

# The Translation of Chinese Literature under the Theory of Translation Compensation

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In order to promote the exchange of Chinese culture with foreign countries, translators bear an important mission in the process of cross-cultural communication. Although there are cultural differences, we can achieve cultural dissemination and exchange through continuous cultural dialogue. As an important way for foreign scholars to understand the history of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties in China, the translation of historical texts is crucial. Multiple typical cases are selected under the guidance of the translation theory of compensation to use relevant methods or techniques from the three levels of language, culture, and aesthetics to compensate for the loss of Li Xueqin's *The Origin of Ancient Chinese Civilization* in English translation proofreading.

*Keywords:* translation compensation theory, Li Xueqin, The Origin of Ancient Chinese Civilization

## Introduction

*The Origin of Ancient Chinese Civilization: Li Xueqin Talks About the Pre-Qin Dynast* was written by the famous historian and ancient philologist Li Xueqin. This book is based on the overall perspective of the study of ancient Chinese civilization. It discusses the Yu, Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties in both the general and sub-sections, covering oracle bone inscriptions, bronze artifacts, bamboo slips, silk books, and other aspects. Finally, it provides a prospect of the four dynasties, oracle bone inscriptions, and bronze artifacts.

The entire work involves a large number of proprietary terms such as objects, places, and names of people, as well as classical Chinese sentences, which poses certain difficulties for translators in translation and requires them to have a wealth of historical and cultural knowledge. This article aims to address the following two questions: The first is: Which translation compensation strategy is more commonly used in the translation practice of historical and cultural texts? The second is: In the practice of translating historical and cultural texts, which level of compensation is most obvious? The research purpose of this article is to explain the application of translation compensation theory in the translation of historical and cultural texts by analyzing examples and combining the characteristics of historical texts.

## Translation Compensation Theory

Translation loss is an inevitable problem in the translation process, and there are differences in social and cultural aspects. The presented text will inevitably suffer from translation losses in terms of language form, style, structure, and other aspects. Based on modern linguistics and its related disciplines, the study of translation compensation has stepped out of the realm of traditional translation theory and developed into a science.

Wolfram Wilss, in his book *The Science of Translation: Problems and Methods* (1982), was the first to propose the theory of translation compensation, which aims at solving the structural level differences within and outside the language. Hatim and Mason (1990, pp. 115, 214) stated that translation compensation means “in the process of translation, if one encounters a sentence that cannot be translated directly, especially if it contains special features such as puns, etc., it is not possible to translate it directly”. Peter Newmark (2001a, p. 143) suggests that “Compensation is the ultimate means of ensuring translation”, which shows that different types of texts should adopt different translation compensation strategies. Mona Baker (1992, p. 78) notes the compensation for misplacement, “This compensation means that the translator can omit or switch words”. Hervey and Higgins (1992) delineate the types of translation compensation by proposing four forms of translation compensation.

In 1993, Nida (1993, p. 124) proposes functional compensation in his book *Language, Culture and Translation*. He emphasises on the level of functional equivalence and proposes that translation strategy of functional compensation, pointing out that the same means of compensation can occur in different positions. He points out that the same means of compensation can take place in different locations and that the effect of overall integrity can be achieved through the implementation of partial compensation. Keith Harvey (1998, p. 37) defines it as

Compensation is a means of using expressions in the target language to achieve a similar effect in the translated text as in the original, thus compensating for the original text’s similar effect to the original, thus compensating for the loss of the original,

after which Peter Newmark (2001b) defines translation compensation as a response to translation loss. George Steiner (2001) makes an in-depth research on the theory of translation compensation. In his book *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, he carries out the first complete study of translation theory and its translation process since the 18th century, and later proposes the famous hermeneutic translation theory.

Xia Tingde’s book, *Studies on Translation Compensation*, is the first work in China to provide a comprehensive overview of translation compensation theory. He (2006, p. 68) points out that

Compensation is a process in which translation is done by means of the target language, supplemented by other linguistic means in accordance with the statutes or norms of the target language, according to the type of text and the purpose of translation.

The source text belongs to literary texts, and since this definition is not limited to a specific text type, the translation compensation theory is also applicable to the language, aesthetics, and translation of literary texts compensation for cultural and other losses.

## Translation Case Analysis

### Linguistic Level

Linguistic differences in living environment, social culture, and religious beliefs lead to vocabulary gaps and grammatical disparities during translation. When semantic and grammatical equivalence cannot be achieved, compensation methods like free translation, additional translation, and modified translation are employed to fully explore and accurately convey the original text’s meaning. This compensation can be categorized into lexical and semantic levels.

**Lexical compensation.** Lexical compensation gain is a translation technique that involves adding necessary vocabulary to the target text after providing the equivalent of the original expression. Once used in translation, it

will help readers of the target language understand the meaning of words, just like readers of the source language (Xia, 2006). This section mainly focuses on how the author supplements the lost meaning of some original vocabulary in translation by using the method of adding translation, and enables readers to understand new knowledge.

Example 1: Item name:

ST	TT
琮	<i>cong</i> 琮 (long hollow pieces of jade with rectangular sides)
圭	<i>gui</i> 圭 (jade tablets)
环	<i>huan</i> 环 (jade rings)
璜	<i>huang</i> 璜 (semi-annular jade pendants)
罍	<i>lei</i> 罍 (an ancient urn-shaped wine vessel); for water vessels
卣	卣 (an ancient wine vessel with a big mouth and a small belly)
钺	<i>yue</i> 钺 (an axe with hooks or spikes on its back)
尊	<i>zun</i> 尊 (a kind of ancient wine vessels)

To ensure accurate and clear translation, the translator uses a combination of transliteration and annotation for object-specific nouns in the original text. Initial mentions include both to aid understanding of shape, color, and other characteristics; subsequent mentions use only transliteration to maintain vocabulary uniqueness. This approach preserves translation accuracy while enhancing target readers' comprehension and appreciation of the objects' unique charm. For common nouns, free translation may be used to improve translation's fluency and readability, considering context and target reader's cognitive level.

Example 2: Book name:

ST	TT
《观林堂集》	<i>Guan Lin Tang Ji</i>
《尚书核诂》	<i>Shang Shu He Gu</i>
《归藏》	<i>Gui Zang</i>
《连山》	<i>Lian Shan</i>
《牧誓》	<i>Mu Shi</i>
《四时》	<i>Si Shi (the Four Seasons)</i>
《天象》	<i>Tian Xiang (Astronomical Phenomena)</i>
《月忌》	<i>Yue Ji (Monthly Taboo Time)</i>
《殷历谱》	<i>The Yin Calendar Genealogy</i> (Using divination records related to astronomy and calendars to solve the issue of the dating of the Shang Dynasty)
《诗谱》	<i>Book of Poetry</i> , which is a metrical basis for reference when writing poetry and other books

When dealing with classic Chinese texts, we use meticulous and diverse methods. *Guan Lin Tang Ji*, a collection of Mr. Wang Guowei's works, showcases his academic achievements and is hailed as an immortal work. We prioritize maintaining its original flavor due to its extensive content. For the 20th-century research *Shang Shu He Gu*, we use transliteration to preserve its style. Other classics like *Gui Zang*, *Lian Shan*, and *Mu Shi* will follow the same approach.

For book titles like *Si Shi*, *Tian Xiang*, and *Yue Ji*, we add English definitions to aid understanding. *Yin Calendar Genealogy* and *Book of Poetry* are freely translated while maintaining their original meaning, with

annotations to clarify content and purpose. Our goal is to convey the original text's meaning accurately, enabling target readers to appreciate Chinese culture's profound heritage and charm. We aim for a translation that's both faithful and internationally appealing, promoting Chinese culture's dissemination and exchange.

Example 3: Official position name:

ST	TT
司马	<i>sima</i>
大司马	<i>Grand sima</i>
公士	<i>gongshi</i>
上造	<i>shangzao</i>
丞相	<i>Prime minister</i>
尚书	<i>minister</i>

To translate ancient Chinese official positions accurately, we must consider their responsibilities, historical backgrounds, levels, statuses, evolutions, and English expression habits. For instance, “Prime Minister” historically aided emperors in national affairs, and “Minster” evolved from a secretary to a senior official. By comprehending these factors, we can better translate and convey the meaning and characteristics of ancient Chinese official positions. By comprehending these factors, we can better translate and convey the meaning and characteristics of ancient Chinese official positions.

**Semantic compensation.** This translated text is a historical and cultural text, with the main purpose of conveying authentic historical information to readers. However, due to the differences between English and Chinese languages, words, phrases, etc., will be influenced by contextual factors during the translation process. Directly translating the source language will inevitably lead to semantic deviation. Therefore, it is necessary to perform semantic compensation during the translation process.

Example 4:

ST: 康有为的所谓“孔学”并非他个人独创，而是得助于当时今文经学如日中天的时势。

TT: Kang Youwei's so-called “Confucianism” was not his personal creation, but enjoyed its heyday prevailing situation of the contemporary textual criticism.

Translation inevitably leads to some semantic loss, but the aim is to minimize it. The Chinese phrase “如日中天” describes the sun at its zenith, symbolizing peak prosperity. In the source text, it refers to the Yuan Dynasty's booming economy and peaceful society. In English, “heyday” conveys a similar meaning, signifying a time of maximum power, success, or popularity. This equivalence in meaning achieves semantic compensation, ensuring a clear and faithful translation that fosters a meaningful dialogue between the writer and target readers.

Example 5:

ST: 东汉时，许慎作《说文解字》一书，在叙言里便讲了“五帝三王之世”文字“改易殊体”的现象。

TT: In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Xu Shen wrote the book *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, in which he talked about the phenomenon of “changes in strokes, resulting in variant characters” in the era of the Five Emperors (Emperors Huang, Zhuanxu, Di Ku, Yao, Shun) and the Three Sovereigns (Emperors Yu of Xia, King Tang of Shang, King Wen of Zhou).

The Five Emperors and Three Sovereigns era, spanning from 2070 BC to 221 BC, marks the beginning of Chinese history and the formation of Chinese characters. Over time, characters evolved from simple symbols to

a complex writing system, with various styles emerging. This period saw significant changes in character forms. “Changes in strokes, resulting in variant characters” refers to the variations in Chinese characters’ writing forms across regions and periods, leading to different fonts. This is evident in the transition from oracle bone script to bronze script, small seal script, clerical script, and regular script. Each font has its unique evolution.

Concurrently, writing habits, materials, and social backgrounds influenced the emergence of different writing styles and font variants. These variants reflect social and cultural changes, enriching Chinese characters’ artistic expressions. Ensuring these cultural nuances are annotated is crucial for reader comprehension and effective translation. Semantic compensation strategies, such as addition translation and interpretation, enhance translation coherence and fluency. By adding or paraphrasing vocabulary, translators aim for a more natural target language expression.

### **Cultural Level**

Language translation is not only the translation of the language itself, but also the communication between two cultures. Due to cultural differences in different countries, translators must pay attention to cultural translation issues. The author will select some typical translation examples in this text from two aspects: cultural differences and cultural background, and analyze how to compensate for translation at the cultural level.

**Cultural differences compensation.** Different countries have different cultures and languages, and cultural differences often arise between the original and translated texts. Therefore, the translator needs to find expressions similar to the source language in the target language and compensate for necessary cultural information.

#### Example 6:

ST: 这时仍然有一些艺术杰作，例如甘肃武威雷台的车马俑群。其中“马踏飞燕”以意境超绝而脍炙人口。

TT: At this time, there were still some artistic masterpieces, such as the Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow, one of the superb artistic creations at Leitai in Wuwei, Gansu Province. This masterpiece, is renowned for its superb artistic conception.

“Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow” is a bronze artifact from the Western Jin Dynasty, known for its romantic depiction of a galloping horse’s agility and swiftness. It is considered a symbol of ancient China’s advanced casting industry, showcasing Chinese cultural charm. Designated as a Chinese tourism symbol in 1983 and a national treasure-level cultural relic in 1986, this artifact might be unfamiliar to target language readers. Therefore, the translator employed an interpretive approach with compensatory annotations to clarify its exact meaning.

#### Example 7:

ST: 到隋唐，又出现了好多精美绝伦的铜镜，并新采用了嵌螺钿、金银平脱之类前所未有的装饰方法。

TT: In the Sui and Tang Dynasties, many exquisite bronze mirrors appeared, and new decorative methods such as inlaid mother-of-pearl and gold and silver inlay were adopted.

Footnote: traditional decorative craft, in which the shells and seashells are ground into thin slices and then inlaid on the surface of the object according to the needs of the picture.

Gold and silver flat-out, a renowned decorative technique for ancient Chinese objects, combines lacquer painting with metal inlay. Similarly, inlaid mother-of-pearl involves grinding shells and embedding them on

object surfaces for decorative purposes. Silver inlay, another famous decorative technique, also integrates lacquer painting with metal. To aid target language readers, footnotes provide necessary background information. Cultural polysemy is effectively compensated in translations through the interpretive approach, ensuring readability, accuracy, and comprehensibility.

**Cultural background compensation.** Cultural background refers to the historical events or characteristics with ethnic characteristics, such as ethnicity, culture, religion, and values, reflected in the original text. Language is a part of culture and reflects it. This article tells the humanistic history of the Pre-Qin period, which has a unique era imprint and historical characteristics. If the translation maintains the same characteristics as the original text, readers may encounter comprehension barriers, so it is necessary for the translator to compensate for the cultural background when translating this text.

Example 8:

ST: 胡适及其弟子顾颉刚先生在此基础上创立了古史辨派, 提出了层累造成的古史观。

TT: On this basis, Hu Shi and his disciple Gu Jiegang founded Ancient History Discrimination School and proposed the view of ancient history caused by layer accumulation.

Footnote: The Ancient History Discrimination School, founded by Gu Jiegang and Qian Xuanton, challenges historical legends and records from the Pre-Qin to Han periods, aiming to expose falsehoods and correct existing issues. Their efforts have led to significant advancements in overturning outdated historical systems, establishing scientific frameworks, and promoting the modernization of Chinese historiography.

To assist readers in comprehending the original text, the translator employed compensatory annotation strategy, offering detailed background information on unfamiliar vocabulary and clarifying implicit meanings. This approach eliminated the need for lengthy explanations, ensuring a smoother reading experience.

Example 9:

ST: 因此把经学说成是王莽“新学”就等于给经学戴上了一个大帽子而加以否定了。

TT: Therefore, describing the Confucian classics as the learning of the Wang Mang's Xin Dynasty which refers to the classical literature of Liu Xin is tantamount to putting a big label on Confucian classics and negating it.

Wang Mang's Xin Dynasty, a political and cultural concept advocated by the Wang Mang regime, aimed to address social and political issues in the late Western Han Dynasty, promoting centralization, land nationalization, planned economy, and Confucianism. In translations, the translator employed compensatory strategies such as annotation and interpretive approach to ensure accuracy, naturalness, and smoothness, reflecting the significance of this era in Chinese history. Example 7 utilized annotation compensation, while Example 8 employed the interpretive method.

### **Aesthetic Level**

The aesthetic of literary texts is reflected in language style, expression methods, artistic characteristics, etc. However, due to the differences in structure, logic, and expression between the two languages, the translation loses its original beauty, resulting in translation losses. Therefore, the loss in aesthetic aspects is complex and requires multiple means of compensation, and can even be recreated without deviating from the original text.

Example 10:

ST: 所以, 前者是新陈代谢, 新的冲破了旧的, 是革命的路线; 那后者却是新陈纠葛, 旧的拖住了新的, 是维新的路线。

TT: So, the former embodies the beauty of rupture and rebirth, the path of revolutionary where the new triumphs over the old. The latter, on the other hand, represents the path of renewal where the old stifles the new.

In the original text, there is a parallel sentence structure, and the translator maintains consistency between the translated text and the original sentence structure. At the same time, the translator expresses the alternation of old and new through the use of “embodying the beauty of ruin and rebirth”, giving readers a visual and emotional impact of a new life arising from the old, and new things breaking free from the constraints of the old. The phrase “the old stiffens the new” elegantly captures the intricate intertwining of past and present, embodying the seamless fusion of old and new elements.

### Summary

The theory of translation compensation has played an important role in this translation practice. Through this translation practice, it can be concluded that the method of interpretation is the most frequently used compensation strategy in historical text translation. Due to the fact that the original text belongs to the category of historical and cultural texts, and its main purpose is to tell readers historical facts, cultural compensation is the most significant in the translation process; due to the significant differences between Chinese and English languages, translating the source language directly will inevitably result in semantic deviation, so there is relatively more compensation at the language level; the compensation at the aesthetic level is mostly used in literary texts, but less in historical and cultural texts. Translators, guided by the theory of translation compensation, strive to reduce the loss of the original text and present the complete information of the original text to the target readers as much as possible.

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