

# On the C-E Translation of Calligraphic Technique Terminologies for Cursive Script on the Bamboo Slips and Wooden Tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang

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**Abstract:** With the development of overseas Sinology, the C-E translation of Chinese culture on calligraphy has become increasingly important. However, existing English translations often inconsistently use core terminology and inevitably omit cultural information, which limits their efficiency in international communication. Examining the English translation of calligraphic technique terminology for cursive script on the bamboo slips and wooden tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang (BSWTHDD), the article situates the English renderings within the specialized context of calligraphy and draws on translation strategies adopted by Jiang Yi and other scholars in related parallel texts. The study seeks to establish a pragmatic equivalence between morphological description and cultural transmission and explore effective strategies for standardizing the English translation of slip calligraphy terminology, thereby facilitating the international communication of writing culture for the bamboo slips and wooden tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang (BSWTHDD).

**Keywords:** Calligraphy on the bamboo slips and wooden tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang; Cursive script; Calligraphic technique terminologies; C-E translation strategies

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## 1. Introduction

The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China called for building cultural confidence and strength and securing new successes in developing socialist culture, while emphasizing the need to strengthen international communication capacity and enhance its effectiveness <sup>[1]</sup>.

In the context of globalization, traditional Chinese culture plays an important role in composing national cultural soft power. As material remains of culture in Chinese calligraphy in the Han Dynasty, BSWTHDD

preserve multiple script styles and provide first-hand evidence for research on the evolution of ancient scripts and early calligraphy <sup>[2]</sup>. Among them, cursive slips are representative examples of cursive writing during the clerical-script transformation and provide important evidence for studying the evolution of Chinese character writing <sup>[3]</sup>. *Timing and Change: A Study of Writing on the Bamboo Slips and Wooden Tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang* systematically analyses the characteristics of stroke-form, patterns of turning, and mechanisms underlying improvements in writing efficiency in cursive script on BSWTHDD, providing a concrete scholarly context for the English translation of calligraphy terminology. However, up to now, studies of the translation and international dissemination of this material are still rather scarce. Existing research has pointed out persistent problems in the translation and introduction of Chinese calligraphy, including inconsistent terminology, loss of cultural information, and insufficient communicative context <sup>[4]</sup>. These are also major challenges in current translation practice.

Therefore, taking Li Yifeng's *Timing and Change: A Study of Writing on the Bamboo Slips and Wooden Tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang* <sup>[5]</sup> as a case study, this study focuses on how terminology standardization can facilitate international dialogue on BSWTHDD, provide discursive resources for overseas Sinology, and support the international dissemination of Chinese culture through terminology <sup>[6,7]</sup>.

## **2. Terminology characteristics of the cursive slips**

Calligraphic technique terminologies for cursive script on BSWTHDD are characterized by strong cultural specificity and historical cumulativeness. While describing stroke forms, brush techniques, and aesthetic contexts, these terminologies also embody the distinctive aesthetic concepts and cultural philosophy of Chinese calligraphy <sup>[8,9]</sup>.

### **2.1. Cultural connotations and translation challenges of the terminology**

As specialized linguistic symbols, calligraphic terminologies are highly culture-specific, and their meanings go far beyond superficial descriptions of techniques. This constitutes a key difficulty in their cross-cultural dissemination and transmission. The context-dependence of these terminologies makes it difficult to find direct corresponding concepts in the target language <sup>[10]</sup>. Both transliteration and literal translation will result in substantial cultural default, increasing the cognitive burden on readers. The aesthetic connotations of terminologies and the systemic relationships are also factors that must be considered in the process of translation <sup>[9,11]</sup>. The English translation of terminologies in cursive script on BSWTHDD should therefore convey technical meanings accurately while retaining their cultural connotations to the greatest extent.

### **2.2. Terminologies of brush technique and stroke form**

The calligraphic technique terminologies for cursive script on BSWTHDD can be divided into two major categories: stroke form terminology and brush technique terminology. Stroke form terminology describes the visual and morphological features of the written result and focuses on the static, completed forms of strokes. Brush technique terminology, by contrast, emphasizes the prescribed actions and dynamic relationships involved in the writing process <sup>[5]</sup>. Brush technique is the “cause”, whereas stroke form is the “effect”. Preserving this causal relationship is essential to conveying the subtle distinction between the two types of terminology in translation.

### 3. Innovative teaching methods

Calligraphic technique terminologies for cursive script on the BSWTHDD have unique imagery, experience and systematicness. Translators must have sight beyond superficial meanings, attend to the cultural connotations embedded in the terminologies, and adopt a comprehensive strategy centered on “compensation” to achieve efficient communication accurately.

#### 3.1. Semantic loss and cultural default

Calligraphic technique terminologies are rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, and historical contexts. It is particularly important to accurately transfer information and reflect aesthetic effects and cultural connotations in the translation of terminology<sup>[12]</sup>. However, in the process of converting the source language into the target language, there will inevitably be semantic loss and cultural default. This semantic loss is multidimensional. Since terminologies are interconnected within the source culture to form a network, the appearance of an individual term in isolation can cut off these network relationships.

Cultural default refers to the phenomenon that the cultural background knowledge shared by the author and the source readers is omitted in the text<sup>[10]</sup>. As an important carrier of Chinese culture, calligraphy contains terminologies that are self-evident to native readers and specialists but may leave Western readers with gaps in understanding, thereby creating a cultural default of blank understanding. Terminologies such as “spirit resonance” (Qiyun), “wind and bone” (Fenggu), and “spirit and charm” (Shencai) are central concepts in classical Chinese aesthetics. There is no completely equivalent terminology in Western aesthetics, which also constitutes a cultural default in the aesthetic category.

#### 3.2. Explicit and implicit compensations

The core of explicit compensation is “addition”: translators add information in a clearly visible manner, either within or outside the text, to compensate for missing semantic or cultural information<sup>[13]</sup>.

Translators may use literal translation in the main text and provide explanatory notes in footnotes, end-of-chapter notes, parentheses, or integrated in-text forms. They may also use apposition or parenthetical phrases to supply brief explanations and the background knowledge readers need for comprehension.

The core of “implicit compensation” is “conversion” and “reconstruction,” which require greater creativity and artistic sensitivity on the part of the translator<sup>[13]</sup>. By selecting appropriate corresponding concepts in the target language and using techniques such as syntactic reconstruction or rhetorical adjustment, the translator can make up for cultural default and semantic loss elsewhere in the target text. Implicit compensation is always deliberately used to preserve the heterogeneity of the source culture, depart from target-language conventions, and guide readers toward the cultural context of the source language.

### 4. Case analysis

In explicit compensation, footnotes, end-notes, in-text notes, appendixes and other ‘ addition ‘ means are used to express compensatory information obviously, whereas implicit compensation integrates cultural information into the target text through transformative devices such as syntactic restructuring, thereby compensating for informational gaps<sup>[13]</sup>.

## 4.1. Strategies of explicit compensation

The core of explicit compensation is “addition”. In the process of English translation of terminology, translators primarily use adds explicit information inside or outside the text through amplification and substitution to add explicit information to compensate for missing semantic and cultural information<sup>[13]</sup>.

### 4.1.1. Explicit compensation through amplification

Amplification is a common translation strategy that adds information needed to compensate for culturally loaded or semantically implicit information in the source language when translating highly culture-specific terminologies.

(1) Example 1:

ST: 草书简中出现的尖撇、点等，在后来字体演变中也成为楷书的典型笔形。

TT: The Jian Pie (a pointed-start left-falling stroke) and dots that emerged in the cursive slips later became standard stroke forms in regular script as Chinese characters evolved.

Analysis: As a stroke-form term, “Jian Pie ( 尖 撇 )” should be translated with particular attention to its morphological features so that its cultural connotations are adequately conveyed. From the perspective of explicit compensation, “Pointed-start” captures the sharp onset of the stroke, while “Left-falling ( 撇 )” establishes a contrast with the internationally standardized terminology for the “Right-falling ( 捺 )” stroke.

By avoiding pure transliteration, the translation retains the terminology’s cultural identity while bridging potential cognitive gaps for target-language readers, balancing cultural preservation with information transfer. “Pointed-start” specifies more precisely than “Pointed” that the relevant feature occurs at the beginning of the stroke. The annotation avoids introducing other dynamic factors and therefore prevents over-interpretation. On subsequent occurrences, the shorter form “Jian Pie” can be used directly, balancing cultural preservation with textual concision.

(2) Example 2:

ST: 前文分析已经表明，总体而言，敦煌汉简草书简圆转数量多于硬折的数量。

TT: As shown above, Rounded Turns (arc-shaped changes of direction made with a continuous brush movement) outnumber Angular Turns (cornered changes formed through a deliberate check of the brush) in cursive writing on the bamboo slips and wooden tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang (BSWTHDD).

Analysis: As contrasting terminologies, “Rounded Turn” and “Angular Turn” not only have differences in the shapes of the stroke but also in whether brush movement is continuous and whether the turning point is cadenced. When the two terminologies first appear together, Definitional notes are used to clarify that in a Rounded Turn, the brush tip changes direction along a continuous arc, whereas an Angular Turn has a conscious stumble at the corner. These parenthetical definitions provide explicit compensation while the parallel structure preserves the systemic relationship between the terminologies. The choice of the same central word “Turn” indicates that both belong to the same category of turning stroke forms.

The graphic opposition between “Rounded” and “Angular” is reinforced by the dynamic contrast between “continuous movement” and “deliberate check” in the parenthetical definitions. Conversely, if it is directly written as a lengthy term, the repetition of the following text will be cumbersome; if completely omitted, it will cause semantic loss.

### 4.1.2. Explicit compensation through substitution

Substitution refers to the replacement of source-language terminology with a functionally equivalent target-language terminology to compensate for multiple semantic layers or systemic associations. It is particularly

suitable when the target language lacks a closely corresponding concept.

(1) Example 3:

ST: 转折笔形包括“圆转”(笔锋弧形过渡)与“硬折”(角状顿挫), 其分类依据运笔力度、速度等动态参数。

TT: Direction-Shift Strokes, including Rounded Turns (arc-shaped transitions of the brush tip) and Angular Turns (angular pauses with deliberate pressure), are categorized according to dynamic parameters such as brush force and movement speed.

Analysis: In translation, expressing stroke form terminology “转折笔形” as “Direction-Shift Strokes” instead of a literal rendering such as “Direction-Turn Brushwork” could obscure the terminology’s cultural connotations. Taking into account the characteristics of the stroke form, “Shift” avoids the limitation of “Turn,” which tends to suggest accurate motion, and can encompass both abrupt and gradual changes in direction.

In English, “Turn” tends to describe a smooth, arc-shaped movement. Although it retains the ideas of direction and turning, it does not adequately capture the angular check implied by “Zhe (折)” (fold/break). Although “Angular Transition Stroke” can describe the angular quality of “Zhe (折)”, it cannot convey the smooth transition implied by “Zhuan (转)” (rounded turn). By contrast, “Shift” suggests the dynamic mechanics of a change in brush-tip direction and resonates with the calligraphic concept of “Shi (势)” (momentum or potential). Replacing “Brushwork” with “Stroke” also creates a consistent word-formation network with existing terminologies such as “Press-Stroke” (捺笔), reinforcing the systematic principle of terminology translation<sup>[11]</sup> and conforming to the communication philosophy of “Timing and Change”.

## 4.2. Strategies of implicit compensation

Implicit compensation integrates cultural information into the target text through transformative means such as syntactic restructuring, reconstructing cultural defaults caused by differences between source-language and target-language cultural schemas<sup>[10,14]</sup>. In terminology translation, implicit compensation is realized primarily through two methods: foreignized literal translation with category word supplementation and syntactic restructuring.

### 4.2.1. Foreignized literal translation + Category word supplementation

Foreignized literal translation with category-word supplementation refers to a strategy that retains the cultural imagery of source terminology and clarifies its professional classification by adding category words such as “Technique” or “Stroke”. This approach is suitable when a source terminology has vivid imagery that can evoke reasonable associations in literal translation but still requires a category word to clarify its professional classification.

(1) Example 4:

ST: 敦煌汉简草书简书写特征主要通过转折与连笔映带等典型笔形表现出来。

TT: The salient features of cursive writing on the bamboo slips and wooden tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang (BSWTHDD) are manifested primarily through typical stroke forms such as Direction-Shift Strokes, Connected Stroke Forms, and Linking Trail Strokes.

Analysis: In Chinese painting and calligraphy theory, “Yingdai (映带)” is an important term. It is rooted in the aesthetic ideal of “Qi-vein Continuity,” and emphasizes responsive relationships among brush movements. Literal renderings such as “Echoing Strokes” or “Reflective Belt” can’t convey this cultural connotation. The foreignizing literal rendering “Linking Trail” uses “Trail” to evoke the dynamic image

of the brush tip moving through the air and leaving an invisible trajectory, while “Linking” expresses its function of connecting preceding and following stroke forms. The category word “Strokes” then identifies the terminology as a type of stroke form.

Through implicit compensation, the translation recasts the aesthetic connotations of “Yingdai” as visual imagery accessible to English readers, avoiding the destruction of the simplicity of terms by rigid literal translation and lengthy interpretation.

(2) Example 5:

ST: 后人在书体判断与书法审美评价中所谓的“离方遁圆”，与此书写现象不无关系。

TT: The concept of “Li Fang Dun Yuan (Transcending the Square and Escaping the Round)”, used by later critics in judgments of script style and calligraphic aesthetics, is closely related to this writing phenomenon.

Analysis: In the translation, “Square ( 方 )” and “Round ( 圆 )” are used to retain the core images in the source language; the translation renders “Li ( 离 )” not simply as “Leaving” or “Departing From” but as “Transcending”. This choice retains the literal sense of separation while compensating for the underlying philosophical connotation of transcending formal constraints.

Similarly, “Dun ( 遁 )” is rendered as “Escaping” rather than “Fleeing” or “Avoiding”. This choice compensates for the active nuance of deliberate or skillful evasion in the original. Compared with the more neutral “Avoiding”, “Escaping” also better conveys the calligrapher’s negative attitude toward rigidity and perfection.

#### 4.2.2. Implicit compensation + Syntactic restructuring

Syntactic restructuring refers to reorganizing source-language sentence structure by adjusting word order, modification relationships, and similar features when source languages and target languages have substantial differences in syntax, so as to achieve an equivalent pragmatic function in the target language. In this translation process, the translation method of syntactic reconstruction strategy is mainly reflected in two levels, structural reorganization and logical explication.

Structural reorganization involves adjusting word order and changing sentence patterns so that the translation conforms to English expression habits.

(1) Example 6:

ST: 因考虑到上下字之间的映带关系，起笔顺锋与收笔出锋已成常态。

TT: To maintain the linking relation between vertically adjacent characters, Forward Brush Entry and Exposed-tip Ending have become standard practice.

Analysis: “Forward Brush Entry ( 起笔顺锋 )” and “Exposed-tip Ending ( 收笔出锋 )” each combine the position of the action, the state of the brush tip, and the effect.

Literal renderings such as “Start the Brush along the Tip” and “Finish with the Tip out” would weaken the correspondence between the two terminologies. The translation uses conversion to nominalize the Chinese verb-object structures. “Entry” and “Ending” create a parallel opposition between the beginning and end of a stroke, while “Forward” and “Exposed” incorporate the state of the brush tip into the terminological phrases. Together, “Forward Brush Entry” and “Exposed-tip Ending” form a more coherent terminology network for stroke initiation and stroke termination.

The hyphen in “Exposed-tip” makes the modifying relationship between “Exposed” and “tip” explicit, avoiding structural ambiguity involving “Ending”. This solution preserves semantic distinctions while giving

the two terminologies a parallel, reusable naming pattern in English, thereby improving consistency across chapters.

Logical explication makes relationships that are implicit in the source text, such as causality, subordination, and contrast, more explicit in the translation.

(2) Example 7:

ST: 交叉笔形实为敦煌汉简草书简书写中的部分右上起圆转笔形。

TT: The Crossing Stroke Form is in fact a subtype of the Right-Upper-Initiated Rounded Turn used in cursive writing on the bamboo slips and wooden tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang (BSWTHDD).

Analysis: In the source text, “实为” conveys the meaning of revealing the underlying classification or essence, rather than functioning as a simple judgment verb and literally rendering it as “Actually” would simply convey the basic meaning but introduce a more colloquial and contingent tone that is inconsistent with the rigor of academic prose. The use of “in fact” in the restructured sentence not only signals the underlying classification but also increases the formality and certainty of the statement. The word “部分” in the source text indicates that the Crossing Stroke Form is a subtype of the Right-Upper-Initiated Rounded Turn. A rendering such as “Part of” would not make this terminological hierarchy explicit. Since both the superordinate and subordinate concepts are treated within the same stroke-form terminology system, using “A Sub-type of” explicitly marks their hierarchical relationship and preserves the integrity of the terminological system. As the core predicative expression, “A Sub-type of” is the core of the sentence, which accurately conveys the main judgment of the source sentence and preserves its logical precision.

## 4. Conclusion

Taking Li Yifeng's *Timing and Change: A Study of Writing on the Bamboo Slips and Wooden Tablets of the Han Dynasty in Dunhuang* as a reference, this article focuses on the translation of calligraphic technique terminologies for cursive script on BSWTHDD. After systematically analyzing terminological features and translation challenges, translation compensation strategies are used to explore a terminology-translation approach that respects academic conventions while responding to the requirements of international communication; it caters to the writing philosophy of “Timing and Change”<sup>[5]</sup>.

Embodying aesthetic concepts and philosophical ideas distinctive to Chinese calligraphy, calligraphic technique terminologies for cursive script on BSWTHDD are marked by strong cultural specificity and systematicness. Strategies of compensation provide effective ways to reconstruct the cultural information embedded in terminology accurately. Explicit compensation makes up missing semantic and cultural information through amplification and substitution. Implicit compensation internalizes cultural default and semantic loss into the normal syntactic structure of the target text. Combining explicit and implicit compensation offers a viable way to preserve both form and spirit in terminology translation. This approach is applicable not only to the translation of calligraphic technique terminologies for cursive script on BSWTHDD but also to the standardized English translation of Chinese calligraphy terminology more broadly. Research on the translation of calligraphic technique terminologies for cursive script on BSWTHDD is not only an interdisciplinary topic spanning linguistics and translation studies but also a bridge for cultural communication and academic dialogue. It should be pointed out that the source of the corpus in this paper is relatively concentrated. Future research could extend to the English translation of terminology for other script

styles in Dunhuang slips, such as clerical script. With the help of corpus-based methods to conduct larger-scale studies of terminology standardization, we will draw more generalizable conclusions in the future<sup>[4,6]</sup>.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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