



On the Application of Three-Dimensional Transformation Means in Translating Historical Classics — A Case Study of the “*Hereditary House of Chu*” of the *Records of the Grand Historian*

Xia Yawen, Chen Shuangyu

School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, China

Received: 11 Aug 2026; Received in revised form: 05 Sep 2026; Accepted: 11 Sep 2026; Available online: 16 Sep 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Chinese historical classics face prominent translation difficulties due to concise classical Chinese, culture-loaded terms and context-dependent dialogues. As the core analytical tool of Eco-translatology, three-dimensional transformation requires translators to make adaptive selections from linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions. Taking the well-known chapter “Zhang Yi Deceiving King Huai of Chu” from the “*Hereditary House of Chu*” of the *Records of the Grand Historian* as the source text, this paper conducts translation practice and case analysis. It explores how adaptive transformation strategies solve translation obstacles of ancient historical texts: restructuring run-on sentences, reconstructing rhetorical parallelism, interpreting culture-specific items associated with institutions and geography, and explicating implicit pragmatic motives in historical narration. This study finds that proper three-dimensional adaptive selection can help target-language readers acquire historical facts, perceive character traits and grasp didactic implications, so as to realize effective cross-cultural communication of Chinese historical classics. It also provides practical references for the external dissemination of Jingchu historical materials represented by *Records of the Grand Historian*.



Keywords— Eco-Translatology, Three-Dimensional Transformation, *Records of the Grand Historian*, *Historical Classics Translation*, Culture-Loaded Terms

I. INTRODUCTION

Records of the Grand Historian compiled by Sima Qian is a milestone work of Chinese biographical historiography. Its excerpt *Hereditary House of Chu* records vital diplomatic events of the Warring-States period. Characterized by compact classical Chinese, vivid conversational plots and abundant culture-loaded

expressions, this text creates substantial obstacles for English translation. As an important carrier of Jingchu culture, the historical stories recorded in *Hereditary House of Chu* carry abundant local historical memory and diplomatic wisdom, which deserve to be introduced to overseas readers through qualified English translation.

Eco-translatology, proposed by Hu Gengshen, defines translation as the translator’s adaptive-selection activity within the translational eco-environment. Its core notion, three-dimensional transformation, demands adaptive adjustments on linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions, enabling translated texts to survive and function in target-language ecological systems (Hu, 2008). Different from traditional translation theories which focus merely on text equivalence, Eco-translatology takes the translator and cross-cultural context into consideration, which is highly suitable for analyzing the translation of ancient Chinese historical prose full of contextual and cultural information.

Existing studies have produced abundant findings on *Records of the Grand Historian* translation. Western sinologists such as Nienhauser has completed the authoritative multi-volume English translation of *The Grand Scribe’s Records*, which has laid a solid foundation for overseas spread of Sima Qian’s work. Nevertheless, concrete case studies combining Eco-translatology with excerpts from *Hereditary House of Chu* remain insufficient. Many existing studies focus on overall translation comments of the complete book, while few concentrate on typical diplomatic chapters with translation practice. This paper selects the story of Zhang Yi’s fraud against King Huai of Chu (r. 329-299 BC) as translation material. It analyzes adaptive choices at three dimensions to summarize feasible translation strategies for ancient Chinese historical texts. It also hopes to offer references for the external dissemination of Chinese historical classics and Jingchu cultural materials.

II. TEXT FEATURES AND TRANSLATION PROBLEMS OF THE SOURCE MATERIAL

The source text is excerpted from the “*Hereditary House of Chu*” of the *Records of the Grand Historian*. It narrates a representative diplomatic fraud: the State of Qin intended to launch an attack on Qi. To undermine the Qi-Chu alliance, Zhang Yi promised King Huai six-hundred-li Shangyu territory to persuade Chu to sever diplomatic ties with Qi. After Chu broke off its alliance, Zhang Yi cheated Chu by reducing the promised land to merely six li. This incident brought severe diplomatic isolation and strategic losses to the State of Chu. The

whole story reflects the complicated geopolitical games among Warring States powers and reveals the personal character defects of King Huai, thus possessing high historical and literary value.

Four prominent textual features constitute major translation problems: First, the formal and concise historiographical style. Classical Chinese historical texts carry high-density information. Translators need to compress or expand information units to conform to English stylistic norms. Excessive literal translation will produce rigid and obscure target text for English-speaking readers. Second, dialogue-driven narration. Key plots including lobbying, remonstrance and deception are advanced by character speeches, which shape distinct personalities: the craftiness of Zhang Yi, the wisdom of Chen Zhen and the fatuity of King Huai. Consequently, translators are supposed to reproduce situational sense and rhetorical force embedded in dialogues, instead of only converting literal words. Third, numerous culture-loaded items. Terms such as “从亲”, “商於之地” and “楚符” embody unique political, geographical and institutional connotations of the Warring-States era, lacking direct equivalents in English historical discourse. Cultural default easily leads to reading barriers for foreign readers without background knowledge of Chinese history. Fourth, diversified rhetorical devices. For example, parallelism and contrast strengthen narrative appeal. Therefore, functional equivalent rhetorical treatments are required in target-language translation. Simple word-for-word translation will lose the literary charm of Sima Qian’s writing.

III. THEORETICAL BASIS: THREE-DIMENSIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

Put forward by Hu Gengshen in 2001, Eco-translatology treats translation as “translator’s adaptation and selection activity for translational eco-environment”. The translational eco-environment covers source text, target-language system and integrated cultural-communicative context. Three-dimensional transformation serves as its core analytical framework (Hu, 2011). Rather than pursuing absolute static equivalence between source text and target text, this theory emphasizes

dynamic adaptation to multi-dimensional translation ecology. The detailed analysis is as follows.

1. Linguistic-dimensional transformation: It refers to the adaptive adjustments and choices made by translators regarding language forms during the translation process. This transformation manifests across different levels and aspects of language (Hu Gengshen, 2012), primarily encompassing lexical, syntactic, textual levels, as well as choices in linguistic form and style. Given the parataxis-hypotaxis difference between Chinese and English in this translation practice, translators should reorganize sentence patterns and reconstruct rhetorical effects to fit target-language conventions.

2. Cultural-dimensional transformation: It emphasizes that translators should focus on the transmission and interpretation of bilingual cultural connotations during the translation process. This dimension requires translators to pay attention to the differences in nature and content between the source and target cultures, avoiding misinterpretations of the original text from the perspective of the target culture. While conducting language transformation, translators must also adapt to the broader cultural system to which the language belongs (Hu Gengshen, 2012). When handling culture-loaded words concerning politics, geography and ancient artifacts, translators need to balance cultural authenticity and readability, avoiding misreading caused by cultural default.

3. Communicative-dimensional transformation: It focuses on the adaptive transmission of bilingual communicative intentions during the translation process. It requires translators not only to transform linguistic information and cultural connotations but also to prioritize the communicative aspect, ensuring that the communicative intent of the original text is fully realized in the translation (Hu Gengshen, 2012). Jia Wenbo (2012) notes that to achieve the desired communicative effect, translators must consider the cognitive abilities of the readers, flexibly apply translation strategies, and accurately handle the source text. For historical classics, it means representing historical facts, depicting character dispositions and conveying embedded historical lessons for target-language readers. Therefore, successfully conveying the communicative intent of the original text to

the target-language readers is key to achieving effective cross-cultural communication.

IV. CASE ANALYSIS OF THREE-DIMENSIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE SOURCE TEXT

Guided by this theoretical framework, this part selects several examples from the source text translation to illustrate adaptation and selection across these three dimensions. Addressing key and difficult points in translation, it integrates multiple translation techniques and strategies, so that the target text can survive within the complex translational eco-environment and effectively fulfil its communicative functions.

1. Linguistic Dimension

From the perspective of the linguistic dimension, translators need to recognize discrepancies of the two languages and deploy appropriate translation measures to make the target text compatible with the eco-system of the recipient language. For this reason, the author investigates linguistic-dimensional adaptive adjustments in this translation practice on syntactic and rhetorical levels, aiming to narrow gaps between classical Chinese writings and modern English.

Example 1: Translation of Run-on Sentences

ST: 秦欲伐齐，而楚与齐从亲，秦惠王患之，乃宣言张仪免相，使张仪南见楚王。

TT: The State of Qin intended to attack the State of Qi, but Chu was aligned with Qi in an alliance to maintain close relations. King Hui of Qin (r. 338-311 BC) was troubled by this situation. Consequently, he announced that Zhang Yi had been dismissed from his post as chancellor and dispatched him south to the court of Chu.

First, the source text is a typical Chinese run-on sentence consisting of juxtaposed short clauses characterized by concise wording and dense information. In Chinese-English translation, attention should be paid to linguistic disparities between the two languages: Chinese follows parataxis with implicit logic. By contrast, English emphasizes hypotaxis and resorts to overt cohesive devices (Lian, 2020). Accordingly, the translator adopts “but” and “consequently” to make explicit the implied adversative and causal relations, streamlining the logical sequence of events and complying with hypotactic features of English.

Second, regarding information reorganization and explication, by adding the reign annotation “(r. 338-311 BC)”, the author meets English-speaking readers’ needs for chronological historical background. The translator further specifies official titles and situational context: “免相” is translated as “dismissed from his post as chancellor”, and “南见楚王” is supplemented with the noun “court” to define official duties and the royal-court setting.

Third, in terms of voice, Chinese tends to use active voice, whereas English shows a stronger preference for passive voice. The Chinese phrase “张仪免相” takes an active syntactic form yet carries passive implication. It is translated into the English passive structure “had been dismissed” to conform to voice preferences of the target language.

In conclusion, this translation makes adaptive transformation in parataxis-hypotaxis shift, logical explication and active-passive structures from linguistic dimension. It not only faithfully conveys the source-text message but also accommodates English expressive conventions and stylistic eco-environment. With an in-depth understanding of syntactic and voice-related disparities between Chinese and English, the translator achieves effective adaptation of linguistic forms within the target-language eco-environment.

Example 2: Translation of Parallelism

ST: 敝邑之王所甚说者无先大王，虽仪之所甚原为门阑之厮者亦无先大王。敝邑之王所甚憎者无先齐王，虽仪之所甚憎者亦无先齐王。

TT: There is no one our king holds in higher esteem than Your Majesty, and no one I myself would rather serve than you. Conversely, there is no one our king detests more than the King of Qi, and no one I myself despise more than him.

From the perspective of the linguistic dimension of Eco-translatology, this translation makes adaptive adjustments in accordance with English grammatical rules, rhetorical conventions and information-organizing patterns. It faithfully conveys the original meaning and produces a natural and persuasive target text.

Rhetorically, the source text, as ancient diplomatic discourse, adopts double parallelism and antithesis,

repeating the structure “无先...” to reinforce its stance. The translation reproduces the rhetorical force of parallelism by employing the English comparative construction “no one ... than ...”. Meanwhile, differentiated diction is adopted for positive and negative contexts: “holds in higher esteem” and “would rather serve” for commendatory meanings, and “detests” and “despise” for derogatory ones, which avoids monotonous repetition and improves rhetorical sophistication.

Syntactically, Chinese is paratactic. It implies concessive and contrastive logic via the structure “虽...亦...” with highly condensed semantic content. Following the hypotactic features of English, the translation connects coordinate components with “and” and adds “Conversely” to externalize the implicit contrast. It also breaks down the compact original semantics and reconstructs two sets of symmetrical sentences to highlight key information, conform to English writing rhythm, and balance the original antithetic effect with target-text fluency.

To sum up, by reconstructing parallel structures, explicating logical relations and segmenting sentence patterns, the translation transforms the condensed parallelism of classical Chinese into logically-oriented English expression, and enhances the acceptability and appeal of the target text in the English context.

2. Cultural Dimension

The source text of this translation practice contains culture-loaded words such as “从亲”, “商於之地” “楚符”, which embody the unique political institutions, rituals, geography and tally-based diplomatic culture of the Warring States period. According to Nida’s theory of culture-specific items, these terms fall into three categories: institutional-culture words, geographical-culture words and artifact-culture words. More than mere information carriers, they reflect the political landscape and cultural mentality of the Warring States era and call for appropriate transference and interpretation in the target language.

For historical texts, the core of cultural-dimensional transformation lies in preserving the original cultural features and historical ambiance while enabling English-speaking readers to grasp the historical context and narrative functions. The translator adopts combined strategies including cultural correspondence, semantic explication, contextual externalization and moderate

compensation to balance cultural fidelity and reader acceptability, so as to realize the adaptive reconstruction of cultural elements within the target-language ecology.

Example 3: Translation of Institutional Culture-Loaded Term

ST: 秦欲伐齐，而楚与齐从亲。

TT: The State of Qin intended to attack the State of Qi, but Chu was aligned with Qi in an alliance to maintain close relations.

From the perspective of cultural-dimensional transformation in Eco-translatology, the term “从亲” embodies the specific form of diplomatic alliance as well as its cultural and political connotations of the Warring States period. In translation, the translator needs to make adaptive choices between conveying its institutional implications and maintaining target-text readability.

As a culture-loaded term, “从亲”, according to *Strategies of the Warring States Dictionary* and commentaries on *Records of the Grand Historian*, refers to intimate interstate alliances built upon the vertical hezong strategy and consolidated by covenants and inter-state marriages. “从” refers to vertical hezong strategy, while “亲” means close political bonds consolidated by marriage and hostage exchange. There exists no fully equivalent term in English historical discourse. Literal translation “vertical alliance” can only reflect strategic meaning and lose connotation of intimate political bonds.

Drawing on Nienhauser’s (2022) English translation of *Records of the Grand Historian*, the translator ultimately renders this expression as “was aligned with Qi in an alliance to maintain close relations”, using “aligned in an alliance” to represent institutional meaning of “从”, and “maintain close relations” to interpret the interactive bond of “亲”. The compound expression avoids over-alienation and reproduces the complete political-cultural connotation in target historical narrative context.

In a word, when translating proper terms of specific historical-institutional culture, translators should adopt the cultural-dimensional perspective. Deep-seated connotations are identified through textual research and parallel-text verification. An integrated strategy of “core-concept correspondence plus contextual implication

supplementation” is adopted to realize the adaptive transmission of cultural information in the target-language historical narrative system.

Example 4: Translation of Geographical Culture-Loaded Term

ST: 今使使者从仪西取故秦所分楚商於之地方六百里。

TT: You can send an envoy with me today to retrieve the six-hundred-li territory of Shangyu, which Qin once took from Chu.

“商於” was a strategic contested region between Qin and Chu. In this historical event, “six-hundred-li Shangyu land” is not merely a geographical concept but a symbolic carrier of diplomatic fraud. Simple transliteration “the land of Shangyu” cannot reflect its historical background. Therefore, the translation reserves the Chinese measurement unit “six-hundred-li” to keep historical authenticity. The attributive clause “which Qin once took from Chu” supplements its historical ownership. The strategy of “transliteration plus attributive explanatory clause” preserves cultural identity of place names and helps target-language readers understand the core conflict of this diplomatic event.

Example 5: Translation of Artifact Culture-Loaded Term

ST: 齐王大怒，折楚符而合於秦。

TT: Enraged, the King of Qi snapped the tallies of alliance with Chu and forged a union with Qin.

From the perspective of cultural-dimensional transformation in Eco-translatology, as a culture-loaded term, “楚符” embodies the distinctive political institutions and covenant culture of the Warring States period. Its translation requires adaptive choices among its physical form, institutional function and cultural symbolism.

According to ancient documents, “符” was a special credential object in ancient China for concluding alliances or dispatching military orders. “楚符” referred specifically to the tally created for the alliance between Chu and Qi, a physical symbol of their mutual political trust. “折符” constituted the highest-standard ritual act of annulling an alliance. If translated simply as “Chu tally”, readers cannot realize its function as alliance credential. The author adopts “tallies of alliance” to highlight its institutional attribute. The verb “snapped” (rather than

general-purpose “broke”) is selected according to *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, representing sharp, sudden breaking movement, reproducing King Qi’s rage and decisive diplomatic break-off. This translation completes re-symbolization of ancient Chinese artifact concept in English cultural context.

In conclusion, when translating culture-specific items combining physical features, institutional functions and symbolic meanings, translators should adopt the cultural-dimension perspective. Based on textual research into origins and contexts, they shall select functionally-equivalent and affectively-matched vocabulary for resymbolization, so as to achieve effective transmission of historical and cultural connotations.

3. Communicative Dimension

Communicative dimensional transformation requires translators to transfer not only facts, but also implicit pragmatic purposes. This translation material features three-fold communicative intentions. First, at the narrative level, it reconstructs the complex diplomatic historical event of “Zhang Yi Deceives Chu”. Second, at the literary level, it draws on dialogues and details to create vivid character portrayals: the cunning Zhang Yi, the wise Chen Zhen, and the fatuous King Huai of Chu. Third, at the didactic level, it draws lessons from history to warn that credulity and short-sightedness in diplomacy may bring national isolation and disasters. Therefore, in communicative dimensional transformation, translators should target English-speaking readers and enable the target text to achieve the three communicative effects of factual narration, characterization and conveyance of historical admonitions within the target-language context.

Example 6:

ST: 张仪至秦, 详醉坠车, 称病不出三月, 地不可得。

TT: Zhang, having returned to Qin, feigned drunkenness and fell from his carriage. He then pleaded illness and remained secluded for three full months, preventing Chu from obtaining the territory of Shangyu.

In original classical Chinese, “详醉” literally reads “drunken”, yet its real meaning is “feigned drunkenness”. Adding the word “feigned” explicitly reveals Zhang Yi’s deceptive motive and eliminates potential misunderstanding for foreign readers. The expression of

“preventing Chu from obtaining the territory of Shangyu” externalizes the implicit cause-effect logic between “remained secluded” and failure to acquire land. The word “secluded” emphasizes Zhang Yi’s deliberate avoidance. The proper noun “Shangyu” is supplemented to clarify object of territorial negotiation.

All in all, through explicating hidden motives, externalizing logical relations and completing background information, the translation successfully delivers multi-layer communicative intentions: stating the plot, exposing Zhang Yi’s trickery and presenting the cause-and-effect of Chu’s diplomatic setback.

V. CONCLUSION

Taking the excerpt “Zhang Yi Deceiving King Huai of Chu” from the “*Hereditary House of Chu*” of the *Records of the Grand Historian* as research object, this paper conducts translation practice and case analysis under Eco-translatology’s three-dimensional transformation framework.

In terms of linguistic dimension, translators should cope with differences between Chinese parataxis and English hypotaxis, reorganize run-on sentences, adjust voice, and reconstruct parallel rhetorical structures to fit target-language stylistic ecology. In terms of cultural dimension, when dealing with culture-loaded terms of institutional, geographical and material categories found in historical classics, strategies combining conceptual equivalence with contextual supplementation may strike a balance between cultural reservation and readability. In terms of communicative dimension, translators are supposed to explicate implicit pragmatic motives and hidden logical relations, so that target-language readers can grasp historical facts, character images and implicit didactic messages.

This study proves that three-dimensional adaptive selection and transformation of Eco-translatology provides effective analytical tools for ancient Chinese historical text translation. Limited by research scope, this paper only selects one short excerpt. Future research may expand corpus scope and make comparisons with published authoritative English versions of *Records of the Grand Historian*, so as to further explore optimal translation pathways for Chinese historical classics going global.

REFERENCES

- [1] Hu, G. (2011). Eco-Translatology: Research Foci and Theoretical Tenets. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 32(02), 5-9+95.
- [2] Hu, G. (2012). The Name and Reality of Eco-Translatology. *Journal of Eco-Translatology*, (2), 3-12.
- [3] Jia, W. B. (2012). *On pragmatic translation with functionalist approach*. China Translation & Publishing Corporation.
- [4] [Lian, S.(2020). *A comparative study of English and Chinese*. Higher Education Press.
- [5] Nienhauser, W. H. (Ed.). (2022). *The grand scribe's records*. Indiana University Press.