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Translation strategies of four-character-idioms in Xiqu texts

Abstract

Idioms appear regularly in Xiqu (known as Chinese opera), among which four-character idioms are typical representatives of Chinese culture, expressing certain meanings with fixed forms and structures in common sayings. The research is a small-scale study of English translation of Chinese four-character idioms based on a corpus consisting of the text and English translation of a single Xiqu, *Silang Visits His Mother*. In this article, the translation strategies of idioms in Xiqu are studied, and through the analysis of examples, it is found that four translation strategies (Wang and Wang 2013) are preferred in translating: literal translation, free translation, abridged translation and borrowing translation. The analysis of these foundational strategies reveals that the unique dual structure of some Chinese idioms often necessitates abridged translation, highlighting the importance of addressing both semantic content and structural differences when translating idioms between Chinese and English.

Keywords: Chinese four-character idioms, translation strategies, Xiqu

1 Introduction

Idioms in Western languages are interpreted as multi-word expressions, such as *being over the moon* or *don't count your chickens before they hatch*; they are omnipresent across languages and one of their intriguing features is that their meaning is not compositional. Furthermore, their use is often related to a particular group of people or to a social or cultural network. This means that their meaning cannot be understood without its accompanying cultural background in many cases. These two reasons, the problem of the literal translation and the problem of the transferability of the cultural meaning encoded in the idiom, are the most challenging features of idioms in the eyes of translators, especially when the language pairs and the two cultures are not strongly interrelated. This is the case when we try to translate Chinese idioms into English.

Usually, in Chinese, there is a group of expressions called 习语 *xiyu*, or idioms, including 成语 *chengyu* (four-character idioms), 谚语 *yanyu* (proverbs) and 歇后语 *xiehouyu* (two-part allegorical sayings).

Zhu Xiaohan:
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(1) chengyu¹

Source text	拔	苗	助	长
Chinese Pinyin	ba	miao	zhu	zhang
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	pull out	seedling	help	grow
Literal translation	pull up the seedling and help it grow taller			
My translation	violating the law of the development of things or rushing to achieve results will lead to bad results			

(2) yanyu

Source text	上	梁	不	正	下	梁	歪
Chinese Pinyin	shang	liang	bu	zheng	xia	liang	wai
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	up	beam	no	straight	down	beam	crooked
Literal translation	if the upper beam is not straight, the lower beam will be crooked						
My translation	subordinates imitate their superiors' vices						

(3) xiehouyu

Source text	铁	打	的	公	鸡	— —	一	毛	不	拔
Chinese Pinyin	tie	da	de	gong	ji	--	yi	mao	bu	ba
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	iron-made			rooster		--	one	fur	no	pluck
Literal translation	an iron-made rooster -- not a hair can be plucked									
My translation	stingy people									

They are fixed phrases or words that are customarily used in Chinese, mostly from ancient literary works, which are widely circulated and often contain profound cultural connotations. Among them, four-character idioms are the most numerous and frequently used. According to statistics, there are over 50,000 idioms (chengyu) in total, 96% of which follow the four-character structure. Therefore, four-character idioms can be considered a significant representation of traditional Chinese culture, with fixed structural forms and fixed sayings to express certain meanings, and are applied as a whole in a statement, assuming the components of subject, object and attribute. Most idioms are inherited from ancient times and represent a story or allusion, and most of them are four characters; however, there are also three, five or even more than seven-characters idioms,² for example, 闭门羹 *bi men geng*, lit. closed-door soup, which means refusal to let somebody in, 桃李满天下 *tao li man tian xia*, lit. peach and plum

¹ These three examples are idioms that are very often used in daily life in Chinese. There is no specific literary source for them.

² <https://baike.baidu.com/item/成语/71626>

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fill the world, which means abundant harvest of talent, 醉翁之意不在酒 *zui weng zhi yi bu zai jiu*, lit. a drinker not really interested in alcohol, which means accomplishing something besides what one set out to do. Kang and Yang (2022) observe that Chinese four-character idioms are established expressions, each consisting of four Chinese characters, that have been in use for an extended period within the Chinese language. A Chinese four-character idiom can be seen as a single language unit, or a word, but it has richer meanings than a word.

The research object of this article is the English translation of Chinese four-character idioms (later shortened to “idioms”). As cultural vocabulary items often appearing in Xiqu, idioms should not be neglected if we want to translate the contents of Xiqu well. This article aims to examine, through a limited set of examples, whether the four translation strategies summarized by Wang and Wang (2013) – namely, literal translation, free translation, abridged translation, and borrowing translation – can be applied to the English translation of idioms in Chinese Xiqu. Additionally, it seeks to identify which of these strategies is used more frequently in comparison to the other three.

In this article, I will first review the literature on the translation of Chinese idioms; secondly, I will introduce the theoretical background of the topic in section 3; this will be followed by an introduction of the corpus and a discussion with examples of the problems which should be dealt with in the translation of idioms in Xiqu in section 4; and finally, I will evaluate my results and draw conclusions. I do not dive into the vast literature on idiom research in general, nor do I intend to provide an overview of the current research topics on idioms (but see Burger 2007), as my aim is more practical: to illustrate the strategies used to translate Chinese idioms into English.

2 Literature review

There are many books and articles which discuss the origin of Chinese idioms (e.g. Ma Guofan 1962 and 1978, Shi Shi 1979, Xiang Guangzhong 1982, Xing Fuyi 1986, Huang Boryong & Liao Xudong 1991, Wang Qin 2006, Shao Jingmin 2007). For example, Ma (1978: 89) believes that the basic forms of Chinese idioms are four-syllable idioms and proverbs, and two-part allegorical sayings etc., which are kinds of fixed phrases, the fixed nature, and the idiomatic, historical, and national characteristics of idioms are what distinguish them from general phrases. In addition to research on the origins and introduction of Chinese idioms, there are also many complex fields of study in Chinese idiom research, encompassing a variety of linguistic issues such as structure, cognition, semantics, semantic rhyme prosody, etc., which will not be explained further in this article. The aim of this article is to study the problem of translating idioms.

There has been considerable exploration of idiom translation by both Chinese and European linguists. In her 1991 work on translation studies, British translation scholar Baker discusses strategies for idiom translation with English as the source language. Baker proposes four primary strategies for translators when handling idiomatic and culturally specific expressions: employing an idiom with an equivalent meaning and form (complete equivalence), using an idiom with an equivalent meaning but a different form (partial equivalence), translating through paraphrase, and omitting the idiom in translation. Bassnett (2013) and Venuti (1995) examine and expand upon Baker's strategies for idiom translation, contributing to discussions on linguistic and cultural

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translation methods. The aforementioned studies reflect the research on idiom translation methods with non-Chinese source languages as the corpus. This article, however, focuses on idiom translation with Chinese as the source language. Therefore, the following literature will provide a more detailed review of studies by researchers on the translation of Chinese idioms.

What Kang & Yang (2022) studied was in alignment with my translation research, the corpus we examine are both Chinese four-character idioms, and they argued that a Chinese idiom is a longstanding phrase with a fixed structure, typically consisting of four Chinese characters. Kang & Yang believe that Chinese four-character idioms have various origins, such as fables, myths and legends, historical events and so on, and that Chinese four-character idioms also have certain characteristics, such as fixed structure, conciseness, etc. The authors proposed three practical strategies for translating Chinese four-character idioms, namely “literal translation”, “free translation”, and “the combination of literal and free translation”. It is undeniable that these three strategies are applicable to the translation of any linguistic unit from any source language to any target language. However, for culturally specific terms, such as idioms, there may be more suitable translation strategies.

Given that Chinese idioms, including chengyu (four-character idioms), proverbs, and xiehouyu (two-part allegorical sayings), all use concise language to convey deeper meanings, I believe that the translation strategies for these various types of Chinese idioms can be applied interchangeably. Using the broader category of idioms as the corpus, I conducted a literature review and analysis. Abdessamad (2023) examined the translation methods for Chinese idioms as a whole, without further subdividing them. He argued that different cultural elements should be dealt with appropriately when translating idioms to avoid misunderstandings and cultural deficiencies, and he used domestication and foreignization as the method for idiom translation. Domestication is a translation method that adapts the text to fit the culture of the target language, sometimes at the cost of losing details from the original. On the other hand, foreignization focuses on keeping the original meaning intact, even if it means intentionally going against the norms of the target language. He believed that adopting domestication as the main strategy in translating Chinese idioms into English is certainly important, but a balanced approach should be followed, with domestication as the main strategy and foreignization as a supplement, since if translators cater to target language readers in dealing with cultural differences, they may make readers lose the enjoyment of certain unique aspects of Chinese idioms, which may not be conducive to the sustainable development of Chinese culture.

Fan (2007) mentioned that cultural differences are the source of difficulties in translating idioms, and that Chinese idioms are shaped by the socio-cultural values of Chinese culture, so we need to combine cultural, contextual, cognitive and linguistic phenomena in translating idioms. When translating, the pragmatic meaning should take precedence over the literal meaning, and the literal meaning should be preserved to the maximum extent possible while guaranteeing the pragmatic meaning. The strategies for translating idioms that she discussed are: annotation, which preserves the idiom’s unique cultural essence and contributes to the diversity of global languages and cultures; semantic translation, which conveys the original message while maintaining cultural nuances, thus fostering intercultural communication; and communicative translation, applied when semantic translation may lead to misinterpretation of the idiom’s

literal or connotative meanings, or when the idiom becomes unclear or challenging to understand, necessitating modifications to enhance comprehensibility in translation.

Wang and Wang (2013) observed distinct differences between English and Chinese idioms, examining these variations through the lenses of religious beliefs, historical allusions, and regional traditions. These cultural differences create some difficulties in translation, so some strategies need to be used. The first strategy they proposed is Nida's translation theory of literal translation (1993), believing that literal translation can preserve the characteristics of the original culture and can successfully spread the original culture. Some examples are given, such as 知识就是力量 *zhi shi jiu shi li liang*, lit.: knowledge is power, in English: knowledge is power, which is the same expression and has the same meaning in both Chinese and English. In some cases where literal translation is not possible, such as when the culture of the source language cannot be understood by the readers of the culture of the target language, they suggested using free translation. In addition, they claimed that Chinese idioms often feature a parallel dual structure, employing two distinct metaphors to convey the same idea. In such cases, translators may adopt an abridged translation approach to omit redundant parts. The final strategy is borrowing translation. They argued that no matter what the cultures of the different countries are, feelings and social experiences will have something in common, that is to say, these idioms in different languages will have something in common. In this case, the translator can use the borrowing translation strategy to translate such idioms into the other language.

Overall, this literature review aimed to explore the existing strategies to idiom translation. Several scholars, including Baker (1991) and Abdessamad (2023), have explored the challenges of idiom translation, emphasizing the importance of preserving cultural meaning, and the others such as Fan (2007) and Wang & Wang (2013), have specifically studied the translation of Chinese idioms. However, few studies address the translation of idioms within the context of Chinese Xiqu specifically. Therefore, I aim to examine whether these translation strategies are equally applicable in the context of Xiqu. To this end, I employed the strategies proposed by Wang & Wang (2013), with a detailed analysis presented in the following section.

3 Theoretical framework

The four strategies suggested by Wang and Wang (2013) form the basis of the theoretical framework in this article. I believe that their translation strategies are suitable for English translation of idioms in Xiqu (as summarized in Table 1 below). Literal translation means that the literal meaning and cultural connotation of idioms can be preserved as much as possible to help the target readers understand the unique expression and cultural background of the original text. Wang and Wang give some examples, such as *blood is thicker than water*, *water drips over a stone*, etc., which can be directly translated into Chinese, so that readers can easily accept and understand them. They are of the view that literal translation is the most basic way of translating idioms.

Free translation is a translation strategy that can be considered when literal translation cannot be used, which allows the translator to adjust the translation according to the actual meaning and context of the idioms to ensure its natural fluency in the target language. For example, translating 井底之蛙 *jing di zhi wa*, lit.: the frog at the bottom

of the well as “a person with a narrow perspective” can more accurately convey the meaning of the idiom. In the case of large cultural differences, free translation can avoid misunderstandings brought about by literal translation and better convey the intention and emotion of the original text.

According to Wang and Wang (2013), in Chinese idioms, there is always a paralleling dual structure, that is to say, the use of two different metaphors to express the same meaning, in which case an abridged translation can be used. The analyses presented later in this paper show that this strategy is used most often in the translation of idioms in Xiqu, because some idioms using two or more different metaphors to express the same meaning often appear in Xiqu, which can make the Chinese lyrics of the Xiqu more rhyming and catchy. When translating into English, on the other hand, if all the words are translated straight, this will not be catchy, but will make the translation redundant and cumbersome. For example, in my text, there is an idiom 刀枪剑戟 *dao qiang jian ji*, lit.: knife, spear, sword and halberd, the translation uses abridged translation to generalize this four-word idiom, directly translating it as “the weapons”³.

The essence of borrowing translation is that it borrows familiar expressions from the target language, which can enhance the target readers’ understanding and the resonance of the text. This strategy is more often used in examples with cultural correspondences, where certain words from the target language’s culture can be directly corresponded to the original text, thus achieving the best translation effect.

Strategies	Explanation
Literal translation	• retain the original cultural characteristics • successfully spread the original culture • idioms and proverbs are the same in terms of form of expression and meaning
Free translation	• its advantage lies in being succinct and distinct • benefits the style of writing • prevents certain messy cases caused by literal translation
Abridged translation	• removes the repeating sections • the same meaning of the idioms should be expressed using different methods
Borrowing translation	• retains the vivid image, the rhetorical effect, and the ethnic characteristics of the original idioms

Table 1. Strategies employed in idiom translation by Wang & Wang (2013: 1694)

³ See Example (6) for details.

4 Corpus

Xiqu is a very traditional element of Chinese culture. It is also known as Chinese opera, but the name “Xiqu” is more appropriate because of the specific characteristics of this kind of art (for more on this, see Zhu 2023). Because of its refined language, Xiqu usually contains many idioms. There is limited research on Xiqu translation, but the Xiqu text contains a wealth of linguistic elements such as modal particles, metaphorical expressions, and idioms or proverbs, making it a valuable subject for translation studies. I am currently conducting research on Xiqu translation with the aim of promoting this culturally rich and outstanding aspect of Chinese heritage globally. For certain unique terms within Xiqu, such as idioms, specialized research is necessary to identify appropriate translation strategies. In this article, the corpus I selected consists of a Chinese Xiqu I am currently researching, *Silang Visits His Mother*, along with its official English translation. The Xiqu contains approximately 7,500 Chinese characters and an English translation of about 11,300 words. There is no specific reason for choosing this exactly Xiqu, as all Xiqu are rich in idiomatic expressions. *Silang Visits His Mother* contains a large number of idioms, among which four-character idioms amount to a total of about 30; since four-character idioms are also representative of Chinese culture, and each idiom contained in this Xiqu is rich in profound culture, so it is worth considering and analyzing them for translation. In this article, I will select about 9 four-character idioms to analyze their different translation strategies, and illustrate which translation strategy might be more suitable for translating idioms in Xiqu. My corpus is relatively limited, consisting of 30 four-character idioms. Through the application of the translation strategies discussed in this article, the translated texts have utilized the four strategies I examined. However, analyzing all 30 examples would lead to redundancy, as many share similar translation strategies. Therefore, I have selected 9 representative examples to illustrate which translation strategies are appropriate to use in different contexts. Nonetheless, I acknowledge the limitations of my study due to the small sample size of the corpus.

The story of this Xiqu *Silang Visits His Mother* takes place during the Northern Song Dynasty in China (960-1127 AD). In the battle of Golden Sands Beach, the Yang family had suffered heavy casualties and Yang Yanhui (Yang Silang), the fourth son of the Yang family, was captured by the enemy Liao, and later married to the Liao princess Tiejing. Fifteen years later, the Liao general Xiao Tianzuo carried out a large military operation near the border, and Yang Yanhui’s mother came to the border from the other side. Silang wanted to visit his mother because he missed her, and his wife, Princess Tiejing, helped Silang steal the arrow of command to cross the border to visit his mother. The Empress Dowager Xiao discovered Silang’s absence and, after he returned to Liao, Xiao wanted to have him executed. Princess Tiejing begged her mother to save her husband’s life, and Silang was finally forgiven.

5 Results and discussion

5.1 Literal translation

(1)

Source text	谢	天	谢	地
Chinese Pinyin	xie	tian	xie	di
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	thank	heaven	thank	earth
Literal translation	thank heaven and thank earth			
English translation in the corpus	thank heaven and earth			

The example here uses literal translation. The original text is an idiom and a word often used in Chinese to express a tone of exclamation that indicates an attitude of gratitude at the occurrence of an event, thus expressing gratitude to fate. In the context of Chinese culture, there are heavenly palaces in our myths, which are inhabited by immortals, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, etc. In contrast, gods appears more often in European cultures. In English, the common expression of exclamation and thanksgiving for good fortune is often *Thank God* or *Thank goodness*, which, if the source language idiom in the above example is translated in this way, is not in line with Chinese culture. The literal translation maintains the metaphorical and national characteristics of the original idiom, and also achieves the mood of exclamation that is intended to be conveyed, and has thus already achieved the purpose of translation.

(2)

Source text	事	不	过	三
Chinese Pinyin	shi	bu	guo	san
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	thing	no	over	three
Literal translation	It won't happen more than the third time			
English translation in the corpus	the third time is the charm			

This example occurs when the Princess and her brothers are simulating a scene in which they are trying to save Yang Silang by pleading with their mother. They assume that her mother ignored her pleading the first and the second time, so her brother says *third time's the charm*, where this idiom means that if something has been done twice, the third time will be successful. In English, there is also the expression *third time's the charm*. Therefore, the use of a literal translation is a good way to convey the meaning.

It is worth mentioning that there is a difference in the meaning of 事不过三 *shi bu guo san* which we usually use in Chinese in our daily life, because this phrase can represent both positive and negative meanings, and the negative meaning is more commonly used in Chinese. The positive meaning is “the third time will be the charm” as shown above, while the negative meaning is that “you should not do the same thing three times in a row” or “you should not make the same mistake three times in a row”. Therefore, when we translate, we need to understand the meaning in context. If the meaning is negative, the strategy of literal translation can also be used, but we should

choose the other translation, because there are similar proverbs in English, such as the baseball term *three strikes and you're out*.

5.2 Free translation

(3)

Source text	插	翅	难	飞
Chinese Pinyin	cha	chi	nan	fei
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	insert	wing	difficult	fly
Literal translation	even given wings, one couldn't fly			
English translation in the corpus	stop me from crossing the border			

One of the challenges we face when dealing with translating idioms into other languages, is how to maintain the original meaning while making them more appealing and comprehensible to the target language audience. In this case, the idiom 插翅难飞 *cha chi nan fei* contains very vivid and compelling imagery. It is not only a metaphor, but also an expression of emotion, highlighting the helplessness and constraints people feel in difficult situations. The idiom of 插翅难飞 *cha chi nan fei* originally describes that it is difficult to fly even if one is given wings, and it is usually used to describe a situation from which it is difficult to escape.

Although the direct translation *even given wings, one couldn't fly* expresses the same concept, the free translation provides a more concrete and vivid scenario, and the translation of *Stop me from crossing the border* transforms the abstract meaning of this idiom into a more concrete scenario, which may be the case of someone trying to escape from a predicament but encountering obstacles and limitations, and so being unable to complete the escape. Such a translation not only intuitively conveys the meaning of the original text, but also provides a more concrete and understandable scenario for the audience, thus making it easier to resonate.

(4)

Source text	琵琶	琵琶	别	弹
Chinese Pinyin	pi	pa	bie	tan
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	pipa		another	play
Literal translation	play a different pipa song (the pipa is the Chinese lute)			
English translation in the corpus	fall in love with someone else			

When it comes to idioms whose meanings are derived,⁴ especially those with literary connotations such as 琵琶别弹 *pi pa bie tan*, the use of free translation can better

⁴ In Chinese, the original idiom is 琵琶别抱 *pi pa bie bao*, lit. Pipa another hold. In the corpus, the word “抱 *bao*” is derived as “弹 *tan*”, which is a slight adjustment of the literal meaning, but the intended meaning is the same.

convey the meanings of idioms and the emotions of the speaker. The idiom of 琵琶别弹 *pi pa bie tan* is a vivid idiom used to describe the situation where a person abandons his old love for a new one, implying a change of emotions.

Therefore, when translated into English, the literal translation of 琵琶别弹 *pi pa bie tan* expresses the literal meaning of the idiom, but fails to capture the emotion and the meaning it implies, and the literal translation is confusing. In contrast, the free translation strategy, such as *fall in love with someone else*, can more accurately convey the meaning of the idiom and the emotions expressed by the speaker, and at the same time it is closer to the context and understanding of the English-speaking audience. Such a translation strategy enables readers to understand more intuitively the feelings and emotions expressed in the idioms, and thus better appreciate the meaning and significance contained in them.

5.3 Abridged translation

In Chinese idioms, there is very often a paralleling dual structure, i.e. using two or more different metaphors to express the same meaning. In this case, the translator can use the abridged translation strategy to remove the repetitive parts. Because this kind of repetitive dual structure is not commonly used in English, translating the same expression twice will be redundant, and this translation strategy can make the translation more concise and clear, which can be more useful for the audience's understanding.

(5)

Source text	秦	楼	楚	馆
Chinese Pinyin	qin	lou	chu	guan
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	Qin	building	Chu	building
Literal translation	the buildings with the surname of Qin and Chu			
English translation in the corpus	brothel			

This idiom is composed of two pairs of words, namely *qin lou* and *chu guan*. During the Spring and Autumn Period (770–221 BC in ancient China), the daughter of Duke Mu⁵ of Qin, Nongyu, was very good at playing xiao (a traditional Chinese instrument), so Duke Mu of Qin built her a Fenglou, also called the Qin Building, where Nongyu played the xiao for fun. King Ling of Chu⁶ was a lecherous man, and he built the Zhanghua Palace, selecting the most beautiful women in the country to live there for his pleasure; people called Zhanghua Palace the Chu Building. Therefore, later on people used the idiom 秦楼楚馆 *qin lou chu guan* to refer to places of singing and dancing, and subsequently, it mostly referred to brothels. If we translate it as *the buildings with the surname of Qin and Chu*, although it expresses the literal meaning, it cannot accurately convey the meaning of the original text. The translation uses the strategy of abridged translation, which generalizes the two kinds of places and translates

⁵ 秦穆公 *qin mu gong*, Duke Mu of Qin, the first substantial king of Qin (ruled 659–621 BC)

⁶ 楚灵王 *chu ling wang*, King Ling of Chu (ruled 540–529 BC)

them with a general term, which is straightforward, improves the reading experience for readers, and reduces the barriers to understanding idioms.

(6)

Source text	刀	枪	剑	戟
Chinese Pinyin	dao	qiang	jian	ji
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	knife	spear	sword	halberd
Literal translation	knife, spear, sword and halberd			
English translation in the corpus	weapons			

When we deal with translations of idioms that contain multiple items or concepts, sometimes a literal translation of each item may result in redundant information. In such cases, the use of abridged translation can convey the meaning of the original text more effectively, while ensuring that the translation is concise and fluent. As in this example, it is an idiom consisting of the names of four different tools with the same attributes, which are four common weapons used for slashing and stabbing in ancient China. Translating the idiom as *knife, spear, sword and halberd* one by one may makes the translation seem too fragmented. In contrast, combining them into a a single, more general collective word *weapons* more directly conveys the meaning of the original idiom.

(7)

Source text	福	寿	康	宁
Chinese Pinyin	fu	shou	kang	ning
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	happiness	longevity	health	tranquility
Literal translation	happiness, longevity, health, tranquility			
English translation in the corpus	blessed long life			

This idiom consists of four blessing words, 福寿康宁 *fu shou kang ning*, which represent “happiness”, “longevity”, “health”, “tranquility”, respectively, and these words have their own unique meanings in the Chinese language. However, a literal translation of each of these words into English may not fully capture their deep meanings and the expressions of good fortune and well-being rooted in Chinese culture and tradition.

Therefore, using the abridged translation can generalize the four characters 福寿康宁 *fu shou kang ning* into a close-to-English context to better convey the meaning of the original text. The translation *blessed long life* not only contains the meanings of “happiness”, “longevity”, “health”, “tranquility”, but also more directly expresses the good fortune and well-being implied by these words – wishing people a happy, long, healthy and peaceful life. Therefore, while retaining the meaning of the original text, abridged translation brings the translation closer to the linguistic environment and cultural background of the target language through concise and clear expression, and improves the readability and comprehensibility of the translation.

5.4 Borrowing translation

The strategy of borrowing translation mentioned by Wang and Wang (2013) refers to the fact that in Chinese and English, there are identical or similar idioms with different forms and different words, but which express the same metaphor and cultural information; in this case, the translator can use the strategy of borrowing translation to translate such idioms. In my opinion, “borrowing translation” as the name of this strategy mentioned by Wang and Wang (2013), is an appropriate term, but it is more of a cultural correspondence, in which different words with the same metaphor as those in the original text are shown in the translation to achieve the same cultural purpose and convey the same connotative meaning and cultural message.

(8)

Source text	肝	肠	痛	断
Chinese Pinyin	gan	chang	tong	duan
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	liver	intestine	hurt	broken
Literal translation	terribly pained in one's liver and intestine			
English translation in the corpus	terribly pained in my heart			

The idiom 肝肠痛断 *gan chang tong duan* is usually used to describe extreme inner pain and sorrow, and refers more to the pain and suffering of the heart than to the pain in one's liver and intestine. The literal translation *terribly pained in one's liver and intestine* retains the meaning of the original idiomatic expression, but to the English reader it may seem hard and unintelligible, making the reader think that the protagonist is really in physical pain, because there is no similar expression in English.

In this example, the translator employed borrowing translation as a strategy, as the literal translation would carry little meaning. Additionally, an equivalent expression that corresponds to the original text can be found in English culture. In this case, the translator found a more common use expression in the English context to convey the emotion and meaning of the original text, corresponding “pain in heart” with “pain in liver and intestine”. Translating the idiom as *terribly pained in my heart* brings it closer to the context and understanding of English, and can better tell the sadness and pain expressed by the idiom. In cases where words with different meanings across cultures can find corresponding equivalents, by using borrowing translation as a translation strategy, the translator can ensure that the translated text is more easily understood and accepted in the target language environment, and at the same time the translation can better convey the emotions that the speaker want to express and meanings of the original idiomatic expression, and improve the quality and effect of the translation.

(9)

Source text	愁	锁	眉	间
Chinese Pinyin	chou	suo	mei	jian
Morpheme-to-morpheme Glosses	worry	lock	brow	adv.
Literal translation	the brows furrowed with sorrows			
English translation in the corpus	wearing a sorrowful face			

In this passage, the idiom 愁锁眉间 *chou suo mei jian* describes a person whose brows are furrowed with sorrows, suggesting inner trouble and unease. A literal translation as *the brows furrowed with sorrows* may convey the meaning of the original idiomatic expression but in English such an expression may seem too descriptive and not direct enough. The translator, using the borrowing translation strategy, takes into account the idioms and conventions of the target language and chooses a way of expression that is more in line with the spoken and commonly understood English language. *Wearing a sorrowful face* is an expression that directly conveys the emotional state depicted by the idiom, i.e., the sadness and pain caused by sorrow. In other words, for two terms from different cultural backgrounds that have corresponding equivalents, the borrowing translation strategy can be effectively applied.

In addition to the above analysis of examples where translation strategies are used, we need to consider one more fact. The translations of the above examples are official translations by a group of Chinese translators (non-native speakers of English). We can see through these examples that Chinese idioms, due to their unique cultural connotations, expressions, and linguistic structures, often cannot be accurately translated into English by simply translating their literal meanings. This is because the differences between Chinese and English cultures lead to semantic gaps, and idioms themselves have fixed collocations and are context-dependent. There are also a few examples of Chinese idioms that are still idioms in English after being translated into English, such as Example 2 in 5.1. Literal translation, 事不过三 *shi bu guo san*, and some of the examples are still idioms after being translated into English, even if there are several ways to translate them, such as 泪流满面 *lei liu man mian*, lit, tear low full face, which is translated in the corpus as *tears stream down my face*. There are many options available when translating; even in this case of literal translation, there are two or more translation alternatives, for example, “tears run down my face”, and “tears roll down my face”, while the translators chose to use “stream down”. If we consider the singing voice used for Xiqu, Chinese Xiqu has more /a/ and /i/ pronunciation, so the word “stream” is more favorable to the pronunciation of Xiqu singing. But if we just consider the translation of the written text, I think all these methods are appropriate to use.

6 Conclusion

This article applies the categories proposed by Wang and Wang (2013) to analyze idiom translation in a Xiqu text, examining strategies for translating idioms within the Xiqu genre. After analyzing various idiom examples in a specific Xiqu text, it was found that the four types of translation strategies can be employed for idiom translation in Xiqu.

1) Literal translation. This strategy is applicable to idioms that have identical expressions in both Chinese and English, where literal translation can directly correspond to the expressions in both languages, or in cases where a literal translation alone allows the reader to comprehend the meaning of the text. For example, 泪流满面 *lei liu man mian*, literal translation: tears stream down my face.

2) Free translation. This strategy is generally employed in situations where literal translation fails to achieve the objective of conveying the original meaning to the reader, as well as in cases where literal translation does not align with the linguistic conventions of the target language, then free translation can try to serve as a strategy to assist readers

in comprehending the content of the original text. For example, 满腹机关 *man fu ji guan*, lit. the whole abdomen is full of ideas, free translation: things in mind. This strategy is used more frequently than literal translation in the corpus I chose.⁷

3) Abridged translation. This refers to the translation strategy used to make the translation more concise and clearer when two or more different words are used to repeat the same meaning in one idiom. For example, 隐姓瞒名 *yin xing man ming*, lit. hide surname and name, abridged translation: take an alias. In my corpus of Chinese Xiqu idioms, this translation strategy is the most commonly used; some 30 idioms appear in my corpus, 10 of which use abridged translation, because idioms using two or more different expressions to express the same meaning in one idiom can make the Chinese lyrics of the Xiqu more rhyming. 4) Borrowing translation. This is often used in examples where the expressions are different in two languages, but the cultures in the expressions of the two languages can correspond. For example, the culturally equivalent idiom for 掌上明珠 *zhang shang ming zhu*, lit. a bright pearl in the palm in English, is *the apple of one's eye*.

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⁷ See appendix: free translation was used eight times in the corpus and literal translation four times.

Zhu Xiaohan:

Translation strategies of four-character-idioms in Xiqu texts

Argumentum 20 (2024), 541–557

Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó

DOI: 10.34103/ARGUMENTUM/2024/32

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Appendix

LT: literal translation, FT: free translation, AT: abridged translation, BT: borrowing translation

插翅难飞	Stop me from crossing the border	FT
东逃西散	Scattered in every direction	AT
肝肠痛断	Terribly pained in my heart	BT
愁锁眉间	Wear a sorrowful face	BT
愁眉不展	Look concerned	BT
满腹机关	What is in the mind	FT
秦楼楚馆	Brothel	AT
琵琶别弹	Fall in love with someone else	FT
意马心猿（心猿意马）	-	Omission
泪流满面	Tears stream down my face	LT
恩德如山	Kindness	FT
巧言改辩	Talk so fancy	FT
快马加鞭	Ride a fast horse	LT
各为其主	-	Omission
乔装改扮	Change our clothing	AT
刀枪剑戟	Their weapons	AT
龙行虎步	Regal walk	AT
谢天谢地	Thank heaven and earth	LT
一言难尽	It is a long story	FT

Zhu Xiaohan:
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交头接耳	Spread any rumor	AT
灯花结彩（张灯结彩）	Decorations	AT
隐姓瞒名（隐姓埋名）	Take an alias	AT
福寿康宁	Blessed long life	AT
胆战惊（胆战心惊）	Shaking with fear	FT
昏迷不醒	Fainted in the corner of the palace	FT
长生不老	Live forever	AT
事不过三	The third time is the charm	LT