

Cultural Compensation Strategies in Museum Artifact Descriptions from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: A Case Study of the National Museum of China

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Abstract

Bilingual descriptions of museum artifacts serve as an important medium for disseminating Chinese culture to international audiences. Given the widespread presence of cultural defaults and implicit information in Chinese artifact descriptions, purely literal translation often fails to convey their deeper cultural meanings effectively. Drawing on five representative bilingual artifact descriptions from the official website of the National Museum of China as the corpus, this study incorporates Trompenaars' cultural dimensions theory to examine the cultural compensation strategies employed in the translation process and the differences in cultural value orientations they reflect. The findings indicate that Chinese texts typically presuppose a shared historical and cultural background among readers, exhibiting characteristics of ascription orientation, communitarianism, synchronic time orientation, and inner-directed harmony. English texts, by contrast, make information explicit through transliteration with annotation, background addition, and functional substitution, thereby shifting the expressive logic toward achievement orientation, individualism, sequential time orientation, and outer-directed control. Cultural compensation not only bridges informational gaps in cross-cultural understanding, but also reflects a dynamic adjustment of value orientations, thereby enhancing the international communicative effectiveness of museum discourse.

Keywords

cultural compensation, museum translation, Trompenaars' cultural dimensions, cultural value orientation, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Museums serve as vital venues for the preservation of cultural heritage and cross-cultural communication. With the proliferation of digital exhibition platforms, official websites have become one of the primary channels through which international audiences access a nation's culture. The official website of the National Museum of China provides systematic bilingual artifact descriptions, constituting an important corpus for studying the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

However, Chinese artifact descriptions frequently presuppose that readers possess a certain level of historical and cultural background knowledge, making extensive use of allusions, artifact nomenclature, and terminological expressions rooted in ancient institutional systems—what are commonly referred to as culturally loaded terms. For English-speaking readers who lack the relevant cultural background, such expressions are often difficult to comprehend adequately, and literal translation alone is seldom sufficient to convey their deeper cultural significance. In this context, translators must supplement implicit information to bridge cultural gaps, a process generally defined in scholarly discourse as “cultural compensation.”

This study adopts a cross-cultural communication perspective, using bilingual artifact descriptions from the official website of the National Museum of China as the corpus, and applying Trompenaars’ cultural dimensions theory to analyze the specific manifestations of cultural compensation strategies in the English-language descriptions, as well as the differences in cultural value orientations between the Chinese and English texts.

1.2 Research Objectives

Through a comparative analysis of Chinese and English artifact descriptions, this study examines how translators supplement implicit cultural information in the source texts to reduce barriers to cross-cultural comprehension. Building on this foundation, and in conjunction with Trompenaars’ cultural dimensions theory, the study further investigates differences in cultural value orientations between the Chinese and English texts, and elucidates the role of cultural compensation strategies in meaning construction from a cross-cultural communication perspective.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Museum Translation

Museum translation constitutes an important branch of professional translation studies. Scholarly interest in this field emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, with early research primarily focused on translation norms and readability in exhibition texts. As the “cultural turn” took hold in translation studies, academic attention gradually shifted from issues of linguistic equivalence to the construction of cultural meaning and cross-cultural communicative function.

Within the field of domestic scholarship, researchers have undertaken diverse explorations from a range of theoretical perspectives. Chen Puyang and Li Dejun (2025) adopted a hermeneutic framework to examine the mechanisms of meaning interpretation in the translation of museum exhibition texts, arguing that translators must balance historical context with the cognitive expectations of contemporary audiences when handling culturally loaded artifact descriptions [1]. Song Jiangwen and Hu Jiasheng (2025) investigated semantic transfer in the translation of museum titles from the perspective of cultural outward transmission, revealing the phenomenon of semantic drift in the cross-linguistic dissemination of proper nouns [2]. Lü Zhaofang (2022), drawing on a communication studies perspective and using the Sanxingdui Museum as a case study, systematically analyzed communicative strategy choices in the English translation of exhibition texts, arguing that communicative effect should be accorded priority in museum translation [3]. Su Yiyuan (2020) employed eco-translatology as a theoretical framework to examine the English translation of artifact labels in the Yunnan Provincial Museum, focusing on ecological adaptation and cultural selection in translation [4].

In the international research domain, scholars have likewise examined museum translation from multiple theoretical frameworks. Morales and Ruiz (2024) applied Skopos theory to systematically analyze artifact translations at the National Museum of China, concluding that the fundamental purpose of artifact translation lies in achieving effective cross-cultural transmission of information, rather than in mechanical linguistic equivalence [5]. Huang and Lei (2024), drawing on cultural translation theory, explored strategies of cultural transposition in the English translation of museum exhibits, emphasizing that the accurate conveyance of cultural imagery is the core criterion of museum translation quality [6]. Ren and Niu (2025) examined curatorial practices in the context of Sino-Western artistic exchange from the perspectives of visual narrative and cultural translation mechanisms, offering new perspectives for multimodal research in museum translation [7].

In summary, while existing scholarship has made valuable contributions to museum translation from diverse theoretical perspectives, the majority of studies have remained at the level of cataloguing and classifying translation methods or strategies, with insufficient attention to the deep cultural value orientations underlying translation practice and their cross-cultural significance.

2.2 Cultural Compensation Strategies

The concept of “cultural compensation” originates from scholarly attention to the phenomenon of “cultural default.” Cultural default refers to the practice whereby communicators omit or implicitly convey certain information on the basis of a shared cultural background. In cross-cultural contexts, however, such implicit information is often inaccessible to target-language readers, thereby creating a cognitive rupture. To bridge this gap, translators typically supplement relevant information through addition, explication, analogy, or rewriting—a process that constitutes cultural compensation.

In translation theory, Nida’s (1964) theory of dynamic equivalence [8] was among the first to incorporate reader response into the framework of translation evaluation, providing an important theoretical foundation for cultural compensation practice. Newmark (1988), in his distinction between semantic and communicative translation [9], similarly noted that for culturally loaded terms, translators consider it necessary to assist target-language readers in understanding their cultural connotations through annotation, explication, or addition. Hatim and Mason (1990), drawing on discourse analysis, argued that cultural compensation is not merely a translation technique, but reflects the translator’s process of meaning mediation between different cultures [10].

In recent years, research on cultural compensation has exhibited tendencies toward localization and applied inquiry, attracting particular attention in the context of cultural outward transmission. In the field of museum translation, related studies have largely categorized cultural compensation into types such as transliteration compensation, addition, and functional substitution. Nevertheless, these studies have remained primarily at the strategic level, with insufficient exploration of the underlying cultural value orientations and cross-cultural significance. Cultural compensation, it may be argued, constitutes not merely a technical translational choice but also implicates mechanisms of value mediation between source and target cultures—a dimension that warrants further systematic analysis.

2.3 Research Gaps and Innovations

Although existing scholarship on museum translation has accumulated a rich body of findings, the exploration of the deep cultural value orientations reflected by cultural compensation strategies remains insufficient, with most studies stopping at the level of strategy identification and classification. Meanwhile, Trompenaars’ cultural dimensions theory has rarely been applied in the analysis of artifact translation, leaving considerable scope for expanding the cross-cultural interpretive dimension. In response to these gaps, this study uses the bilingual artifact description texts from the official website of the National Museum of China as its corpus, introduces Trompenaars’ cultural dimensions theory into the analysis of cultural compensation strategies, and, while examining specific manifestations of compensation, seeks to reveal the differences in cultural value orientations between the Chinese and English texts.

3. Research Design

3.1 Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The cultural dimensions theory proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1993) is one of the important models in cross-cultural research [11]. The theory aims to illuminate deep-seated differences across cultures in terms of values, social norms, conceptions of time, and the relationship between human beings and nature, thereby explaining behavioral tendencies in communication and decision-making.

The theory encompasses three broad dimensions and seven value orientations.

At the level of human relationships, five pairs of value orientations are identified: universalism versus particularism (emphasizing the universal applicability of rules or their situational dependence); individualism versus communitarianism (emphasizing individual autonomy or collective interests); neutral versus affective

(reflecting emotional restraint or expressiveness); specific versus diffuse (reflecting the separation or permeation of public and private domains); and achievement versus ascription (distinguishing whether social status is determined by personal ability or by ascribed identity).

At the level of time, a distinction is drawn between sequential and synchronic: the former emphasizes linear progression, planning, and efficiency, while the latter emphasizes multitasking, cyclicity, and flexibility.

At the level of environment, two orientations are identified: outer-directed control and inner-directed harmony, corresponding respectively to the mastery of and accommodation to nature.

In general terms, Chinese culture tends toward particularism, communitarianism, neutral expression, diffuse relationships, ascription orientation, synchronic time, and inner-directed harmony along these dimensions, while Western cultures tend relatively toward universalism, individualism, affective expression, specific relationships, achievement orientation, sequential time, and outer-directed control. It should be noted, however, that these differences are not absolute oppositions, but rather manifest dynamically across specific contexts.

In translation research, Trompenaars' theory has been widely applied to analyze value conflicts and modes of adjustment between source and target cultures. As Katan (2022) observes, the strategic choices made by translators when handling cross-cultural texts inherently reflect judgments of and responses to differences in the value orientations of the two cultures [12]. This is especially apparent in museum translation, where Chinese source texts frequently carry deep imprints of Chinese cultural values, and English translations must make measured accommodations toward target-culture orientations—a dynamic that constitutes a primary impetus for cultural compensation strategies.

This study employs corpus analysis and contrastive analysis as its primary research methods. First, a parallel bilingual comparison table of selected key artifact descriptions from the National Museum of China was constructed; all materials were sourced from the official Chinese and English websites of the museum and aligned sentence by sentence to ensure semantic correspondence and sample representativeness. Second, using the official English-language descriptions as the reference point, the study systematically analyzes—across the three dimensions of interpersonal relationships, time orientation, and the relationship between human beings and nature—the specific applications of cultural compensation strategies in the English texts, as well as the differences in cultural value orientations between the Chinese and English texts.

3.2 Research Objects and Corpus Selection

Upon verification, the English-language official website of the National Museum of China has not yet provided coverage for the full range of Chinese artifact descriptions. Furthermore, some English texts do not constitute sentence-by-sentence translations of the Chinese originals, but rather represent independently constructed formulations developed through integration and restructuring. In light of the research objectives and to ensure the representativeness of the corpus, this study selected five representative artifacts and analyzed their Chinese and English bilingual descriptions¹.

4. Case Analysis

4.1 Human Relationship

4.1.1 Achievement vs. Ascription

Example (1): Eagle-shaped Pottery Ding

Chinese description (excerpt): 鹰形陶鼎出土于一座成年女性墓葬，与其共出的物品还有十多件骨匕、数件石圭、石斧及一批生活器皿等。

¹ Chinese collection search website of the National Museum of China: <https://www.chnmuseum.cn/zp/>; English collection search website: https://en.chnmuseum.cn/collections_577/

English description (excerpt): The eagle-shaped pottery ding was unearthed in a tomb of a female adult. Other artifacts were excavated along: there were more than a dozen bone daggers, several pieces of stone gui (ritual artifact), stone axes, and a batch of living utensils.

In the Chinese description, the term “石圭” (shi gui) appears without any accompanying explanation, as is natural within the Chinese cultural context: readers are assumed to possess basic knowledge of such ritual implements, and the association between the artifact and its ceremonial function is established through shared cultural background knowledge requiring no further elaboration. This mode of expression reflects the ascription orientation characteristic of Chinese culture—cultural identity and historical knowledge are treated as the reader’s “natural premise.”

The English description, by contrast, adopts the formulation “stone gui (ritual artifact),” appending a functional gloss immediately following the transliteration. This represents a typical cultural compensation strategy—“transliteration with annotation”—whereby parenthetical addition bridges the cultural default, providing a cognitive foothold for English-speaking readers without the relevant background. The compensatory move implies an adjustment of cognitive assumptions regarding the target audience: rather than presupposing familiarity with ancient Chinese ritual systems through ascribed cultural belonging, the translator makes the functional significance explicit, aligning the expressive logic with an achievement-oriented epistemological framework in which readers actively construct cultural meaning through access to explanatory information.

Example (2): “Hou Mu Wu” Bronze Ding

Chinese description (excerpt): 器腹部内壁铸铭“后母戊”，是商王母亲的庙号。

English description (excerpt): The “Hou Mu Wu” bronze ding (food container) is reported to have been unearthed at Wuguan Village, Anyang, Henan Province in the 1930s, with its abdominal inscription giving it its name.

As in Example (1), the Chinese description introduces the institutional term “庙号” (temple name) directly and without explanation, because within the Chinese cultural context, “庙号” is a conventional identity designation within sacrificial ritual systems and constitutes shared cultural knowledge. The English description, however, entirely foregoes the translation of this institutional concept, replacing it with the formulation “its abdominal inscription giving it its name”—substituting the logic of artifact naming for an explanation of the ritual institution.

This represents a noteworthy cultural compensation choice: rather than employing direct translation or transliteration with annotation, the English text substitutes the cultural information that cannot be conveyed concisely, replacing the Chinese ritual context with a more universally intelligible narrative framework centered on the logic of artifact naming—thereby achieving the concision appropriate to an introductory text. The underlying cultural logic is that English-speaking audiences lack a basis for identifying with the ascription-oriented social identity system encoded in the miaohao institution (whereby a person’s post-mortem status is determined by their position within the clan and ritual order), and a literal or transliterated rendering would create greater comprehension difficulties than a reorientation toward an achievement-and-function-centered narrative framework.

Both examples thus exemplify a cross-cultural adaptation from ascription orientation to achievement orientation.

4.1.2 Communitarianism vs. Individualism

Example (3): Drum-playing and Singing Figurine (Ji Gu Shuo Chang Yong)

Chinese description (excerpt): 他们往往随侍主人左右，作即兴表演，随时供主人取乐。

English description (excerpt): They usually attended upon their masters and performed improvisations by beating their drums while singing.

The Chinese description characterizes the social role of court entertainers through the phrases “随侍主人左右” (attended upon their masters) and “供主人取乐” (for the master’s entertainment), embedding the individual performer within a framework of hierarchical dependency. This narrative reflects the

communitarian orientation characteristic of Chinese traditional culture: the individual's social worth is expressed through their position within a network of hierarchical relationships, with their artistic talents serving the master rather than asserting personal agency.

The English description retains the expression “attended upon their masters” and does not modernize this relationship of dependency. This is a relatively straightforward corresponding treatment, yet it also involves a compensatory cultural consideration: by preserving this relational description, English readers are enabled to perceive the master–servant social structure of the Han dynasty, rather than misconstruing the entertainers as independent artistic practitioners. In other words, the English text opts against recasting this role in individualistic language, and instead treats the faithful transmission of the communitarian context as its compensatory objective, assisting English-speaking readers in understanding the cultural ecology of performance arts in ancient China. It is worth noting that certain English expressions, such as “performed improvisations,” attribute a degree of creative agency to the performers themselves, subtly introducing an individualistic narrative undertone that represents a partial shift away from the communitarian framing of the source text. Whereas the Chinese subordinates the entire performance to the master's will—“供主人取乐” positions the act of entertainment as wholly contingent on the master's pleasure—the English phrasing implies that the performers bring something of their own to the act, suggesting a degree of autonomous artistic identity that sits in partial tension with the communitarian framework. The translation thus reflects a nuanced negotiation between the two orientations: the hierarchical relational structure is preserved at the macro level, while a trace of individual creative subjectivity is quietly introduced at the level of expressive detail, representing a partial shift toward individualism.

4.1.3 Specific vs. Diffuse

Example (4): Painted Bronze Goose-Fish Lamp

Chinese description (excerpt): 缸指的是导烟管，缸灯就是带导烟管的灯，是汉代新创制的一种灯具。

English description (excerpt): This kind of lamp furnished with smoke tunnels was a newly created lamp in the Han Dynasty.

The Chinese description devotes a dedicated explanatory sentence to the character “缸” (gang), a mode of narration that treats “gang” as a specialized term belonging to a particular cultural field—an expression of diffuse relational textual structure in which the artifact's name, its institutional connotations, and its functional properties interpenetrate, forming a coherent cultural-semantic field.

The English description, by contrast, foregoes the transliteration of gang entirely, replacing it directly with the functional description “lamp furnished with smoke tunnels,” converting a culturally specific lexeme into a functional common-noun phrase. This represents a functional substitution type of cultural compensation strategy: by dissolving diffuse cultural associations and compressing information into a specific functional description more readily processed by English readers, it shifts the mode of cultural meaning reception from diffuse to specific, thereby lowering the cognitive threshold for cross-cultural understanding. This translation strategy thus reflects a cross-cultural adaptation from diffuse to specific relationships.

4.2 Time Orientation

Example (5): Jade Dragon (Yu Long)

Chinese description (excerpt): 新石器时代很多遗址中都发现有类似龙形的遗存，或为蚌塑，或为彩绘，或为雕塑。关于龙的原型，研究者们提出过各种假说。商代甲骨文中的“龙”字和妇好墓出土的玉龙都显示，龙是一种巨头、有角、大口、曲身的神兽。新石器时代最符合这些特征的文物应属红山文化中的这种蜥体玉龙，它们应该是龙的原始形态。

English description (excerpt): ...Regarding the prototype of the dragon, researchers have put forward various hypotheses, such as snakes, crocodiles, lizards, fish, salamanders, horses, cows, pigs, deer, bears, tigers, silkworms, grubs, pine trees, clouds, lightning and so on. Both the word “Long” (dragon) in the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty and the jade dragon unearthed from the Fuhao Tomb show

that the dragon is a giant, horned, big-mouth, and curved-body mystical creature. Among the cultural relics of the Neolithic Age, those most in line with these characteristics contain the curly jade dragon in Hongshan Culture. Similar images of jade dragon also appear in Lingjiatan in Hanshan County, Anhui Province and “Xiao Jia Wu Ji” (Ridge of Xiao’s Family) in Tianmen City, Hubei Province. They may be the original forms of dragon. There are different opinions on the origin of dragons, such as lizards and crocodiles. It is said that the dragon head origins from horse head, cow head or pig head. This jade dragon is one of the earlier images of dragon that has been discovered in China. For the characteristics of its head, there is a long snout, a protruding nose with an upturned edge. The end is truncated and has two side-by-side nostrils, seeming to have the characteristics of pig head. This jade dragon is made of black and green jade and has a very high artistic value.

The English description not only conveys the information contained in the source text but also substantially supplements the enumeration of hypotheses regarding the dragon’s origins—including snakes, crocodiles, lizards, fish, salamanders, horses, cows, pigs, deer, bears, tigers, and numerous other prototype hypotheses—as well as additional information concerning analogous jade dragon sites in other regions. This augmentation is the most typical instance of cultural compensation among the cases analyzed in this group.

The Chinese source text glosses over the matter with the phrase “研究者们提出过各种假说” (researchers have proposed various hypotheses), presupposing that Chinese readers already possess a deep cultural sense of belonging to the image of the dragon. For Chinese readers, the dragon is a collective memory sustained across millennia, its significance flowing naturally through cultural transmission under a synchronic time orientation, with no need to build from scratch.

For English-speaking readers, however, the equivalent term “dragon” belongs to an entirely distinct iconographic tradition in Western culture, and without supplementary explanation, readers are highly likely to interpret the Chinese jade dragon through the lens of the Western dragon, resulting in cross-cultural misreading. By enumerating specific hypotheses, the English description makes explicit the background knowledge that is otherwise embedded within the collective cultural memory of Chinese culture, completing what may be termed a compensatory transition from synchronic time orientation—in which cultural meaning accumulates through natural sedimentation—to sequential time orientation, characterized by linear information deployment and cognitive guidance.

4.3 Human-nature Relationship

Example (6): Painted Bronze Goose-Fish Lamp

Chinese description (excerpt): 灯盘、灯罩可转动开合以调整挡风和光照，鱼身、雁颈和雁体中空相通，可纳烟尘，各部分可拆卸以便清洗，构思设计精巧合理，达到了功能与形式的完美统一。

English description (excerpt): The tray and shade can be opened and closed by turning, which serves not only as a windshield, but also to adjust the brightness of the light. The fish body, the goose neck and its body are hollow and connected to hold the fumes. All parts are dismountable for cleaning. Such ingenious design makes it a perfect combination of function and form and a piece of rare art treasure...The smoke tunnels were either single or double, which could channel the smoke into the belly of the lamp to reduce soot and keep the room clean.

The Chinese description handles the smoke-collection function succinctly with the phrase “可纳烟尘” (capable of collecting smoke and soot), leaving readers to infer for themselves the connection between smoke conduction and indoor cleanliness. This reflects Han dynasty craftsmen’s holistic consideration of the relationship between artifacts and the living environment—a design philosophy that harmonizes with nature, wherein humans and artifacts coexist in equilibrium, embodying the inner-directed harmony orientation in material form.

In conveying the smoke-collection function, the English description expands the concise original expression into “hollow and connected to hold the fumes,” with a subsequent supplementary explanation of the functions of reducing soot and maintaining cleanliness (“to reduce soot and keep the room clean”), making the implicit functional logic explicit. This treatment constitutes a functional explication type of cultural compensation: the Chinese original presupposes that readers can independently complete the

inferential chain from “collecting smoke” to “purifying indoor air,” whereas the English translation renders this inferential pathway visible, satisfying the English-speaking audience’s expectation of informational completeness. This move simultaneously reflects the expressive logic of outer-directed control orientation—function is disaggregated into operable technical steps, rather than being perceived as integrated within an overarching design philosophy. This translation strategy thus reflects a cross-cultural adaptation from “inner-directed harmony” to “outer-directed control” orientation.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on Trompenaars’ cultural dimensions theory, this study has analyzed the cultural compensation strategies employed in the bilingual artifact descriptions on the official website of the National Museum of China. The findings demonstrate that Chinese texts typically presuppose a shared historical and cultural background among readers, exhibiting characteristics of ascription orientation, communitarianism, synchronic time orientation, and inner-directed harmony; their overall expression tends toward implicitness and diffuseness. English texts, by contrast, render information explicit and structured through strategies such as transliteration with annotation, background addition, and functional substitution, adjusting the narrative logic in measured ways toward target-culture orientations including achievement orientation, specific relationships, and sequential time orientation. It is thus evident that cultural compensation is not merely a translation strategy for bridging informational gaps, but constitutes a process of value orientation reconstruction in cross-cultural contexts, thereby enhancing the comprehensibility and receptivity of museum discourse in international communication.

This study is subject to certain limitations. Owing to the scale of the corpus, only a small number of representative artifacts were selected for analysis, and the generalizability of the conclusions requires further verification. In addition, the analysis is primarily based on textual comparison and does not incorporate empirical feedback from actual readers. Furthermore, the partially reconstructive character of some English texts introduces a degree of interference into assessments of the purity of translation strategies. Future research might expand to a larger corpus incorporating multiple museum collections and multiple languages, conducting cross-comparative analysis of cultural compensation strategies, while integrating audience research methods—such as questionnaire surveys or eye-tracking experiments—to further examine the communicative effectiveness of different strategies. Building on this, the scope of inquiry could be extended to multimodal contexts to consider the synergistic interplay among images, exhibition design, and textual descriptions, thereby achieving a more comprehensive understanding of cultural communication mechanisms in the digital museum environment. Through these avenues, it may be possible to develop more adaptive translation models that achieve greater flexibility between cultural preservation and cultural adaptation, providing practically meaningful guidance for the international dissemination of Chinese museum discourse.

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