

Chinese-English Translation of Chinese Dish Names From the Perspective of Cultural Differences

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Abstract

As an important aspect of international cultural exchange, the exchange of food and cuisine culture between China and the West is related to people's ordinary life. The wonderful Chinese cuisine has been attracting more and more foreigners, so as the names of dishes which reflect Chinese cuisine culture. There are still some serious problems according to the previous studies at present. The author first summarized the definitions of language, culture, translation, and the interrelation between them. Next, the author made a detailed comparison between Chinese and Western dietary culture, then classified the Chinese dish names into descriptive dish names, image-telling dish names and newly-invented dish names according to their naming styles. The author hopes that through the study of this paper, more and more attention will be paid to the Chinese and Western cultural differences and the translation of Chinese dish names, to make an effort to standardize and unify the English translation of Chinese dish names and to spread Chinese dietetic culture throughout the world in a better way.

Key words: Cultural differences; Cuisine culture; Chinese dish names translation; Intercultural translation

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INTRODUCTION

With the development of globalization in trade and economy, cultural exchanges among different countries have been accelerated and become more frequent. Against this context, an increasing number of foreign friends come in China for work, study, and tour. China is known for its long cuisine history and the unique foods with local flavors. As an indispensable part of Chinese culture, Chinese culinary culture is seen as a marvelous creation in foreigners' eyes. In addition to the delicious tastes, friends from alien cultures are usually fascinated by Chinese food designs, forms and looks.

Among the various dish names, we could find that the dish names containing cooking methods are very common. One of characteristics of Chinese dish names is the abundant cooking methods, for Chinese people are accustomed to eating cooked food and hot foods. When tasting Chinese foods, most of people from foreign cultures are extremely eager to learn the precise meanings and cultural connotations or backgrounds hidden in the dish names. Therefore, it is crucial to translate Chinese dish names appropriately, which will help foreigners enjoy Chinese foods better. Research Purpose and Significance Food name translation in itself is an intercultural communication activity with the purpose of both conveying physical contents and spreading Chinese dietary culture worldwide. The successful hosting of 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and 2010 Shanghai World Exposition provides China with precious opportunities for exhibiting Chinese diet culture and promoting intercultural dialogue. Cultural elements implied in dish names embody their cultural backgrounds and connotations, which exert an influence on spread of Chinese dietary culture.

1. CHINESE CUISINE CULTURE AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN CUISINE CULTURE

1.1 Cultural Background Information of Chinese Dish Names

Chinese dish names are important sources to understand Chinese culture, which are loaded with abundant cultural background information.

1.1.1 Names Related with Folk Festival and Religion

Dumplings and Spring Festival are closely related since Ming and Qing Dynasty. According to historical record, “饺子” and “交子” are homophonic. In the lunar calendar, the period of the day from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. is called “Zi shi”, which is just the period spanning over the old year and the new year, and it is also called “交子” when we eat dumplings so as to bid farewell to the old year and welcome the new year. “饺子” has become a symbolic word wishing for good luck and big fortune as well as an important part of traditional Chinese food culture (Hornby, 2004). Eating “腊八粥” on the Laba Festival, which falls on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month is a very old tradition. Eight ingredients are used in this porridge, such as glutinous rice, red beans, millet, Chinese sorghum, peas, dried lotus seeds, red beans, etc.. “腊八粥” is also known as “Buddha porridge”, in commemoration of Sakya muni Buddha’s enlightenment on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month. Nowadays, “腊八粥” serves as a symbol of good fortune, long life, and fruitful harvest (Bender, 2005).

1.1.2 Names of Distinct Regional Features

China is a multinational country with a vast land of a lot of regional areas, and each regional area is featured by its own distinct climate, dialect, customs, etc., which are the source of different food culture. According to regional differences, Chinese cuisine can be generally divided into four categories, which vary from north to south, and can be summarized as “sweet in the south, salty in the north, sour in the west, and spicy in the east (Katan, 2004).” As language is the carrier of culture, a particular local dish name reflects the cuisine culture of a particular region and can be characterized by the appearance of certain regional mark. For instance, the dish names “文昌鸡”(a famous traditional dish of Wenchang county in Hainan Province), “洞庭金龟”(Dongting Lake in Hunan Province is abound in Jingui), in which certain specific regional names appear for its distinct products and customs. Another case is that certain general regional name appears in the dish names for its distinct regional features. Such kind of dish name could tell the origin of a certain dish and its unique style. For example, “川北风味虾”, “潮汕鱼丸”, “金陵烤鸭”, “西湖醋鱼”. And some dishes are named in different ways in different regions. For example, “长吻蛙鱼” has several names as

an ingredient. It is called “江团” in Sichuan, “鮰鱼” in Jiangsu, “肥土鱼” in Anhui, “白吉”, “蓝鱼” in other regions. “馄饨” is a common naming way in most places of China, while in Sichuan and Tianjin they are call as “抄手” and “云吞” respectively. In addition, regional climate and environment are also the causes of their special dish names. For example, Guangdong and its neighboring regions, featured by its ocean climate, are abundant in aquatic resources. Therefore the dishes of these are as are mostly seafood. Some typical dishes like “水晶龙虾”, “红焖海参”, “白灼大海螺”, “橙汁鳗鱼”. While in the northern region where continental food culture is popular, meat is the major ingredient. Typical dishes are “北京烤鸭”, “涮羊肉”, “烤全羊”, “带把肘子” and “五香卤驴肉”.

1.2 Differences in Dietary Concept

1.2.1 “Eating All” and Pragmatism

Since ancient time, Chinese people have looked eating as a very important thing. Philosopher Gao has said, “Appetite for food and sex is nature.”(食色, 性也。) We can also find “Dining and intercourse between male and female are the most basic and important requirement”(饮食男女, 人之大欲存焉) in “Liji, liyun”《礼记·礼运》. In China, the important place of dining reflect in many aspects of people’s daily life, and one of these aspects is people like to say “Have you eaten?”, When they meet others. We have a common saying, “When the door is opened, there will be seven things we have to deal with, and that is fuel, rice, oil, salt, sauce, vinegar, and tea (Longman House, 1997)”. Everything could not be separated with eating. Chinese people like eating and dare eating. From the animals flying in the sky to the animals swimming in the water, Chinese people could take anything as food if only it was a substance with life.

A lot of things which is impossible to eat in foreigners’ eyes could become delicious food in Chinese chef’s hands. Mr. Lin Yutang said in “My country and My People”: Depending on the special mouths and teeth, our Chinese people have eaten the whole biosphere, from trees to lands, from vegetables to animals, and from ants to elephants, etc. The “eating all” of Chinese people also reflects in “eating all time” and “eating for all things”. We eat Jiao zi in the Spring Festival (the 1st day of the 1st lunar month), yuan xiao in the lantern Festival (the 15th day of the 1st lunar month), zong zi in the Dragon Boat Festival (the 5th day of the 5th lunar month) and moon cake in the Mid-autumn Festival (15th day of the 8th lunar month).

1.2.2 Taste Orientation vs Nutrition Orientation

Eating is a natural activity in the first place, and its original function is to maintain life, but the development of eating itself changed its function. The differences between western countries and china gradually emerged. The difference is that Chinese people care about the taste

of the food, while the people in western countries care about the nutrition of food. Long time ago, Chinese people have already taken the taste of food as a very important thing, and we have a common saying—the masses regard food as their heaven; the taste of food is the most important thing”. Chinese people think highly of the taste of foods. If only the food taste delicious, they will not care the nutritive value. Entertaining guests, the host usually ask: “ Is the dish to your taste? The host will never ask: Is the nutritive value of the dish high?” Chinese people think highly of taste reflected both in eating and in the aspect of aesthetics. Chinese character “美” (beautiful) is composed of “羊” (Sheep) and “大” (big) . “羊” and “大” are “美”. That means Chinese people’s concept of beauty come from the sense of taste. Taste is not only belongs to the field of Chinese aesthetics, but also combined with many other things, e.g, “韵味”、“回味”、“趣味”etc. All of these words could be used in expressing material foods and spiritual food, but the emergence of these words could be separated from material foods. Just because Chinese people are very particular about the foods’ taste, Chinese cooking skills is very developed.

The next five aspects could prove this point. The first is to select excellent materials. The materials selected must be considered strains, sources, season, producing period, etc. The standard of selecting is fresh, live, fat and tender, but all of these are not the real “be particular”. The real “particular” refers to “the unique source of raw material”, e.g., “the beef dishes cooked in Beijing must use the SanHe Cattle in Inner Mongolia. XinJiang Cattle will not do, and Scottish cattle in Great Britain will not do. Only the beef of SanHe Cattle could be called particular.” Moreover, many famous dishes’ garnish, subsidiary materials and condiment are all selected from special area in order to ensure the special flavor. The second is cutting and slicing skill is meticulous. Cutting and slicing is an important link in dish making, for it decide whether the dish could be even heated and tasty or not, and at the same time, keep the dish in good shape. Through using different kitchen knife skill, the materials could be cut or sliced into the shape of cubes, slices, shreds, slip, small cubes, etc. Furthermore, the materials could be carved into many kinds of patterns and figures in order to add aesthetic feeling of the dish. The third is be particular about the heat control which refers to the time of heating and the strength of the firepower. The strength of the firepower could be divided into roaring fire, fast fire, slow fire, middle fire, small fire, etc. For those dishes which are difficult to be tasty, we usually use slow fire or small fire, which could help materials to absorb the soup. Different firepower could bring about different texture, e.g., crisp, fragile, tender, mashed, etc.

All in all, under the influence of pragmatism, westerners will not consider the taste of food. Diet is

just a means of maintaining healthy for them, so their attitude towards eating is careless and the food they eat is comparatively simple. Enjoyment is not the main purpose of eating, and they will not place eating at a very important position.

1.3 The Differences Between Chinese and Western Cooking Approach

Chinese people have the thinking style of “heaven and man are united into one,” which refers to man as the subject and “Heaven” as the object are united as a whole. This concept also reflects in dietary culture, emphasize that human beings have a kind of whole, harmonious and organic connection with nature. Chinese dish cooking attach importance to Harmony, and are used to cooking different materials together. In the unity and neutralization, different kinds of materials attain the effect of an integral whole. In “My country and my people”, Mr. Lin Yutang said, “Chinese cooking skill mainly rely on the blending skills of many kinds of flavors. Chinese people believe many foods should be cooked by their original juice, but all in all, they blend many kinds of flavors together. Westerners cannot do this. The cooking process of Chinese dishes also reflects the harmonious ideology. The cooking process of every dish usually has more than two steps, e.g., first fry and then boil, or first dip the material into boiling water and then saut. Finally, the dishes become crisp, soft and smooth, tasty etc. Chinese people call “cooking dishes” as “烹调”, that is to say, they unit “烹” and “调” into one all through the ages. One point deserves our attention is that Chinese diet not only pay attention to the harmony of flavor, but also attach importance to harmony of color, shape and quality. The harmony of color is realized by making use of food’s natural colors, matching different food’s colors, and polishing colors through condiments. The harmony of shapes is achieved by cutting and slicing skills, arrangement of table wears, modeling skills; The harmony of quality is realized by cooking skills and heat control. The function of garnishes in western food is nutrition and color match, e.g., meat is matched with vegetables, red tomatoes or yellow lemon which could add the sense of beauty and stimulate the appetite. In addition, garnishes could regulate the taste, e.g., matching deep-fried squid circle with salad sauce and matching salmon with lemon quarter could neutralize the fatty sense of dishes, but this kind of matching is only coordination, but not in harmonious proportion. Only a small number of soups are cooked by different kinds of materials in one pot of porridge. In the regular dishes, different materials are separated from each other. The genuine western food is like this: a beef-steak matched with some potatoes, slices of tomatoes, some lettuce, etc. They are arranged in one plate, but they are not disturbed by each other which embody strong individual character. This conforms to western culture which lay stress on oneself and individual character.

CONCLUSION

Chinese dish names usually have abundant implications and varied styles which reflect the extensive and profound dietary culture of China, and they are also the important way through which foreigners understand Chinese culture. How to translate Chinese dish names exactly and properly is a problem deserves our research. Although Chinese and foreign scholars have done some research in this field, the translation of Chinese dish names are in disordered condition, for so many baffling Chinese-English dish names appeared on the menu. The paper starts with the differences of Chinese and western dietary culture, and through the discussion of the relationship among language, culture and translation, analyzes how to transmit the Chinese culture behind dish names. Translation is a kind of cultural activity, and at the same time, it is a kind of language communication between different cultures.

Language is a part of culture, and translation always has something to do with culture. Language is a carrier of culture, culture nurtures language in return, and translation is an important means of cross-culture communication. Language, culture and translation are closely related with each other. The Chinese cuisine has the character of complexity, profundity and unpredictability. In China, food has always been much more than what satisfies hunger. We can eat everything, therefore our menu is complex. China boast a long history throughout which “people have regarded food as the heaven”, hence the profundity. The dish names, as an important part of the dishes, not only attract customers, but also help the dishes win an everlasting fame. Chinese dish names are of informative, expressive and vocative functions. So we must pay attention to different cultural habits and characteristics of different regions in the process of translation. As is seen in the above example, no simple method can always solve all the problems in name translation. So a good translator seldom applies one

strategy at a time. Usually several strategies are involved in one version. A translator’s competence of language and mastery of culture both play a very important role in the process of translation and affect the version greatly. Knowing the features of culinary English clearly will make the Chinese-English translators aware of the habitual ways of expression of culinary English so as to produce a version of high quality. Therefore, Chinese culinary culture can be spread further.

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