

# A Cognitive Metaphor Study on the Translation of Culture-Specific Items in Traditional Chinese Festivals: Concepts of "Year of the Dragon" and "Ancestor Worship" as Examples

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**Abstract:** From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, this paper focuses on the translation of culture-specific items in traditional Chinese festivals. Taking core concepts such as the "Year of the Dragon" and "Ancestor Worship" as research subjects, it conducts an in-depth analysis of the metaphorical conflicts and cognitive differences present in their translation processes. By comparing the effectiveness of different translation strategies, the paper proposes a dynamic translation model based on cognitive metaphor. This model aims to resolve issues of semantic loss and cultural misinterpretation in translating culture-specific items, thereby providing theoretical support and practical guidance for cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Linguistics; Culture-Specific Items; Metaphor Translation; Year of the Dragon; Ancestor Worship

## Introduction

Traditional Chinese festivals, as vital carriers of Chinese civilization, embody profound cultural connotations and a distinctive national spirit. Due to significant differences between Chinese and Western cultural cognitive systems, the translation of traditional festival terminology often encounters the dilemma of "cultural discount." Cognitive linguistics posits that the generation and comprehension of linguistic signs rely on humankind's metaphorical cognitive models of the world. The translation of culture-specific items is not merely a simple linguistic conversion but rather a process of reconstructing cognitive frameworks. Therefore, examining the translation of culture-specific items in traditional Chinese festivals from the perspective of cognitive metaphor holds significant theoretical and practical importance. This paper takes typical cases such as the "Year of the Dragon" and "Ancestor Worship" as entry points to delve into translation conflicts and strategies from the cognitive metaphor perspective. It aims to provide novel insights and methodologies for the precise cross-cultural dissemination of traditional festival culture.

## 1. Relevant Theories in Cognitive Linguistics and Translation Studies

Cognitive linguistics emphasizes the interactive relationship between language and cognition, positing that language is a product of human cognitive activity and reflects the ways in which humans perceive the world. From the perspective of translation studies, translation is viewed through the lens of cognitive linguistics as a dynamic adaptation process by the translator based on the cognitive frameworks of the source and target languages. The "Conceptual Metaphor Theory" proposed by Lakoff suggests that humans comprehend abstract concepts by mapping them from concrete conceptual domains. This mechanism is particularly prominent in the translation of culture-specific items. For example, the imagery conflict between the Chinese "龙" (dragon) and the Western "dragon" is, in essence, a result of different cultural metaphorical representations of "divine power." The Chinese "龙" symbolizes auspiciousness, authority, and strength, closely connected to the reverence for natural divine forces within an agrarian civilization. In contrast, the Western "dragon" originates from fear-driven narratives in maritime civilizations, metaphorically representing destructive natural forces. This cognitive disparity leads to imagery dislocation in the translation of "龙年" (Year of the Dragon),

highlighting the critical role of cognitive metaphor in translation.

## **2. Current Status and Limitations in the Research on Translating Traditional Chinese Festivals**

Currently, research on the translation of traditional Chinese festivals predominantly focuses on methodological approaches, such as transliteration (e.g., "饺子—Jiaozi"), free translation (e.g., "清明节—Tomb Sweeping Day"), and transliteration with annotation (e.g., "功夫—Gongfu (Chinese martial arts)"). While these methods have partially addressed certain translation challenges, they often overlook the profound role of cognitive metaphor, leading to deviations in the conveyance of cultural connotations in translated outcomes. For example, translating "重阳节" as "Double Ninth Festival" retains its numerical characteristics but weakens the folkloric metaphor of "ascending heights to ward off disasters." As a result, Western readers may struggle to grasp the cultural significance embedded in the festival.

Furthermore, current research lacks systematic analysis of cognitive conflicts in the translation process, particularly insufficient exploration of the dynamic reconstruction mechanisms of metaphorical cultural imagery. Most studies remain at the level of describing surface phenomena, failing to delve deeply into the cognitive roots behind cultural differences or to propose targeted solutions. Therefore, this paper aims to employ the framework of cognitive linguistics to reveal the essence of metaphorical conflicts in traditional festival translation and proposes a dynamic translation model based on cognitive metaphor to address the shortcomings of existing research<sup>[1]</sup>.

## **3. Cognitive Metaphor and Translation Conflict**

### ***3.1 Cross-cultural Differences in Conceptual Metaphor***

Conceptual metaphor serves as a fundamental mechanism for human cognition of the world. Individuals from different cultural backgrounds may employ distinct metaphorical representations for the same concept. In traditional Chinese culture, the "龙" (dragon) symbolizes rain and bountiful harvests within an agrarian civilization. Its metaphorical system is grounded in a "nature-divinity continuum." In agricultural societies, the dragon is closely associated with rainfall, revered as a deity controlling wind and rain and ensuring crop abundance, thus embodying natural forces. Simultaneously, due to its extraordinary power and majestic image, it is imbued with divinity, becoming a symbol of imperial authority, auspiciousness, and power. In contrast, the Western "Dragon" originates from fear-driven narratives in maritime civilizations, metaphorizing "destructive natural forces." Within the maritime environment, the Dragon is depicted as a ferocious monster capable of stirring storms, devouring ships, and bringing disaster to humanity, thus becoming synonymous with evil and destruction. This cognitive disparity leads to imagery dislocation in translating "龙年" (Year of the Dragon). A literal translation as "Year of the Dragon" fails to convey the positive connotations of "龙" within Chinese culture and may instead evoke negative associations among Western readers.

### ***3.2 The Reconstruction of Metaphorical Mapping in Translation***

The essence of translation lies in reconstructing the metaphorical network of the source language within the target language, enabling target-language readers to comprehend the cultural connotations conveyed by the original text. However, due to differences in cognitive frameworks between Chinese and Western cultures, this process often encounters numerous challenges. For instance, "祭祖" (ancestor worship) in Chinese culture metaphorically represents the "ethical obligation of family continuity," serving as a crucial component within China's social-ethical system. Through ancestral worship activities, people express reverence and gratitude towards their ancestors, emphasizing family continuity and heritage, which reflects the ethical values of valuing family and respecting elders in Chinese society. Conversely, the Western term "ancestor worship" is associated with "religious rituals," which may readily lead Western readers to associate it with religious veneration practices, thereby causing a significant deviation in cultural connotations from the ethical essence of Chinese "祭祖". Therefore, translators need to employ contextualized processing to transform abstract metaphors into descriptions of specific cultural behaviors, allowing target-language readers to grasp the true meaning of "祭祖" within Chinese culture.

### **3.3 Classification of Cognitive Conflicts**

In the complex context of cross-cultural translation, the metaphorical conflicts embedded within culture-specific items exhibit rich and multi-layered dimensions, which can broadly be categorized into three main types<sup>[2]</sup>.

#### **3.3.1 Complete Conflict**

A typical example is the contrast between the Chinese "龙" and the Western "Dragon." In Chinese culture, the dragon symbolizes auspiciousness, authority, and power. It is deeply rooted in agrarian civilization and embodies people's reverence and wishes towards divine natural forces. From ancient emperors identifying themselves with the dragon to folk tales depicting dragons as bringers of rain and benefactors of the people, the dragon has consistently been a positive figure in Chinese culture. In contrast, the Western "Dragon" is synonymous with evil and destruction, originating from the fears and imaginations of unknown dangers within maritime civilizations. In Western literature and art, dragons are often portrayed as fierce and greedy creatures, engaging in fierce battles with heroes and ultimately being slain. The imagery of the two is diametrically opposed, making cognitive resonance difficult to achieve. Therefore, special attention is required during translation to avoid cultural misunderstandings.

#### **3.3.2 Partial Conflict**

Taking "祭祖" (ancestor worship) as an example, both its core meaning and that of the Western term "ancestor worship" focus on commemorating ancestors. However, the former places greater emphasis on ethical obligations and familial continuity, representing a vital component of the Chinese social-ethical system. The latter, in contrast, often leads Western readers to associate it with religious rituals, resulting in a significant deviation in its cultural connotations. Within Chinese culture, ancestor worship is not merely a formal commemorative activity; it constitutes a moral duty that reflects the Chinese people's respect and gratitude towards their family and ancestors. In Western culture, however, ancestor veneration is frequently intertwined with religious beliefs, imbuing it with a certain religious dimension. Therefore, when translating the term "祭祖", it is essential to consider these cultural differences and select a more appropriate rendering to accurately convey its cultural essence.

#### **3.3.3 Latent Conflict**

Take, for instance, "中秋" (Mid-Autumn Festival) and its translation "Mid-Autumn Festival." While the surface names correspond directly, the profound cultural connotation of "团圆" (family reunion), deeply rooted in Chinese culture and saturated with familial affection, is often obscured in the target language, resulting in a loss of cultural significance. In Chinese culture, the Mid-Autumn Festival is a significant holiday centered on family reunion, where families gather to admire the full moon and share mooncakes, embodying the Chinese emphasis on and yearning for familial togetherness. However, Western culture lacks a directly corresponding festival with similar connotations. Therefore, while the translation "Mid-Autumn Festival" accurately conveys the temporal aspect of the holiday, it fails to communicate its underlying cultural essence. This necessitates that translators provide appropriate supplementary explanations during the translation process to assist Western readers in comprehending the cultural significance of the Mid-Autumn Festival<sup>[3]</sup>.

## **4. Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Cognitive Metaphor**

"Translation strategies from the perspective of cognitive metaphor" refers to the exploration of translation strategies based on the theoretical framework of cognitive metaphor. Cognitive metaphor posits that metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but is, more fundamentally, a fundamental mode of human cognition and thought.

### **4.1 Translation Strategies for "Year of the Dragon"**

#### **4.1.1 Limitations of Traditional Translation Approaches**

The literal translation "Year of the Dragon" is a common rendering; however, this approach readily evokes associations with an "evil creature" among Western readers, leading to cultural misinterpretation. Due to the deeply ingrained negative image of the "Dragon" in Western culture, Western audiences often conjure thoughts of terror and disaster upon encountering "Year of the Dragon," failing to grasp its positive significance within the Chinese context. The alternative "Loong

Year," adopted by China Global Television Network, attempts to circumvent confusion with the Western "Dragon" by creating a neologism. Yet, it lacks a cognitive foundation and consequently suffers from limited acceptance. For Western readers, "Loong" is a completely unfamiliar term whose meaning cannot be deduced from their existing cognitive experience, making this translation unlikely to gain widespread recognition<sup>[4]</sup>.

#### ***4.1.2 Cognitive Metaphor Reconstruction Strategy***

Based on the agricultural metaphor associated with the Chinese "龙" (dragon), a potential translation is "Year of the Agricultural Guardian." This rendering utilizes the imagery of a "guardian" to activate the cognitive framework of a "protective deity" within Western culture, thereby achieving metaphorical alignment. In Chinese culture, the dragon is closely linked to agriculture, serving as a guardian of agricultural production that controls wind and rain and ensures bountiful harvests. Translating "龙年" as "Year of the Agricultural Guardian" enables Western readers to associate it with the archetype of a protective deity present in their own cultural context. This approach can, to a certain extent, facilitate metaphorical alignment and assist Western readers in understanding the positive significance of the "Year of the Dragon" within Chinese culture.

Alternatively, the term "Year of the Lung" may be considered, as both "龙" (dragon) and "肺" (lung) are associated with the "Metal" element within the Five Elements theory of Traditional Chinese Medicine. However, this approach requires supplementary cultural annotations to prevent ambiguity. In TCM theory, the doctrine of the Five Elements correlates the organs of the human body with the five elemental phases found in nature. The correspondence of both "龙" and "肺" to the "Metal" element reflects the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of the unity of heaven and humanity. However, this connection is relatively unfamiliar to Western readers. Therefore, it is necessary to provide cultural annotations that explain the relationship between "龙" and "肺" within TCM, as well as the cultural context behind this translation strategy, in order to avoid potential misunderstandings.

### ***4.2 Translation Strategies for "Ancestor Worship"***

#### ***4.2.1 Deviation in Religiously-Charged Translations***

"Ancestor Worship" is a common translation for "祭祖"; however, this rendering accentuates religious connotations and deviates from the ethical essence of the Chinese practice. Western readers may categorize it as a "pagan ritual," thereby hindering cultural understanding. In Western culture, religious ceremonies typically adhere to strict norms and are grounded in specific belief systems. In contrast, the Chinese practice of "祭祖" is predominantly a cultural activity rooted in familial ethics, with no direct link to religious faith. Consequently, using "Ancestor Worship" in translation can easily lead Western readers to misinterpret "祭祖" as a form of religious conduct<sup>[5]</sup>.

#### ***4.2.2 Ethical Reconstruction Strategy***

An alternative translation could be "Commemoration of Ancestors." By substituting "worship" with "commemoration," this approach activates the cognitive framework of "memory inheritance" within Western culture. In Western societies, commemorating ancestors is a common practice, where people express remembrance and respect for their forebears through activities such as holding memorial services or visiting gravesites. Translating "祭祖" as "Commemoration of Ancestors" can make its meaning more accessible to Western readers while avoiding the interference of religious connotations.

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#### ***4.2.3 Metaphorical Analysis of Other Cases***

Taking the "Qingming Festival" as an example: The literal translation "Tomb Sweeping Day" conveys only the behavioral aspect while diluting the metaphor of the "cycle of life." In Chinese culture, the Qingming Festival is not merely an occasion for honoring ancestors; it also embodies philosophical concepts regarding the cycle of life and the renewal of nature. On this day, people sweep tombs and pay

respects to their ancestors while also venturing outdoors to appreciate spring blossoms, attuning themselves to the transformations in nature. This reflects the Chinese reverence for both life and the natural world. An alternative translation could be supplemented as "Festival of Remembrance and Renewal," which activates the Western cognitive schema of "commemoration and rebirth." This rendering not only communicates the core significance of commemorating ancestors during the Qingming Festival but also captures its cultural connotations related to the cycle of life and renewal, thereby enabling Western readers to better appreciate the cultural value of the festival.

Taking the "Dragon Boat Festival" as an example: The translation "Dragon Boat Festival" highlights the imagery of "dragon boats" but overlooks the folkloric metaphor of "warding off evil and preventing disease." In Chinese culture, the Dragon Boat Festival carries rich connotations. Beyond the traditional activity of dragon boat racing, customs such as hanging calamus and wormwood leaves and drinking realgar wine are observed, all of which are associated with warding off evil, preventing disease, and praying for health and safety. An adjusted translation could be "Duanwu Festival: A Tradition of Warding Off Evil," which reinforces the description of its cultural function. This rendering can emphasize the cultural function of the Dragon Boat Festival in warding off evil and preventing disease, helping Western readers understand that the festival is not merely recreational but also embodies people's prayers for health and safety.

## **5. Construction of a Dynamic Translation Model**

Based on the aforementioned analysis, this paper proposes the "Cognitive Metaphor Dynamic Translation Model" (CMDTM), which comprises the following steps:

### ***5.1 Metaphor Identification***

A thorough analysis of the metaphorical underpinnings of source-language terminology is crucial for translation to capture the cultural core. Translators must delve into the cultural context of the source language to dissect the metaphorical system behind the term. Taking the Chinese "龙" (dragon) as an example, it constitutes a "nature-divinity" metaphorical system within Chinese culture. In agricultural societies, the dragon is closely associated with rainfall, revered as a deity controlling wind and rain and ensuring abundant harvests, thus symbolizing natural forces. Simultaneously, due to its extraordinary power and majestic image, it is imbued with divinity, becoming a representation of imperial authority, auspiciousness, and power. Accurately identifying this system lays the foundation for subsequent translation and prevents the loss of cultural connotations. Only by deeply understanding the metaphorical system of the "dragon" in Chinese culture can translators select appropriate renderings during the translation process to accurately convey its cultural significance.

### ***5.2 Conflict Assessment***

Accurately determining the cross-cultural compatibility of metaphors is a crucial step in ensuring translation quality. Following metaphor identification, it is necessary to assess the cognitive compatibility of the metaphor within the target language. Different cultures often hold vastly different cognitive understandings of the same conceptual metaphor. In Western culture, the "Dragon" symbolizes evil, ferocity, and destruction, evoking fear, which stands in complete opposition to the positive imagery of auspiciousness and authority associated with the Chinese "龙" (dragon). This negative connotation makes "Dragon" an unsuitable direct equivalent for "龙," and a forced literal translation would induce cognitive conflict, thereby hindering the transmission of cultural information. Consequently, during the translation process, translators need to conduct a conflict assessment between the source-language metaphor and the target-language culture. This involves anticipating potential cultural misunderstandings in advance and taking corresponding measures to address them.

### ***5.3 Framework Reconstruction***

Skillfully constructing an equivalent metaphorical bridge in the target language is crucial when conflicts arise between the source and target language metaphors. The translator must select or create an equivalent framework within the target language to achieve an accurate transfer of cultural connotations. For instance, to address the conflict between the Chinese "龙" (dragon) and the Western "Dragon," the framework of "Agricultural Guardian" can be created. This framework retains the

symbolic meaning of the dragon as a protector of crops and a master of natural forces within agrarian culture, while also aligning with the Western cultural understanding of a guardian. It thereby provides an appropriate conceptual anchor for the "dragon" in the target language, assisting Western readers in comprehending its cultural essence. Through framework reconstruction, the translator can establish a cognitive framework in the target language that is analogous to that of the source language, enabling target-language readers to better understand the cultural information conveyed by the original text.

#### **5.4 Contextual Compensation**

The comprehensive bridging of cultural gaps in translation is a crucial step in ensuring the integrity of the translated work. Even after framework reconstruction is performed, cultural differences may still leave certain gaps, making contextual compensation essential. This involves elucidating the cultural background and metaphorical significance of the source-language terminology through annotations or supplementary information. For example, when translating the term "龙" (dragon), an annotation can be added: "In Chinese culture, the dragon symbolizes a deity that controls wind and rain, protects agricultural harvests, and represents auspiciousness and authority." This assists target-language readers in achieving a more comprehensive and profound understanding, thereby reducing potential misinterpretations. Contextual compensation helps target-language readers overcome comprehension barriers arising from cultural differences, enabling them to better grasp the cultural connotations of the source text.

#### **5.5 Acceptability Testing**

The final step of refining the translation based on feedback is a crucial safeguard for ensuring translation quality. The purpose of translation is to enable target-language readers to accurately understand and accept the source culture, making acceptability testing indispensable. This involves collecting feedback from the intended audience to gauge their cognition and level of acceptance of the proposed translation, and subsequently refining the translation accordingly. For example, regarding the innovative translation "Loong Year," research should be conducted to assess the target readers' cognitive understanding and acceptance of it. The translation should then be adjusted and perfected based on this feedback to ensure it accurately conveys the cultural connotations and is well-received. Through acceptability testing, translators can evaluate the effectiveness of their translation solutions in practical application, promptly identify any issues, and make improvements, thereby enhancing the overall quality and acceptability of the translation.

### **6. Conclusion**

Grounded in the advanced theoretical perspective of cognitive metaphor, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the underlying conflicts present in the translation process of culture-specific items from traditional Chinese festivals. These conflicts extend beyond mere linguistic conversion and critically concern the transmission and comprehension of cultural imagery. Building upon this analysis, the paper innovatively constructs a dynamic translation model, offering a practical new pathway for addressing the translation challenges of terms rich in Chinese cultural characteristics, such as the "Year of the Dragon" and "Ancestor Worship." This model systematically addresses issues of semantic loss and cultural misinterpretation in translating culture-specific items through steps including metaphor identification, conflict assessment, framework reconstruction, contextual compensation, and acceptability testing. It thereby provides robust theoretical support and practical guidance for effective cross-cultural communication.

Future research may focus on conducting multi-dimensional validation of this model. By conducting extensive empirical studies, the effectiveness and feasibility of the model can be examined. Applying the Cognitive Metaphor Dynamic Translation Model to the field of traditional culture is expected to provide more comprehensive and effective solutions for the international dissemination of Chinese culture, thereby promoting its widespread transmission and deeper understanding across the globe.

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