016: 60) found that differences in cohesive patterns between different languages greatly contribute to the terminological deviations between the source and target texts. It’s widely acknowledged that the repetition of key words plays a major role in the co-referential chains of Chinese discourse while the cohesive devices of English discourse

mainly includes substitution, omission and conversion. Owing to the great difference in terms of cohesive patterns between Chinese and English, a translator has to employ the method of omission in Chinese-English translation. Omission, as a translation strategy accounting for the terminological deviations, is widely discussed in the previous studies, but most of them were conducted in a context between cognate languages. León-Araúz & Cabezas-García (2020: 230) classified omissions into two types in the context of English-Spanish translation: omission of articles and omission of formants. As for the translation from Chinese into English, omissions usually occurs in the form of zero translation (Li, 2023: 361): omission of the whole term in the English target texts.

Omissions account for a considerable percentage of the terminological deviations in the translation of Chinese ceramic terms into English. For instance, 7.19 percent (85 cases) of qing hua in the Chinese source text are omitted in the English target text, which can be categorized into three situations:

I. Subject of a sentence

-e.g. While blue and white porcelain failed to gain favor with the Yuan rulers, it was appreciated by the Ming emperors and so ϕ became the major product of both the official and private kilns.

II. Head of a modifier + head construction

-e.g. Apart from blue and white porcelain and wucai ware, other varieties in this period included red and green ware, doucai ware (mostly imitating the Chenghua period), red glazed blue and white porcelain, and yellow glazed ϕ porcelain.

III. Modifier of a modifier + head construction

-e.g. Production of ϕ doucai ware in the Xuande period also paved the way for its boom in the later Chenghua period (1465-1487).

(Notes: ϕ stands for the omitted term.)

In the examples illustrated above, "blue and white"(青花) functioned as subject of a sentence or head/modifier of a construction can be omitted in the Chinese-English ceramic translation.

5.2.4 Determinologization

Determinologization is, as Montalt Resurrecció and Shuttleworth (2012: 16) put it, a process of recontextualisation and reformulation of specialized terms. To be more specific, it involves using general language to convey the meaning of terms, making the concept they designate intelligible to lay audiences. Determinologization occurs in either intralingual translation or interlingual translation. A translator may perform both interlingual and intralingual translation simultaneously when he is given an expert-to-expert text but asked to produce a layman's version in the target language. The source text under discussion is highly technical aiming at expert audiences, but its English translation, as a product of the project sponsored by Chinese Fund for the Humanities and Social Sciences, is targeted at the general audiences who are interested in Chinese ceramic culture. Therefore, the translator frequently reformulate the terms with general language. A typical example is the translations of "外销瓷". To cater to the need of general audience, the translator employed a number of ways to reformulate the term according to the contexts.

Table 3 The Major Ways of Determinologization in the English Translation of "外销瓷"

Chinese Term	Ways of Determinologization in TT	Frequency/%	Examples
外销瓷	export (wares/varieties,etc.)	14/15.39	Peony along with twining lotus was a motif frequently seen on <i>export</i> wares in the 1630s and 1640s.
	exports	12/13.19	Most of the <i>exports</i> at that time were blue and white porcelain.
	exported	7/7.69	Some <i>exported</i> products were decorated with Latin inscriptions.
	foreign (style, trade, ect.)	5/5.49	Zhangzhou porcelain on one hand featured a <i>foreign</i> style and on the other hand, imitated Jingdezhen porcelain.
Total	—	38/41.76	—

As shown in Table 3, the translator replaced in the target text the term with explanations of four major ways, whose total frequency is 38 of 91 cases (41.76%). Three of four explanation patterns are constructed around *export* which is used either as a

noun (e.g. export wares, exports, etc.) or as a verb (e.g. exported products, were mainly exported to Japan, etc.), and one around *foreign* (e.g. foreign style, etc.).

6. Conclusion

This article employed self-building corpus to explore the strategies and methods of translating Chinese ceramic cultural terms. Firstly, the translator rendered the Chinese ceramic terms preferably into their literal or conceptual equivalents in English, during which the methods of literal translation (e.g. for “民窑”), transliteration (e.g. for “五彩”) and free translation (e.g. for “粉彩”) were utilized. However, the English translations of Chinese ceramic terms were also diversified and suffered from deviation from source-target equivalence for both intralinguistic and interlinguistic reasons. The intralinguistic reasons include polysemy of Chinese Ceramic terms and terminological variations in Chinese ceramic texts, and the interlinguistic reasons include different cohesive patterns between English and Chinese and determinologization as result of the adaptation of the target audience from experts for the source text to laymen for its English translation. These intralinguistic and interlinguistic reasons accounts for the methods adopted by the translator in English translation of Chinese ceramic terms including the zero translations of Chinese ceramic terms and explanations of Chinese ceramic terms with general language in English.

Funding: This research was funded by Jiangxi Social Science Fund Project entitled “The Corpus-based Research on the English Translation of Chinese Ceramic Cultural Terms”(No. 21YY15) and Jingdezhen Social Science Fund Project entitled “Research on the Non-Native Language Writing and the English Translation Accommodation of Chinese Ceramic Cultural Terminologies” (No. 2023005).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher’s Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Bushell, S. W. (1910). *Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain: Being a Translation of the T'ao Shuo*. Clarendon Press.
- [2] Cabré, M. T. (2010). Terminology and translation. In Y. Gambier & L. van Doorslaer (Eds.), *Handbook of Translation Studies* (Vol. 1, pp. 356-365). John Benjamins.
- [3] Fang, L. (2013). *History of Chinese Ceramics*. Shandong Qilu Press Co., Ltd.
- [4] Fang, L. (2023). *The History of Chinese Ceramics* (L. Ma, Trans.). Foreign Language Teaching and Research Publishing Co., Ltd/Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
- [5] Fernández-Silva, S., & Kerremans, K. (2011). Terminological variation in source texts and translations: A pilot study. *Meta*, 56(2), 318-335.
- [6] Feng, H., & Xu, M. (2023). Cultural construction and dissemination in the C-E translation of ceramic classics: With special reference to Tao Shuo. *Foreign Language Education*, 44(3), 86-92.
- [7] Kerremans, K., & Temmerman, R. (2016). How terminological equivalence differs from translation equivalence: Quantitative and qualitative comparisons of term variants and their translations in a parallel corpus of EU texts. In G. Corpas Pastor & M. Seghiri (Eds.), *Corpus-based Approaches to Translation and Interpreting: From theory to Applications* (pp. 43-63). Peter Lang.
- [8] León-Araúz, P., & Cabezas-García, M. (2020). Term and translation variation of multiword terms. *MonTI* (Special Issue 6), 210-247.
- [9] Li, B. (2023). Conceptual deviation in terminology translation: A case study on translating COVID-19 terminology in multilingual news media. *Terminology*, 29(2), 351-382.
- [10] Lu, J. (2016). The source and development of qing in Chinese ceramic classics and its translation in English. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 37(4), 105-109.
- [11] Montalt Resurrecció, V. & Shuttleworth, M. (2012). Translation and knowledge mediation in medical and health settings. *Linguistica Antverpiensia New Series -Themes in Translation Studies*, 11, 95-112.
- [12] Ou, B. (2018). The translation of Chinese ceramic cultural terms: A concept construction approach. *Journal of Yangtze University* (Social Science), 41(6), 87-90.
- [13] Sayer, G. (Ed. & Trans.). (1951). *Ching-te-chen T'ao-lu, or The Potteries of China*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- [14] Wang, Q. (1989). *Jianming Taoci Cidian*. Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House.