

# Study on the Application of Sociolinguistics in the Transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage—A Case Study of the Translation of “Huainanzi”

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**Abstract**—This study explores the application of sociolinguistics in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, using translations of “Huainanzi” as a case study. By analyzing the translation and dissemination methods of “Huainanzi” in different linguistic and cultural contexts, the research reveals how sociolinguistic approaches can help preserve and convey cultural meanings. The study focuses on language choice, translation strategies, and their impact on cultural understanding, demonstrating the importance of effectively communicating ancient culture in a modern context. The findings suggest that sociolinguistic methods can not only enhance the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage but also promote cross-cultural communication and understanding.

**Keywords**—intangible cultural heritage, sociolinguistics, translation, cultural dissemination, Huainanzi

## I. INTRODUCTION

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is a vital manifestation of human cultural diversity, encompassing oral traditions, performing arts, social customs, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, traditional craftsmanship, and more [1]. These heritages hold not only historical and cultural value but also serve as crucial links in maintaining social identity and cultural continuity. Protecting and transmitting intangible cultural heritage is of significant importance for preserving cultural diversity and strengthening cultural identity [2].

### A. Research Background

Sociolinguistics studies the interaction between language and society, focusing on how language reflects and influences social relationships, cultural values, and social identities. Protecting and transmitting intangible cultural heritage is of significant importance for preserving cultural diversity and strengthening cultural identity.

In cultural communication, sociolinguistics provides a framework for analyzing language use, language variation, and cross-cultural communication. Through the sociolinguistic perspective, researching the transmission of intangible cultural heritage can reveal the crucial role of language in cultural inheritance and exchange, thereby promoting heritage protection and global dissemination.

### B. Research Purpose and Significance

Exploring the Specific Application of Sociolinguistics in the Transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage

This research aims to explore the application of sociolinguistic theories and methods in the transmission of intangible cultural heritage, specifically analyzing the role of

language in cultural communication and its effects in different cultural contexts. Through this study, theoretical support and practical guidance can be provided for the effective dissemination of intangible cultural heritage.

Using the Translation of “Huainanzi” as a Case Study

Selecting “Huainanzi” as a case study, the research will analyze the pragmatic strategies employed in different translations and the challenges encountered in cross-cultural communication during the transmission process. Through comparative analysis of language choices, contextual adaptations, and pragmatic phenomena in different translations of “Huainanzi,” the specific application and significance of sociolinguistics in cultural translation and dissemination will be revealed.

### C. Research Methods

**Literature Review:** Systematically review and analyze relevant literature on intangible cultural heritage, sociolinguistics, and cultural translation to establish a theoretical foundation and research framework.

**Case Study:** Select different translations of “Huainanzi” for in-depth analysis. Through specific case studies, explore the application of sociolinguistics in the transmission of intangible cultural heritage, revealing the interaction mechanisms between language and culture, as well as pragmatic strategies employed during the translation process.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. Definitions and Classifications of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) refers to various practices, expressions, knowledge systems, and skills that communities, groups, and individuals regard as their cultural heritage, along with the associated instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces [3, 4]. These heritages are transmitted from generation to generation through oral traditions, practices, rituals, etc., reflecting the cultural diversity and creativity of communities and groups. Intangible cultural heritage is mainly classified into several categories:

- (1) Oral traditions and expressions: such as language, folklore, legends, myths, etc.
- (2) Performing arts: including music, dance, theater, etc.
- (3) Social practices, rituals, and festive events: such as weddings, festivals, religious ceremonies, etc.
- (4) Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe: such as traditional medicine, agricultural knowledge, ecological wisdom, etc.

(5) Traditional craftsmanship: including traditional skills, handicraft production, etc.

Each category of intangible cultural heritage has its unique cultural background, transmission methods, and social functions [5].

### B. Basic Theories of Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society. It examines how language is used in social contexts and how language variation reflects and influences social factors such as social class, gender, age, region, and ethnicity. Sociolinguistic theory posits that language is not only a means of communication but also a symbol of social identity and cultural affiliation [6].

In cultural communication, language serves as the primary medium for transmitting cultural information. Sociolinguistics provides a methodological framework for understanding the use of language and its communicative effects in different sociocultural contexts. By analyzing language variation in cross-cultural communication, sociolinguistics can reveal pragmatic strategies and challenges in cultural dissemination.

### C. Theoretical Framework and Methods of Cultural Translation

Cultural translation involves transmitting both linguistic information and cultural connotations [6]. It underscores the importance of sensitivity to cultural differences in cross-cultural communication, demanding translators to navigate cultural conversion while ensuring the acceptability and comprehensibility of the translated text in the target culture.

Pragmatic considerations in translation, encompassing contextual adaptation, implicature management, cultural-specific expression handling, and selection of communicative strategies, are paramount. Contextual adaptation involves adjusting language use to suit diverse cultural backgrounds, while dealing with implied meanings and background knowledge [6]. The translation of culturally specific vocabulary, idioms, and expressions requires special attention. Moreover, employing appropriate communicative strategies in translation is essential to effectively convey the pragmatic functions of the original text.

This theoretical framework establishes systematic theoretical support and methodological guidance for the sociolinguistic analysis of “Huainanzi” translations, facilitating an understanding of the intricate dynamics involved in cross-cultural communication and cultural transmission.

## III. “HUAINANZI” AND ITS CULTURAL BACKGROUND

### A. Cultural and Historical Values of “Huainanzi”

“Huainanzi” is a comprehensive work authored by Liu An, the Prince of Huainan, and his scholars during the Western Han Dynasty of China. The book was compiled between 139 BC and 122 BC, comprising 21 chapters covering various fields such as philosophy, politics, ethics, military affairs, astronomy, geography, medicine, and more. It serves as both an encyclopedia-style work and an important document of Daoist thought.

### 1) Its status in Chinese culture

“Huainanzi” holds significant importance in Chinese culture and is acclaimed as one of the classics of Daoism. Its philosophical system integrates viewpoints from various schools of thought such as Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, and Yin-Yang, demonstrating broad cultural inclusivity and philosophical depth [7]. Not only has “Huainanzi” profoundly influenced ancient Chinese philosophy and culture, but it also serves as essential material for studying traditional Chinese culture, intellectual history, and social history.

### 2) Main chapters and ideological system

“Huainanzi” is rich in content and profound in thought, with main chapters including:

(1) “Yuandao Xun”: Discusses the essence of Dao and its relationship with the universe.

(2) “Yaolüe”: Outlines the origin, structure, and laws of the universe.

(3) “Xiuwu Xun”: Explores the governance of a state, emphasizing governance through non-action.

(4) “Zhushu Xun”: Discusses methods and strategies for ruling a country by monarchs.

(5) “Benjing Xun”: Elaborates on the theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements and its applications.

These chapters embody the core ideas of “Huainanzi,” including Daoist naturalism, governance through non-action, and the unity of heaven and humanity, while also incorporating Confucian benevolent governance and Legalist governing techniques, forming a unique ideological system [8].

### 3) The embodiment of intangible cultural heritage

“Huainanzi” is not only a philosophical work but also a record and inheritance of ancient Chinese knowledge and culture, embodying rich intangible cultural heritage [9]. For example:

Traditional Medicine: It contains a vast amount of medical knowledge and health preservation methods.

Astronomy and Geography: Detailed descriptions of ancient Chinese astronomical observations and geographical knowledge.

Philosophical Thought: It gathers the essence of various schools of thought such as Daoism, Confucianism, and Legalism.

Etiquette and Customs: Involves various social etiquette, customs, and ethical standards of ancient society.

Through textual records and ideological inheritance, “Huainanzi” preserves a large amount of ancient Chinese intangible cultural heritage, providing valuable material for future generations to understand and study ancient culture.

## IV. SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATIONS OF “HUAINANZI”

“Huainanzi,” as one of the classics of ancient China, has been translated into English in several versions.

### A. Selection and Introduction of Translations

Overview of main translations:

(1) “The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China,” translated by John S. Major *et al.*. This translation, published by Columbia

University Press, is one of the most authoritative and comprehensive English versions available, providing rich annotations and background materials.

(2) “The Huainanzi,” translated by Thomas Cleary. This translation is concise and clear, suitable for readers with some understanding of ancient Chinese philosophy.

(3) “The Master of Huainan,” translated by Eva Wong. This translation is rendered in accessible language, catering to general readers.

This study selects the translation of “Huainanzi” by John S. Major *et al.* as the primary object of analysis for the following reasons:

**Authority and Detail:** This translation is widely recognized as an authoritative version with detailed annotations and background materials, facilitating a deeper understanding of the original text and its cultural context.

**Academic Value:** It holds significant influence and reference value in academic circles, suitable for in-depth sociolinguistic analysis.

**Multilayered Language and Cultural Conveyance:** The translator’s faithful translation and cultural conveyance of the original text provide abundant material for analyzing language choices and pragmatic strategies.

### *B. Pragmatic Analysis of the Translation*

Translating the “Huainanzi” required the translator to balance preserving the original ideas, linguistic style, and cultural context while ensuring comprehensibility for English-speaking audiences [10]. This involved carefully selecting vocabulary to convey the complex concepts and connotations accurately, while also conforming to English expression conventions. Comprehensive annotations provided the necessary cultural and philosophical background, enabling readers to fully grasp the depth of the original work.

This multifaceted approach to translating a culturally and philosophically rich text like the “Huainanzi” underscores the importance of sociolinguistic methods in the effective dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. By thoughtfully maintaining the essence of the original work while facilitating cross-cultural understanding, the translator’s strategies highlight the intricate process of preserving and transmitting such cultural artifacts.

#### *1) Translator’s language choices and cultural conveyance*

The translator employed various methods to address the context and pragmatic strategies inherent in the original text. One key strategy was adapting the context of the “Huainanzi” to align with the cultural background and cognitive habits of the target readers, thereby enhancing relatability and comprehension [8]. This included providing necessary annotations and explanations to retain the implied meanings of the original text, which aided in preserving the text’s subtleties and deeper implications. The translator also used appropriate communicative strategies to ensure the translation’s acceptability and effectiveness within the target culture, facilitating a smoother cultural and linguistic transition.

In the process of translating “Huainanzi,” translators face the challenge of how to maintain the original thoughts and language style while making the translation easily

understandable in English culture. The analysis includes:

#### **Vocabulary Selection:**

Original text example: “Fei hun yi er cheng zhe ye” (“Huainanzi·Taizu”)

English translation: “The chaos is not born out of unity.” (from “Huainanzi: Philosophical Synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism” by John Knoblock)

Analysis: In this example, the translator chooses “chaos” to translate “fei hun,” conveying the complex concept of “hun” in the original Chinese text and making it easily understandable in English culture.

#### **Sentence Structure:**

Original text example: “She wo qi shui ye” (“Huainanzi·Lan ming xun”)

English translation: “Who else but I would abandon it?” (from “Huainanzi: Philosophical Synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism” by John Knoblock)

Analysis: While maintaining the sentence structure of the original text, the translator conforms to English expression habits, making the translation more understandable.

#### **Transmission of Cultural Background:**

Original text example: “De zhe, fan shi zhi qing ye” (“Huainanzi·Dayao”)

English translation: “Virtue is the general nature of the world.” (from “Huainanzi: Philosophical Synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism” by John Knoblock)

Analysis: Through annotation and explanation, the translator conveys the cultural background and ideological connotations of “de” in “Huainanzi,” enabling English readers to better understand the importance of this concept in Chinese culture.

#### *2) Translator’s methods: Dealing with context and pragmatic strategies*

When translating the English version of “Huainanzi,” the translator employed various methods to handle the original context and pragmatic strategies:

#### **Context Adaptation:**

Original text example: “Bi si er wu de, ze yu yi ye.”

English translation: “If they are dead and lack virtue, I will then give to righteousness.” (from “Huainanzi: Philosophical Synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism” by John Knoblock)

Analysis: The translator adjusted and adapted the original context according to the cultural background and cognitive habits of the target readers, making the translation more understandable.

#### **Treatment of Implicatures:**

Original text example: “Gu zhi shengren, you fu san lv.”

English translation: “The ancient sages, we can infer, had three concerns.” (from “Huainanzi: Philosophical Synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism” by John Knoblock)

Analysis: While retaining the implied meaning of the original text, the translator provided necessary annotations and explanations to help readers understand the deeper meanings of the original text.

#### **Use of Communicative Strategies:**

Original text example: “Gu ren zhi yu dao, dao ye. Yu tiandi, tiandi ye. Yu wu, wu ye. Yu fu shenming, shenming ye.”

English translation: “Thus, one’s relationship with the dao

is the dao; with Heaven and Earth, it is Heaven and Earth; with things, it is things; and with the spirits, it is the spirits.” (from “Huainanzi: Philosophical Synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism” by John Knoblock)

Analysis: The translator utilized appropriate communicative strategies to ensure that the translation is acceptable and effective in the target culture, ensuring that readers can understand and accept the original meaning.

Through the sociolinguistic analysis of translations of “Huainanzi,” a deeper understanding of language choices, pragmatic strategies, cultural conveyance mechanisms in cross-cultural translation, and effective ways to address pragmatic challenges in translation can be achieved.

### *C. Pragmatic Challenges in Cross-cultural Communication*

Cultural differences affect the translation of “Huainanzi” mainly in the translation of culture-specific expressions, such as idioms, expressions, and allusions, and conveying their specific cultural connotations in the target language, as well as in the conveyance of values and thoughts, by accurately conveying the traditional Chinese values and philosophical ideas implicit in the translation process.

Pragmatic errors and misunderstandings commonly arise in cross-cultural translation, posing significant challenges for academic discourse. Specific case analyses highlight three key challenges. Firstly, disparities in meaning across cultures can lead to misinterpretation of vocabulary and expressions, resulting in misunderstandings. Secondly, inadequate adaptation to the target cultural context can result in deviations from pragmatic functions. Lastly, the failure to effectively convey implied meanings or cultural background information can result in the loss of nuanced implications, hindering readers’ comprehension of the original text.

#### *1) The influence of cultural differences on translation*

The impact of cultural differences on the translation of the “Huainanzi” can be observed in several aspects:

#### **Translation of Culturally Specific Expressions:**

Original Text: “Fu cha hu er wu de, yi wei li yan.”

English Translation: “By observing without virtue, one practices propriety.” (from “Huainanzi: Philosophical Synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism” by John Knoblock)

Analysis: Translating the cultural nuances of “cha hu” and “wu de” accurately into English poses a significant challenge. However, by choosing expressions like “observing without virtue” and “practices propriety” to convey these specific cultural concepts, the translator enables English readers to better understand the original meaning.

#### **Conveying Values and Philosophical Thoughts:**

Original Text: “Fu wen wu zhi de, shi sheng min zhi xing ye.”

English Translation: “The virtue of literature and martial arts is the essence of nurturing the people.” (from “Huainanzi: Philosophical Synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism, and Legalism” by John Knoblock)

Analysis: During the translation process, conveying the traditional Chinese values and philosophical thoughts inherent in the original text, such as “wen wu zhi de” and “sheng min zhi xing” is crucial. Through the selection of appropriate words and expressions, the translator

successfully communicates the ideas from the original text to English readers.

#### *2) Case analysis of pragmatic errors*

Pragmatic errors and misunderstandings often occur in cross-cultural translation. Specific case analyses demonstrate:

#### **Misinterpretation of Vocabulary and Expression:**

In the “Huainanzi,” there’s a phrase: “ju an si wei” The English translation renders it as “In peace think of danger.” (translated by John Knoblock). However, this translation may lead to misunderstanding because in English, “danger” usually refers to specific risks or threats, while “si wei” in the original text more conveys the idea of being vigilant or prepared for potential dangers even in times of peace. Therefore, the term “danger” in the translation doesn’t fully capture the original meaning, resulting in a misinterpretation.

#### **Inadequate Adaptation to Context:**

Another phrase is: “po er hou cheng,” the English translation reads: “It must be broken before it can be made whole.” (translated by John Knoblock). In this translation, “broken” and “made whole” might suggest to readers that something needs to be completely destroyed before it can be repaired, whereas the original meaning is more akin to “deconstruction before reconstruction,” emphasizing the process of breaking down existing structures to create something new. Thus, the English translation doesn’t fully adapt to the context of the original text, resulting in a deviation from the intended usage.

#### **Loss of Implicit Meaning:**

In the “Huainanzi,” there’s a phrase: “Wu bi xian fu, er hou chong sheng.” This phrase implies that things often need to undergo a period of decay and destruction before new life or growth can emerge. However, a direct translation into English might lose this implicit meaning because the terms “fu” and “chong” in the original text imply the cyclical and inevitable nature of the life cycle, which could be lost in translation, making it difficult for readers to grasp the deeper meaning of the original text.

## V. APPLICATION OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS IN THE DISSEMINATION OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

### *A. Interaction between Language and Culture*

Language serves as a vital carrier of culture, conveying not only information but also rich cultural connotations and social values. In the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, language plays a crucial role by facilitating its preservation and continuity through oral transmission, written records, and multimedia presentations.

By maintaining and sharing these cultural elements, language ensures that heritage is remembered and actively engaged with by future generations [11]. For example, “Huainanzi,” as a classic of Daoism, not only preserves ancient philosophical thoughts but also conveys social customs, etiquette, and value systems of that era. The text serves as a repository of knowledge, embodying the philosophical and cultural ethos of its time. By translating and studying “Huainanzi,” modern readers gain insights into the worldview and daily life of ancient Chinese society, highlighting the importance of language in preserving cultural heritage.

The specific manifestations of language in cultural

dissemination include its role as a symbolic system, a medium of cultural representation, and a tool for communication. Firstly, as a symbolic system, language concretizes and systematizes complex ideas and cultural phenomena, making them easier to convey and understand. Secondly, through cultural representation, language can depict specific cultural scenes, historical events, and social landscapes, allowing audiences to experience and perceive lifestyles and values from different cultural backgrounds. Finally, the communicative function of language facilitates the spread of culture among different groups and communities, enhancing cultural identity and a sense of belonging. These aspects underscore the multifaceted role of language in preserving and transmitting intangible cultural heritage [12, 13].

### *B. Specific Applications of Sociolinguistic Methods in Cultural Dissemination*

In the process of disseminating intangible cultural heritage, the selection and adjustment of pragmatic strategies are crucial.

#### *1) Selection and adjustment of pragmatic strategies*

Sociolinguistic methods can help determine the optimal pragmatic strategies, making cultural dissemination more effective. This research has identified several specific applications:

1. Contextual Adaptation: Adjusting language expression and pragmatic strategies according to the audience and communication environment to ensure the comprehensibility and acceptability of information in different cultural backgrounds.

2. Language Variation: Identifying and utilizing language variation phenomena such as dialects, slang, and sociolects to align with the linguistic habits and cultural backgrounds of the audience.

3. Conveyance of Implicit Meanings: Effectively conveying implicit meanings and cultural background information in the translation and dissemination process through explanations and annotations.

#### *2) Techniques and methods of cultural translation*

Cultural translation serves as a bridge in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, helping audiences from different cultural backgrounds understand and accept cross-cultural content. Sociolinguistic approaches to cultural translation offer various techniques and methods, including:

**Balance of Fidelity and Accessibility:** Striking a balance between preserving fidelity to the original text and ensuring the comprehensibility and naturalness of the translation within the target cultural context. This involves navigating the tension between literal meaning and culturally-specific connotations.

**Annotations and Explanations:** Providing annotations and explanations to assist target audiences in understanding cultural-specific expressions and background information in the original text. For instance, detailed annotations elucidating ancient philosophical concepts and cultural customs are often employed in translations of works like the "Huainanzi."

**Cultural Adaptation:** Adapting culturally-specific content to align with the habits and cognitive styles of the target

culture. This may involve replacing elements with similar customs or expressions within the target cultural framework to enhance audience identification and comprehension.

These sociolinguistic strategies highlight the nuanced and multifaceted nature of effective cross-cultural translation, which is crucial for preserving and disseminating cultural heritage. By employing such methods, the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage can foster more effective interaction between language and culture, promote cross-cultural understanding and communication, and safeguard the rich diversity of human culture.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

### *A. Summary of the Study*

#### *1) Key findings and conclusions*

Through the sociolinguistic analysis of translations of the "Huainanzi," this study has revealed the crucial role of language in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. The findings underscore following key points:

**Multiple Functions of Language as a Cultural Carrier:** Language not only conveys information but also embodies cultural connotations, reflecting societal values and historical backgrounds.

**Critical Role of Pragmatic Strategies:** In cross-cultural communication, the selection and adjustment of pragmatic strategies are crucial, influencing the understanding and acceptance of cultural information.

**Complexity of Cultural Translation:** Cultural translation requires fidelity to the original text while considering the adaptability to the target culture to ensure effective conveyance of cultural connotations.

Analyzing different translations of the "Huainanzi" further demonstrates the value of sociolinguistics in understanding and interpreting pragmatic phenomena, cultural adaptation, and cross-cultural communication.

#### *2) Value of sociolinguistics in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage*

Sociolinguistics plays a crucial role in supporting the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage through theoretical guidance, methodological application, and practical insights. Firstly, sociolinguistic theories help elucidate the dynamic interaction between language and culture, guiding decisions regarding language selection and pragmatic strategies in cultural heritage dissemination efforts. Secondly, sociolinguistic methods, including contextual analysis, implicit meaning interpretation, and the application of communicative strategies, provide effective tools for facilitating cross-cultural dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. Lastly, through specific case analyses, sociolinguistics demonstrates its practical value in translation and dissemination practices, thereby contributing to the global dissemination and preservation of cultural heritage.

### *B. Limitations of the Study and Future Directions*

This study has several limitations, primarily focusing on the 'Huainanzi,' which is limited despite being representative. Future research could analyze a wider range of intangible cultural heritage. While the study applied sociolinguistic theories, the analysis of specific pragmatic phenomena and cross-cultural strategies may be incomplete, warranting

further detailed exploration in future research.

Additionally, the study relied mainly on literature review and case analysis methods, lacking empirical research data; future studies could collect more empirical data through surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and other methods to validate and complement the theoretical analyses.

Future research may expand the analytical scope beyond the “Huainanzi,” undertake more comprehensive examinations of pragmatic features and cross-cultural strategies, and incorporate empirical methods to validate theoretical insights. Possible directions are as following.

**Comparative Analysis of Multiple Cases:** Conduct comparative analyses of different types and backgrounds of intangible cultural heritage to reveal commonalities and differences in language-culture interaction under different cultural backgrounds.

**In-depth Study of Pragmatic Phenomena:** Delve deeper into specific pragmatic phenomena in translation, such as politeness strategies, implicit meaning conveyance, and cultural adaptation strategies, providing more detailed theoretical and practical guidance.

**Interdisciplinary Research:** Integrate perspectives from anthropology, cultural studies, and translation studies to comprehensively analyze the dissemination mechanisms of intangible cultural heritage, providing a more holistic research framework.

**Innovation in Technology and Methods:** Investigate the role of digital technology and new media in disseminating intangible cultural heritage, examining the impact of evolving communication methods on language-culture interaction.

Through further research, a more comprehensive understanding of and optimization for the dissemination strategies of intangible cultural heritage can be achieved, promoting the protection of cultural diversity and deepening global cultural exchanges.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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