

A Study on Place Name Translation Strategies for the Shu Roads

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Abstract

Place name translation is an important component of cross-cultural communication and a key link in the international dissemination of Chinese cultural heritage. A Survey Report on the Southern Section of the Shu Roads (2017–2018) documents various types of remains along the southern section of the Shu Roads, including the ancient road proper, passes, city sites, bridges, grotto temples, and cliffside carvings, involving translation practices for a large number of place names of different types. Taking this text as its research object, this paper reviews the current state of place name translation research and existing problems. Referring to established classification methods in place name studies, it categorizes Shu Roads place names according to the attributes of the geographical entities they refer to, and discusses translation strategies for each type respectively, with a view to providing reference for the English translation of similar cultural heritage place names.

Keywords

Place Name Translation; the Shu Roads; A Survey Report on the Southern Section of the Shu Roads (2017–2018).

1. Introduction

Place names are proper names given by human beings to specific geographical entities. They are basic public information of society and important carriers of historical culture. A place name not only indicates a specific geographical location but also carries the historical memory, cultural connotations, and geographical features of that region.^[1] The translation of place names is not a simple conversion of linguistic symbols, but a comprehensive endeavor involving knowledge from multiple disciplines such as linguistics, geography, history, and cultural studies. Its purpose is to provide readers with more accurate geographical information, enhance the cultural visibility of a region, and shape a favorable regional image.^[2]

Place name translation has a deeper significance beyond linguistic communication. Lian Zhenran holds that place names are symbols of national territorial sovereignty, and that the standardization of Chinese place name translation into English facilitates social interaction and international information exchange, and helps safeguard national sovereignty and national interests.^[3] Kang Zhihong argues that in place name translation, the translator's real object of work is not the linguistic sign, but the specific place itself which already has a certain signifier in the source language.^[4] Place name translation research thus has both important practical application value and rich theoretical potential.

A Survey Report on the Southern Section of the Shu Roads (2017–2018), authored by Jiang Xiaochun, Qiu Ruiqiang, Luo Hongbin, Cai Dongzhou and others, is one of the volumes in the "Shu Roads Heritage Culture Series" hosted by the Shu Roads Research Institute of China West Normal University. The report systematically investigates various remains along the southern section of the Shu Roads, including the ancient road proper, passes, city sites, bridges, grotto temples, and cliffside carvings, providing rich first-hand materials for the study of Chinese cultural heritage place names.^[5] This paper will take the place name translation practice in this report as a case study to systematically analyze translation strategies for different types of place

names, with the aim of providing reference for the English translation of similar cultural heritage place names.

2. Current State and Problems of Place Name Translation Research

2.1. The Normative System for English Translation of Chinese Place Names

The English translation of Chinese place names has undergone a development process from chaos to gradual standardization. For a considerable period in history, the Romanized spelling of Chinese place names for international use was highly chaotic, with most forms determined by foreigners according to their own usage needs and linguistic habits.^[1] Among these, the "Wade-Giles" system was a commonly used form for spelling Chinese place names in English, while the "Postal System" was a spelling method adopted by the postal system in the past. This chaotic situation was not gradually improved until the late 20th century.

In 1958, the Fifth Session of the First National People's Congress approved *the Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet*, establishing Hanyu Pinyin as the domestic standard for Romanized spelling of Mandarin Chinese. In 1978, the State Council of China forwarded a document concerning the unified standard for Romanized spelling of Chinese personal and place names, deciding to adopt Hanyu Pinyin to replace various old spelling systems such as Wade-Giles. In 1977, the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names adopted a resolution to use Hanyu Pinyin as the international standard for the Romanized spelling of Chinese place names. Subsequently, in 1986, the State Council issued the Regulations on *Place Name Management*, and in 2000, the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* legally established the statutory status of the *Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet*. At the technical standard level, GB/T 16159 Basic Rules of the *Chinese Phonetic Alphabet Orthography* regulates the spelling of Chinese place names and the transliteration of minority language place names, while the GB/T 30240 series of national standards, *Guidelines for the Use of English in Public Service Areas*, uniformly stipulates the English translation norms for public place names such as roads and scenic spots. The above laws, regulations, and technical standards together constitute a complete normative system for the English translation of Chinese place names, providing a basic framework for translation practice.

2.2. Major Problems in the English Translation of Chinese Place Names

Despite the existence of a relatively comprehensive normative system, the English translation of Chinese place names still faces several urgent problems in practice.

First, there is a lack of uniformity in translated names. Multiple versions of translation exist for the same place name, as seen in the names of provinces and municipalities directly under the central government. For example, the provincial capital "广州" has the legally designated standard translation of Guangzhou in Hanyu Pinyin, but due to its history of foreign trade in modern times, the old spelling Canton remains widely used, and the Canton Tower still uses this form in its official English name. For the national capital "北京", while the official standard translation is Beijing, the historical name Peking is still retained in fixed proper nouns such as Peking University and Peking Duck. "内蒙古" is legally transcribed as Nei Mongol, yet the historically established name Inner Mongolia is commonly used internationally. Similar issues of mixed usage exist for Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. These discrepancies not only create obstacles to information transmission in international communication but also undermine the seriousness and authority of place names as symbols of national sovereignty.

Second, simple transliteration results in the loss of cultural connotations of place names. Chinese has a large number of homophonous characters and words, and relying solely on direct transliteration in Hanyu Pinyin can easily cause confusion and fails to fully convey the historical

and cultural information carried by place names. For instance, the standard pinyin for both 吉安 (Ji'an, Jiangxi) and 集安 (Ji'an, Jilin) is Ji'an, making it difficult to distinguish between the two places based on pinyin alone. Even if homophonous place names can be distinguished by adjusted spelling forms, this only solves the identification problem and cannot compensate for the loss of cultural information. Place names are carriers of regional history, natural landscapes, and folk memory. Simple phonetic transliteration can only accomplish phonological transcription, making it difficult to convey to foreign audiences the profound cultural meanings behind place names. A large number of place names derive from local topography, historical allusions, and cultural legends. If translation merely lists pinyin, the unique historical origins and cultural heritage of these place names will be completely lost, and foreign readers will be unable to grasp the stories and connotations behind them.

Although the academic community generally recognizes Hanyu Pinyin as the primary principle for translation, when it comes to practical application, there is still no unified and systematic standardization for detailed issues such as the treatment of specific generic terms and the transference of place name imagery. The southern section of the Shu Roads features a large number of distinctive historical place names including passes, plank roads, ancient post roads, mountains and rivers, and ancient towns. *A Survey Report on the Southern Section of the Shu Roads (2017–2018)* covers a rich variety of place name types, diverse generic terms, and a unified context, making it an ideal case base for refining the above translation norms.

3. Analysis of Place Name Translation Strategies

Place name classification is the foundation of place name translation. Place name classification is the basis for achieving orderly storage, management, retrieval, database conversion and sharing of historical urban place name data, as well as for analytical applications such as the distribution of place name landscapes in different periods and the evolutionary patterns of different types of place names.^[6] In translation studies, the accurate classification of place names is equally fundamental. Only by clarifying the category of geographical entity to which a place name refers can the corresponding translation of its generic term be determined. Referring to established classification methods in place name studies, place names can first be divided into two major categories according to the attributes of the geographical entities they refer to: natural region place names and human region place names,^[6] with the latter further subdivided according to specific attributes.

The core of place name translation lies in properly handling the relationship between the specific term and the generic term. The structure of Chinese place names can be summarized as a modifier-head structure of "specific term + generic term," where the specific term refers to a particular entity and the generic term identifies the entity category. Chinese place names generally consist of a specific term and a generic term, and translation should follow the method of translating the generic term by meaning and the specific term by sound.^[1] The following sections discuss translation strategies for each type of place name under the two major categories of natural region place names and human region place names.

3.1. Translation of Natural Region Place Names

Natural region place names refer to natural entities such as mountains, rivers, plains, and valleys, and their generic terms include 山 (mountain), 岭 (ridge), 江河 (river), 溪 (stream), 平原 (plain), etc. The translation of this category of place names has developed relatively mature norms in both theory and practice.

(1) Mountains and Ridges

The generic terms 山 and 岭 are translated as Mountain, Mountains, or Ridge.^[8] The specific term is transliterated using Hanyu Pinyin. When the specific term is monosyllabic, the generic

term should first be transliterated as part of the specific term and written together with it, followed by a repeated translation by meaning. For example, 泰山 is translated as the Taishan Mountain, and 衡山 as the Hengshan Mountain. When the specific term is disyllabic or polysyllabic, the generic term is added directly after the transliteration of the specific term, as in the Shu Roads place names 米仓山 translated as the Micang Mountains and 平梁山 as the Pingliang Mountain. As natural geographical entities, mountain names generally take the definite article "the" upon first mention. When referring to a mountain range as a whole, the generic term should be in plural form, such as the Micang Mountains.

(2) Water Systems

The generic terms for water system place names include 江, 河, 溪, 水, etc. The specific term is transliterated and followed by a translated generic term. For example, 白龙江 is translated as the Bailong River, 白水江 as the Baishui River, 韩溪河 as the Hanxi River, and 焦家河 as the Jiaojia River. For smaller water bodies such as 野洋溪河, the generic term 溪 may be translated as Stream, giving the full name the Yeyangxi Stream.

Although the Chinese characters 江, 河, 川, 水, and 溪 differ in written form, consideration should be given to whether the chosen English word accurately reflects the distinction. The differences among these Chinese generic terms should be recognized in order to accurately convey the category of entity indicated by the generic term, which is the essence of translating generic terms by meaning. Water system place names should likewise take the definite article "the" upon first mention.

(3) Plains, Basins, and Valleys

The generic terms for plains, basins, and valleys include 平原, 坝, 谷, etc., translated as Plain, Basin, and Valley. For example, 成都平原 is translated as the Chengdu Plain. For place names with multiple designations, such as 成都平原 also known as 川西平原 and 盆西平原, this reflects the flexible application of the principle of established usage. The coexistence of multiple names is a common phenomenon in place name culture, and translation need not force a single unified version.

3.2. Translation of Human Region Place Names

Human region place names refer to human settlements, administrative units, and various man-made structures. Their generic terms are rich in variety, and translation strategies should be differentiated according to specific types.^[7] Following established practice in place name classification, human region place names can be further subdivided into several subcategories: settlements and administrative divisions, buildings and historic sites, transportation and defense facilities, and sites and stone carvings.

(1) Settlements and Administrative Divisions

Settlement and administrative division place names cover administrative units at various levels and urban and rural settlements. The translation of administrative division place names requires different generic term correspondences according to administrative level.^[9] At the provincial level, 四川省 is translated as Sichuan Province and 甘肃省 as Gansu Province. At the prefecture-level city level, 绵阳市 is translated as Mianyang City and 陇南市 as Longnan City. At the county level, 南江县 is translated as Nanjiang County and 文县 as Wenxian County. At the township level, 沙河镇 is translated as Shahe Town and 玉垒乡 as Yulei Township. At the village level, 红光村 is translated as Hongguang Village and 陈家坝村 as Chenjiaba Village. In addition, ancient town place names take 镇 as their generic term, translated as Town or Ancient Town. For example, 碧口古镇 is translated as Bikou Ancient Town and 青木川古镇 as Qingmuchuan Ancient Town. City site place names take 城 or 故城 as their generic term,

translated as City or Ancient City. For example, 文州故城 is translated as Wenzhou Ancient City and 牟阳城 as Muyang City.

Administrative division names generally do not take the definite article "the." The full administrative level should be indicated upon first mention, such as Nanjiang County; in subsequent references, the specific term Nanjiang alone may be used without repeating the generic term. This strategy ensures accuracy of reference while avoiding redundancy, embodying the principle of practicality in translation. For smaller geographical units below the administrative hierarchy, such as 两河口, which does not have a clear administrative designation, direct transliteration as Lianghekou is appropriate.

(2) Buildings and Historic Sites

Buildings and historic sites place names cover various man-made structures such as temples, palaces, passes, and pavilions. The generic terms for temples and palaces include 寺, 庙, 宫, 殿, 祠, etc. Their translation requires the selection of accurate corresponding terms according to religious affiliation and architectural function, which is a direct manifestation of the principle of cultural connotation. For example, in the report, 桃园寺 is translated as the Taoyuan Temple, 琉璃寺 as the Liuli Temple, 文昌宫 as the Wenchang Palace, and 报恩寺 as the Bao'en Temple.

Place names of temples and palaces refer to specific architectural entities and should take the definite article "the" upon first mention. It should be noted that "temple" is a neutral term with broad applicability. To reflect more specific religious attributes, one may further choose Buddhist temple, Taoist temple, monastery, or lamasery. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are the major religions of China, in addition to Islam, Catholicism, and others. To convey cultural connotations, English terms must be strictly selected according to religious custom.^[3] For example, the Bao'en Temple in Pingwu is a Buddhist temple, and its translation as Bao'en Temple accurately conveys its nature as a Buddhist place of worship. The Wenchang Palace is dedicated to the Wenchang Emperor and belongs to the Taoist temple system; the use of "Palace" in the translation can reflect its architectural grade as a 宫.

(3) Transportation and Defense Facilities

Transportation and defense facility place names are the core category in the study of Shu Roads place names, covering roads, bridges, plank roads, passes, and more. The generic terms for road names include 道, 路, 古道, 驿道, etc., translated as Road, Ancient Road, or Post Road. For example, 阴平道 is translated as the Yinping Road, 米仓道 as the Micang Road, and 金牛道 as the Jinniu Road. For ancient road names, the specific term is transliterated and followed by "Ancient Road," as in 阴平古道 translated as the Ancient Yinping Road. For branch routes and byways, terms such as "by-route" or "branch line" may be used for distinction. For example, the report translates 阴平偏道 as the alternative Yinping Route and 阴平正道 as the main route.

The generic term for bridges is 桥, translated as Bridge. For example, 大高桥 is translated as the Dagao Bridge, 接龙桥 as the Jielong Bridge, 乐善桥 as the Leshan Bridge, and 天生桥 as the Tiansheng Bridge. The generic term for plank roads is 栈道, translated as "Plank Road." For example, 阴平栈道 is translated as the Yinping Plank Road and 险崖栈道 as the Xianya Plank Road.

The generic term for passes is 关, translated as Pass. For example, 火烧关 is translated as Huoshao Pass, 玉垒关 as Yulei Pass, 江油关 as Jiangyou Pass, and 琉璃关 as Liuli Pass.

Transportation and defense facility place names, as names of specific transportation and military facilities, should take the definite article "the" upon first mention. Pass names, when listed separately, generally do not take "the," but may take it when referring to the pass in a sentence, for example, "the pass is a natural barrier."

(4) Sites and Stone Carvings

Sites and stone carving place names cover various cultural sites, grotto temples, cliffside carvings, and stone inscriptions. The generic terms for grotto temples include 窟 and 龕, translated as Grottoes or Niches. For example, 南龕石窟 is translated as the Southern Niches Grottoes, 北龕石窟 as the Northern Niches Grottoes, and 水宁寺石窟 as the Shuining Temple Grottoes.

The translation of cliffside carvings needs to distinguish between the two elements of 摩崖 (cliff) and 造像 (carving). 摩崖 refers to the rock face, translated as "cliff" or "cliff face"; 造像 refers to carved Buddhist or divine images, translated as "carving" or "image." 玉女泉摩崖造像 can be translated as the cliffside carvings at the Yunü Spring, and 碧水寺摩崖造像 as the cliffside carvings at the Bishui Temple.

The generic terms for stone inscriptions include 碑, 题刻, and 题记, translated as "Stele," "Inscription," or "Stone Inscription." For example, 御笔手诏碑 is translated as the Emperor's Handwritten Edict Stele. The generic term for sites is 遗址, translated as "Site" or "Remains." For example, 阴平桥遗址 is translated as the Site of the Yinping Bridge, and 火烧关遗址 as the Site of the Huoshao Pass. Site and stone carving names refer to specific cultural heritage entities and should take the definite article "the" upon first mention.

3.3. Summary of Translation Strategies for Shu Roads Place Names

Based on the above analysis, the place name translation practice in *A Survey Report on the Southern Section of the Shu Roads (2017–2018)* can be summarized in the following strategic points:

First, transliteration of specific terms and translation by meaning of generic terms is the fundamental principle. Regardless of the type of place name, the specific term should be transliterated using Hanyu Pinyin, and the generic term should be translated by meaning into the corresponding English word. This principle conforms both to the national regulatory requirements for Romanized spelling of place names and to internationally accepted conventions of place name translation. Certain generic terms (such as 岭 and 江) may be transliterated in specific cases, reflecting the flexible application of the principle of "using the owner's name."

Second, the use of the definite article should be distinguished according to the category of place name. Natural region place names (mountains, ridges, rivers, streams, plains, etc.) and human region place names of the building and historic site type (temples, grottoes, steles, etc.) and the transportation and defense facility type (roads, bridges, plank roads, passes, etc.) refer to specific geographical or architectural entities and should take the definite article "the" upon first mention. Human region place names of the settlement and administrative division type (provinces, cities, counties, towns, villages, etc.), as well as ancient town and city site names, as symbols of proper place names, generally do not take the definite article "the." This distinction reflects adherence to English grammatical norms and the principle of international usage.

Third, for administrative levels, a strategy of "full form upon first mention, abbreviated form in subsequent mentions" should be adopted. For example, Nanjiang County should be given in full upon first mention with its administrative level indicated; subsequently, Nanjiang alone may be used. This ensures accuracy of reference while avoiding redundancy, embodying the principle of practicality in translation.

Fourth, the conveyance of cultural connotations needs to be supplemented through context. For place names with rich cultural significance, transliteration of the specific term cannot fully convey their cultural connotations; the meaning needs to be supplemented through annotations or explanatory text in the body of the work. This is a concrete practice of the

principle of cultural connotation and a reflection of the essence of translation as "translating meaning."^[8]

4. Conclusion

Place name translation is a task that requires both normativity and creativity. *A Survey Report on the Southern Section of the Shu Roads (2017–2018)* provides rich practical cases for the study of Chinese cultural heritage place names. Taking this report as an example, and on the basis of reviewing the current state and problems of place name translation research, this paper has systematically classified Shu Roads place names into two major categories—natural region place names and human region place names—referring to established classification methods in place name studies, and has analyzed translation strategies for each type.

The English translation of Chinese place names still faces problems such as lack of uniformity and loss of cultural information. Against the backdrop of the deepening implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative and the "going global" of Chinese culture, establishing a more systematic and standardized place name translation system has important practical significance for promoting international cultural exchange and spreading Chinese civilization. Future research may be further extended to translation practices of more types of cultural heritage place names, promoting the deepening and refinement of place name translation theory.

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