



# 文化艺术品的可译性

——在国外建造中国园林的困难和挑战

TRANSLATABILITY AND UNTRANSLATABILITY OF A CULTURAL ARTIFACT

——THE CHALLENGES OF BUILDING A CHINESE GARDEN

■ 周 明 著

 哈尔滨工业大学出版社

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## 内容简介

中国园林是中国文化的缩影和精华。除了园林中随处可见的诗词歌赋在翻译过程中存在的不可译因素之外,园林作为一个建筑整体在海外建造中也不能保持纯正的原汁原味。本书通过中国园林这个例子,向读者展示各种文化的独特之处。期望各文化之间能互相理解,加强交流。

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# 前言

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作者于 2002 至 2006 年在美国加利福尼亚州的汉庭顿博物馆做翻译及文化顾问。本书通过描述汉庭顿博物馆在建造中国园林过程中遇到的问题,向读者展示中国园林这个文化艺术品在海外传播及建造过程中遇到的困难和挑战。作者通过描述中、美两国建筑设计师在设计图纸及确定建筑方案时的谈判过程,展示了双方由于文化背景不同而产生的不同意见;通过采访园林项目的主要负责人和设计师,详尽地阐述了各自的观点和理念;另外,作者通过采访和问卷调查中国园林旅游者的方式,说明了中、西方对于园林截然不同的理解。

本书以作者在美国克莱蒙研究生院的博士论文为基础,此论文于 2003 年末起稿,于 2007 年初定稿不但涉及传统的文字翻译,更进一步将翻译的范围拓宽,从符号学的角度详尽地阐述了文化艺术品从一种文化背景翻译到另一种文化背景过程中遭遇的不可译性,说明原意的丧失不可避免。但本书的目的并非使翻译和文化交流者气馁,而是强调各国文化的独特性,进而鼓励文化交流和相互理解。

周 明  
2009 年 12 月

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# CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

The Huntington Library, located in San Marino, California houses an art collection and botanical gardens, and has been engaged in building a Chinese garden on the grounds since 1990's. As an interpreter and translator for this project since the summer of 2003, I found it interesting that some linguistic and cultural specificities in a Chinese garden are not translatable when creating one within a culture and a country vastly different from China. This study looks into the difficulties and challenges of translating the concepts and contexts in a Chinese garden. The introductory section first presents the research questions and hypothesis; it then contains a brief background regarding research on untranslatability. Included in the introduction is an anecdote on building a threshold in a doorway because it is an example of an untranslatable nonverbal sign (there is meaning for a threshold in Chinese culture). The introduction also states this study's purpose, rationale, significance, and in addition, it includes an overview, which covers a review of the literature, methodology, conclusions, and implications. Finally, limitations of previous studies and definitions of terms used in this dissertation are discussed.

## Research Question and Hypotheses

The guiding question throughout the study has been what is untranslatable when building a Chinese garden at Huntington Library? Within the primary question are three interrelated hypotheses. The first is that, as a cultural artifact, a Chinese garden's physical form cannot be totally translated. The second is that the verbal forms in the garden, such as the naming, cannot be totally translated. For instance, some meaning in garden naming will be lost when translated from Chinese to English. The third is that visitors' perceptions of garden elements differ greatly between the two distinctive cultures. The attempt at finding answers to the research questions can contribute to translation studies, anthropology, cultural studies, education, and landscape design and construction.

Through unplanned participant observation, I describe what happened during the garden design meetings, thus lending insight into the issue of translatability and untranslatability. The interviews with garden experts help provide concrete evidence of the difficulties and challenges of recreating a Chinese garden. They also shed light on what is lost in translating names of different scenic sites. Finally, the surveys and interviews completed by garden visitors provide both quantitative and



qualitative data to analyze what significant differences exist between the two cultural groups' perceptions. The methodology and results section of this dissertation will provide information that can ultimately support or refute these three hypotheses and answer the main research question.

## **Background**

In 1999, the late Peter Paanakker, a Los Angeles businessman and philanthropist, gave a 10-million-dollar endowment to build a Chinese garden that would "showcase the wonders of Chinese culture." Since that time, Chinese and American designers have worked together to design and build a Suzhou-style scholar garden. This is a complex process because there are many factors to consider—from every detail of design to its actual construction. The process of design and construction is contingent on a joint effort between American and Chinese garden architects and designers. To Chinese designers the garden has much to do with the choice and placement of water, rocks, buildings, plants, and the consideration of what seem to be a million nuances. Chinese designers take all these factors for granted, because for them, the placement, texture, size, and shape of garden objects are recognized as related meanings. For example, piling rocks inside of a pond or naming a building holds cultural, philosophical, and symbolic meaning, and not just because rocks might look well in a pond, but also because specific types of rock have meaning based on their type, color, or texture. Trying to create a Chinese garden does not only mean simply using Chinese plants or styles of structural architecture; garden creation is like any other art form that requires interpretation of a visual, aromatic, or aural object. The Chinese designers are creating a garden that holds the same deep meanings and context in a very different geographical, linguistic, and cultural setting.

When Chinese and American designers and architects met to discuss the design details, it was a shock for both sides when it was discovered that the task was more complicated than they originally expected. For each side, East and West, creating a built artifact requires specific knowledge about culture and contextual meaning, and not simply using materials that would be found in China. The garden's function held a different meaning for Chinese and Western designers, thus brings the issue of translatability to light.

Translating meaning and context embedded in the design was not always obvious to a visitor or a non-Chinese designer. For the Chinese to understand the points made by Western design specialists requires an understanding of how things are done in the United States. In this situation, translation of a meaning that is embedded in the use of specific materials or the way they are placed obviously is one of the most important parts of the design. Therefore, construction and design requires that the notion that the end product's meaning and significance can be "translated" and understood. This issue alone was difficult to explain to Western designers and what everyone originally thought as a fundamental and natural task proved to be unacceptable and difficult from

each side's perspective. Different cultures have their own ways and standards of architecture and construction. American standards pose some difficulty for Chinese building styles, and vice versa. In addition, translation also includes understanding meaning. Since one object, or form, may convey several different meanings, this characteristic of lacking one-to-one correlation between form and meaning makes translation of cultural artifacts a difficult task.

Translating a Chinese garden involves the translation of language forms and nonverbal physical forms. First, the factor of untranslatability is encountered when translating Chinese language into English. Chinese writing is graphic, and English writing is phonetic. When Chinese is translated into English, meanings expressed in the written characters or shapes are lost. In addition, some cultural and referential meanings embedded in written words do not have equivalents when translated, or particular meanings are lacking. Secondly, translation consists of understanding the nonverbal physical forms as is the case with the garden; water, rocks, buildings, and plants all have a nonverbal meaning other than obvious names for the items. My working experience as an interpreter includes being a cultural interpreter and has led to an interest in studying the difficulties and challenges of recreating a Chinese cultural artifact in America. Through observation, I will try to detect what is untranslatable, and by interviewing experts and garden visitors from both cultures, I will further prove that human beings may universally admire beauty and artistic form, while discerning different meanings or interpretations from the same art form. Put in other words, each culture may share some commonalities such as enjoyment and respect for the arts, but they also have their own way of interpreting and doing things, such as building gardens. Cultures are equal, and there is no way of judging good or bad, right or wrong when it comes to artistry; it is important to realize our differences and understand that diversity in all forms including art, language, or culture should be respected. The puzzlement or shock one may experience after a first encounter with another culture leads to a logical thought that others may experience culture shock from our culture or practices. This awakening towards understanding could lead us to appreciate and respect each other. In this study, it is my desire to use the Huntington Library Chinese Garden Project to illustrate the untranslatability issue between cultures, and that nonverbal forms can speak to us through symbolism. A good place to start the introduction is with an anecdote that comes from one session of the design meetings.

## **An Anecdote**

In the summer of 2003, a design delegation from Suzhou, China had a meeting with American architects to discuss the design detail of a Chinese garden to be built in Southern California. Serving as an interpreter, I noted an instance of untranslatability when American and Chinese experts discussed the use of a threshold in doorways. The designer (Chinese) and the architect (American) had their own embedded knowledge regarding including or taking out the threshold. (Note: the

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following dialogues were recalled from memory and were not the exact quotes)

American architect: (pointing at the design drawings) “No, all thresholds have to be moved. We cannot have them in the building.”

Chinese designer: (looking surprised) “What is wrong with the thresholds? If you visit a Chinese garden in China, you see them in every building.”

American architect: (looking puzzled) “People cannot get into the building with a threshold.”

Chinese designer: (throwing out his palms in amazement) “Well, that is easy; visitors can step over and get into the room.”



Figure 1.1 A threshold (The horizontal beam located at the bottom one-third of the picture). (Photograph by Ming Zhou at Humble Administrator's Garden, Suzhou China, June 15, 2004).

I learned a lesson from the incident involving the use of thresholds in doorways: the lack of understanding between the designer and the architect does not occur from foreign language interpretation. They are interpretation and translation issues that arise from nonverbal forms, from culture to culture, or from language to language. The garden designer and the architect understand the explicit information in the translation of their discussion; however, they are unaware of the implicit meanings embedded behind the words. Being foreign to the Chinese culture, American architects may think, “Why put an extra piece of wood at the gate of the building that is so inconvenient for the visitors, especially for those in wheelchairs?” On the other hand, being unfamiliar with American building design and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) with its requirements for building access and maneuverability, Chinese designers may wonder how one can omit the threshold of a building. Thresholds have existed in traditional Chinese buildings for centuries. Indeed, the use of thresholds has high significance culturally because it is believed that a threshold fends off evil spirits from entering a home or building. Moreover, by stepping over the threshold, the visitor realizes he is in a different space. Use of space is critical in garden design and will be discussed further in the Literature Review. This piece of cultural knowing about thresholds is particular to Chinese culture, and has become part of life so the Chinese do not feel anything special

or restrictive about using thresholds; the use of a threshold is embedded in what the Chinese view as commonplace and they may not think about it. In the minds of Americans, accessibility and equality are the first priority, and this mentality has been deeply embedded in the culture and written into law. Standards for Accessible Design issued by the US Department of Justice require public institutions to provide equal access for people with mobility, visual, hearing disabilities or impairments (DOJ) (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994).

The threshold example shows that both cultures were unaware of the other's cultural knowing. Both Chinese and American designers were puzzled by the big difference in interpreting the use of a nonverbal symbol, "threshold." Visually seeing the plans with a threshold included proved to be untranslatable to American architects because they did not have information as to why a threshold is used. The same holds true for the Chinese designers; if they did not know about state building codes and accessibility, then not using a threshold was incomprehensible to them. The Chinese also do not see a path as having to be a minimum of 36" so wheelchairs can use it; they see the path in another way using embedded meaning.

Many different cultures are coming into close contact with one another during the current age of globalization requiring a mutual understanding between cultures. Translating language is not the only form of translation; the notion of translation extends its boundary to include the translation of artifacts, artwork, and other types of nonverbal signs or activities. Thus, the impetus and motivation for this study comes from observation of two vastly different cultural groups in translating meaning and design principles. Through questions posed to designers, builders, and viewers of Chinese gardens I have noted issues of translatability and untranslatability.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study has several purposes. First, it examines "untranslatability" of cultural artifacts. All cultures are unique and it follows that knowledge that is specific to one culture may be unknown in another, thus causing untranslatability of forms beyond the written or spoken word.

Second, the study illustrates how abstract concepts can be untranslatable. Creating an understanding between Chinese and American garden designers is essential for sharing concepts from one another's culture, and can result in a cooperative work effort, which, in turn, will make visiting the garden meaningful for all visitors.

Third, my experience in translating enables me to be both an insider and an outsider with respect to Chinese culture. The threshold is an example of "knowing" that is specific to a culture. The Z Factor, a term coined by John Regan, Professor of Education at Claremont Graduate University, means that the insiders of a culture take their embedded knowledge for granted. Outsiders experience this knowledge as "strange" and "different" from their own culture, which causes them to explore and uncover this knowledge. In fact, the American and Chinese designers

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working on the project are an excellent example of the Z Factor, as are visitors to Chinese gardens, and the study will reflect this in other sections.

Fourth, because the American educational setting is composed of students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, this research aims to help educators realize the importance of being both an insider and an outsider in the classroom. Educators can be alert to what may be ordinary or commonplace for students of the dominant, geographic culture, while students from other cultures have no idea what is commonplace or ordinary. Addressing this type of issue could alter places of learning, influence educational practice, and affect the process of gaining or disseminating knowledge.

Lastly, the final purpose is to set an example for transdisciplinary studies to show how one topic such as building a Chinese garden can cross disciplines such as anthropology, education, cultural studies, translation studies, communication, architecture, art, and landscape design. It is my desire to present research findings that can be used to help people from Chinese and Western cultures appreciate and respect the special elements in each other's culture.

## **Rationale for the Study**

Translatability has become an issue in translation studies because as global communication and translation activities have increased, the notion of translatability has attracted interest from the fields of cultural and anthropological studies. Translatability holds important implications for educational studies because the goal of education is to provide clear research evidence of the diverse contributions of all cultures so appreciation, respect, understanding, and unity of purpose will result.

Through my observation at the design and construction meetings, it is apparent that Chinese and American cultures have their own way of doing things and have particular embedded meanings, concepts, and contexts that they take for granted. Examples of this are given in various parts of this paper including a section on the definition of terms. In that section one example is given of knowledge that is specific to a given culture, and unknown to other cultures. The example is of the Liberty Bell (meaning to Americans). When we see something that we think is a negative symbol, and another culture thinks it is positive, we can suffer from culture shock in trying to adjust our thinking to "positive." The threshold example shows culture shock occurring as you read the dialogue of the designers. When culture shock occurs, one can move toward understanding diversity, practicing cultural exchange, and how others on the "outside" view, or do not view, things. In the exchange, a learning process can take place about one's own culture and way of life. Therefore, the lens of observation is not always towards the outside world and others, it should be turned inward to study oneself.

The rationale thus far is to expand understanding of diversity and culture, finding applications

for employing understanding in new areas, and to recreate something that can be understood or translated by anyone who views it, and in this case, it is a Suzhou Scholar Garden.

## **Significance of the Study**

The study's significance lies in its contribution to anthropology, sociology, translation and communication studies, and in creating a basis for how knowledge and information can be shared and understood. This study attempts to clarify and elucidate the problems of cultural, verbal, and nonverbal translation, and to enhance cultural awareness so that schools, educators, and learners, understand the difficulty that arises when we view other cultures in our own context. Often contexts are not similar and for education, students from different cultures can be active contributors within their cultural context while bridging their knowledge with new cultural input, finding a way to express their own point of view without losing or forfeiting context or meaning. Moreover, American culture can cultivate an understanding of the translation of nonverbal signs in other cultures.

Lastly, this dissertation is the first scholarly effort that examines issues of translatability of a Chinese cultural artifact—the Suzhou Scholar Garden.

## **Dissertation Overview**

A general overview of the dissertation is introduced in this section, including literature review, methodology and conclusions and implications.

### **Review of the Literature**

In the Literature Review chapter, I discuss the three major translatability theories, Universalist, Deconstructionist, and the Monadist. Primary focus will be on Monadist theory and represented by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Lee, 1996), which argues that nothing “representing” culture can be totally translated because each community interprets reality in its own particular way and this jeopardizes translatability. The Z Factor Principle is introduced as well to illustrate why untranslatability occurs.

This chapter also introduces works on Chinese classical gardens. The literature review will provide background information on gardens, and garden characteristics in design and interpretation such as philosophical underpinnings, history, literature, creative arts, and aesthetic standards. Also examined are physical characteristics such as size, shape, use of space, color, types of plants or structures used based on specific embedded meaning for each item, and using surroundings to enhance the quality of the garden while paying homage to the beauty, meaning, and significance outside it.



## **Methodology**

### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

In this section, methods chosen for research and analysis of the data will be discussed. First, various methods were employed for data gathering. I was the interpreter at the Chinese and American garden design experts meeting, which gave me a unique position as an observer. Therefore, an observation method was chosen to record and describe the heated discussions among Chinese and American designers, which ultimately led to uncovering cultural specificity in both cultures.

Second, I utilized an interview method to gain information from nine Chinese and American garden experts. These experts were asked their opinions about the difficulties and challenges encountered in the design and construction process. Employing an interview method facilitated open-ended responses by both American and Chinese designers. In this way, I hope to highlight and illustrate the issues of untranslatability. A criterion for this sample of interviewees was that Chinese and American experts (1) were involved in the design and construction of the Huntington Library Chinese garden, and (2) that they were knowledgeable in the field of Chinese gardens. The interview was designed to uncover complexities of translation of nonverbal signs (Chinese) and common design knowledge based on building codes and requirements (American).

Third, a survey was given to a second sample group. This sample was divided into two subgroups that were surveyed on their perceptions of Chinese garden elements. The first subgroup was made up of sixty people who were raised and acculturated in an American cultural environment and the second subgroup consisted of sixty people who have been raised and acculturated in a Chinese cultural environment. The survey was composed of questions that have unique appeal and intrinsic meaning for the cultures represented in the two subgroups discussed above. The survey gave information that could be quantitatively analyzed through various methods such as descriptive tests and an independent samples t-test to note significant differences between the two cultural groups when they viewed the same garden element.

In addition, fifteen Chinese and seventeen American visitors to a garden in China were interviewed to obtain in-depth information on their perceptions of the garden (32 participants), thus complementing or adding to results gained from the surveys.

### **Data Findings and Data Analysis**

Analysis of the interviews and the surveys requires different methodologies. Observations from design meetings help address the first hypothesis that—as a cultural artifact, Chinese garden's physical form cannot be totally translated. The interview data of garden experts were used to uncover instances of difficulties and challenges of building the garden, thus addressing not only the first hypothesis, but also the second one—"the verbal forms in the garden, such as the naming, cannot be totally translated." The survey and interview data of garden visitors were examined and analyzed

through various quantitative, statistical methods in order to address the third hypothesis that “the visitors’ perceptions of garden elements differ greatly between the two distinctive cultures.” All three methods are discussed and they assist me in eliciting responses to the research question—“what is untranslatable when building a Chinese garden at Huntington Library?”—so as to establish corroboration with the above mentioned three hypotheses.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Summarizing findings, noting implications, and offering direction for future research will be presented. Conclusions will be drawn based on the results of the various statistical research methods, and the responses of interviewees. What effect does the type of translation employed in this research have on translation studies, cultural studies, the field of education, and communication studies? In addition, I include recommendations or consideration for future research in cultural awareness, translatability, untranslatability studies, and educational areas.

## **Limitations of Previous Studies**

Although there is a great body of research on translatability issues, most of them are focused on the (un)translatability of a literal text or written word; translating an actual artifact that possesses, or consists of, a physical presence or elements, has seldom been studied. The Chinese garden project provides a living example of the translatability and untranslatability of an artifact. This study will fill the gap in studying translation of nonverbal forms, in that it will provide an example of one or many meanings being conveyed through the use and placement of objects—not spoken word or written text. The opportunity of having an artifact as the setting for this study, two different cultural garden design groups cooperating on the project, and my verbal and written translation experience provides a research scenario not yet explored. Thus, previous studies have not focused on nonverbal elements in a single scenario (a garden) that consists of translating meaning, emotion, and feelings from multiple signs of garden elements.

There are many studies on the different aspects of Chinese gardens, but no research has focused on the difficulties of building one in a different cultural environment and the lessons learned from the experience. This study fills the gap and helps raise the level of awareness and importance for translatability issues in current global communication and cultural exchange.

## **Limitations of This Research**

I served as the interpreter at the Huntington design meetings, and this experience stimulated my interest in writing this study. So when I started to write the dissertation, all the observations data

were from my notes, which I took while I was doing interpretation. Therefore, the quotes in the texts were not the exact wordings from the dialogues but based on my notes and memories. Since this was unplanned observations, I prepared neither a tape recorder nor a video camera to document all the details happened. It was possible that there were some other misunderstandings that I might miss. In addition, the inexact quotes might to some extent reduce the credibility of the study.

## Definition of Terms Used in This Book

*Artifact*. Artifact refers to an object produced or shaped by human craft, especially a tool, weapon, or ornament of archaeological or historical interest.

*Chinese garden*. There are many different kinds of gardens in China. Since the garden at the Huntington Library is modeled after Suzhou scholar gardens, the term “Chinese garden” in this paper refers to Chinese Suzhou-style private scholar gardens.

*Cultural artifact*. In this paper, the term refers to an object produced that contains embedded beliefs, meanings, emotions, feelings, contexts, and expressions of a particular culture. For instance, the Chinese garden is a cultural artifact because there is a philosophical, cultural, spiritual, or literary meaning in the use of space, texture, type of plant or structure, and/or color, size, or shape.

*Cultural specificity*. Refers to something that is particular to one culture.

*Cultural untranslatability*. Failure to find a target language/object equivalent of a cultural symbol or item with embedded meaning. An example would be similar to the American symbol, “The Liberty Bell.” Americans seeing this image know it is related to America’s War for Independence (1776, CE) in that the bell was rung to signify victory until the bell cracked. Those unfamiliar with the American cultural significance of this symbol of liberty or freedom may not understand the emotion and sentiment it elicits.

*Culture*. The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. These patterns, traits, and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community, or population

*Culture shock*. Surprise or puzzlement experienced due to unfamiliar situations encountered in a country or culture unfamiliar with our own.

*Knowing*: The knowledge embedded in the perception, understanding, and appreciation of cultural artifact(s) or cultural phenomena.

*Linguistic untranslatability*. Failure to find a target language equivalent for a source language. This can be due entirely to differences in word meaning(s) in the source language (SL) or the target language (TL).

*Nonverbal translation*. Refers to the translation of nonverbal forms such as a physical attribute in a Chinese garden. For example, a Lake Tai stone placed by itself in a pond could represent a