
**ENGLISH TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR CHINESE DISH NAMES
THROUGH THE LENS OF CULTURAL PRESUPPOSITION --WITH INVITATION
TO A BANQUET AS AN EXAMPLE**

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ABSTRACT

Chinese dish names epitomize the culturally rich culinary heritage of China. Their accurate translation not only fulfills international audiences' informational needs but also facilitates cultural dissemination. Through qualitative analysis and case study methodology, this research adopts cultural presupposition theory to examine the translation of Chinese dish names in Invitation to a Banquet. It explores three strategic approaches to handling cultural presuppositions based on distinct communication objectives and target audiences. Findings reveal that: when cultural presuppositions are retainable, literal translation is optimal; when presuppositions require manifestation, annotations or contextual explanations are essential; when presupposition migration is necessary, condensation or adaptive rewriting proves effective. These strategies preserve source-cultural essence while ensuring communicative efficacy, thereby advancing China's cultural global outreach and cross-civilization dialogue.

Keywords: Culinary culture; Cultural presupposition; Dish name translation; Invitation to a Banquet.

1. INTRODUCTION

Presupposition refers to propositions implicitly assumed by speakers through given lexical items without explicit assertion. Fawcett distinguishes between linguistic presuppositions and non-linguistic presuppositions (or cultural presuppositions), noting that while linguistic presuppositions have minimal impact on translation, non-linguistic presuppositions pose significant challenges (Fawcett, 2007:123-126). As a core component of pragmatic presuppositions, cultural presuppositions denote the background knowledge regarded as common ground within a specific cultural community, deeply rooted in historical traditions, social customs, value systems, and lived experiences. Translation constitutes a cross-cultural communicative act wherein the primary obstacle lies in transmitting cultural alterity, stemming from divergent cultural presuppositions activated by source-text readers versus target-text readers.

Amid accelerating globalization, intercultural exchanges have intensified, propelling the worldwide dissemination of Chinese culinary culture. Presupposition plays a pivotal role in Chinese-English culinary translation. Chinese dish names encapsulate profound cultural presuppositions, including historical allusions, philosophical concepts, and regional characteristics. However, target readers' lack of corresponding cognitive schemata often

renders literal translation ineffective, such as “Buddha Jumps Over Wall” for “佛跳墙” causing bewilderment.

In 2023, the publication of Fuchsia Dunlop’s *Invitation to a Banquet* marked a seminal contribution. This gastronomic text explores Chinese cuisine’s origins, ingredient selection, culinary techniques, and food-thought interrelations, characterized by its encyclopedic scope, substantive content, and stylistic versatility balancing accessibility with erudition. Dunlop’s expertise in cultural exegesis and systematic translation strategies renders this work particularly paradigmatic. Her culinary writings have garnered numerous accolades, including four James Beard Awards, the “Oscars of food writing”. Therefore, conducting descriptive research on Chinese dish name translation through this corpus holds significant implications for globalizing Chinese culinary culture.

Existing scholarship demonstrates limited engagement with presupposition-based translation studies (戈玲玲, 2002; 蔡平, 2007; 王建荣等, 2010; 贾永青, 2011; 王敏, 罗选民, 2017), with even scarcer attention to culinary discourse, particularly dish name translation (朱纯林, 2008). This study therefore conducts descriptive analysis of Fuchsia Dunlop’s *Invitation to a Banquet* to elucidate intercultural reconstruction of Chinese culinary presuppositions, addressing the following questions.

- 1) What typologies characterize Chinese dish names and their cultural presuppositions?
- 2) What strategies does *Invitation to a Banquet* employ to explicate implicit cultural presuppositions in Chinese dish names?

2. CULTURAL PRESUPPOSITIONS IN DISH NAMES

Cultural presuppositions refer to the assumptions, beliefs, and perspectives tacitly shared within a culture but not formally articulated (Nida, 1981:14). Specifically, they constitute a shared knowledge system among members with common cultural backgrounds or sociocultural environments. Grounded in mutual understanding of social culture, communicators achieve implicit comprehension without stating contextual knowledge. These pre-existing, culturally implicit connotations in verbal communication define cultural presuppositions.

Food is the first necessity of people. Nowadays, Chinese cuisine has been well received globally, acting as a goodwill ambassadors among different nations and cultures, making the well-established Chinese food culture known across the world. Translating Chinese dish names is inherently an act of cultural transmission. Meanings embedded as presuppositions in Chinese dish names reflect unique cultural elements: traditions, cognitive patterns, aesthetic paradigms, value systems, cultural orientations, ethnic customs, historical contexts, and social psychology. When target readers lack shared presuppositions, translators must judiciously strike balances. Beyond accurately conveying a dish’s essence, translators must holistically assess culinary values, analyze cultural presuppositions, determine handling methods, and select strategies. Effective translations showcase Chinese culinary culture, bridge semantic gaps, and achieve cross-cultural communication. For examples, “北京烤鸭” is translated into Beijing Roast Duck, “东坡肉” is translated into Braised Dongpo Pork. These adopt conventions of English dish names while preserving source-cultural exoticism.

Exhaustive textual analysis identified 217 Chinese dish names in *Invitation to a Banquet*. Adopting the classification framework by translation scholars (陈家基, 1993 ; 任静生, 2001), dish names are categorized into: realistic, imagery, semi-realistic and semi-imagery, allusion-based, and medicinal one.

Table 1: Distribution of Dish Name Types in *Invitation to a Banquet*

Types of dish names	Realistic dish name	Imagery dish name	Semi-realistic and semi-imagery dish name	Allusion-based dish name	Medicinal dish name
Occurance Frequency (N=217)	89	47	32	29	20
Percentage	41.00%	21.70%	14.70%	13.40%	9.20%

As Table 1 indicates, realistic dish names constitute the largest proportion (41%, 89 cases), centering on perceptible attributes, such as “姜汁芥蓝” highlighting ingredients and seasoning and “白切鸡” emphasizing cooking techniques. Their cultural presuppositions are attached to tangible elements (techniques, ingredients, forms), granting them inherent translatability.

Conversely, non-realistic dish names (collectively 44.3%, 96 cases) form the crux of cultural presupposition research. Among these, imagery dish names (21.7%) rely on symbolic systems (e.g., wealth metaphor in “金玉满堂”); allusion-based names (13.4%) are tied to historical or literary knowledge (e.g., Southern Song folktale in “宋嫂鱼羹”); medicinal names (9.2%) are grounded in traditional Chinese medicine (e.g., organ-balancing concept in “四神汤”). These categories exhibit highly implicit cultural presuppositions, requiring specific cultural background knowledge for comprehension.

2. APPROACHES TO CULTURAL PRESUPPOSITION HANDLING AND TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

Statistical analysis above reveals that dish name typology distribution reflects a gradient of presupposition explicitness. The material presuppositions in realistic dish names can be preserved through literal translation, while the 44.3% non-realistic names with implicit presuppositions necessitate proactive strategies, that is presupposition manifestation for allusion-based and medicinal names or presupposition transfer for imagery names. This section demonstrates the strategies and efficacy of three cultural presupposition disposal approaches through specific translation examples.

Preservation of Cultural Presuppositions

Most Chinese dish names adopt a realistic approach, characterized by their ability to authentically reflect key information including ingredients, cooking methods, color, shape, flavor, serving utensils, and geographical origins, which is presupposition information that can be shared by English readers. Therefore, literal translation is employed for realistic dish names to communicate essential elements such as ingredients, presentation style, and cooking techniques to target audiences, ensuring comprehension and receptance of the translated names. Literal translation of dish names achieves three primary objectives. They are comprised of preserving all informational components of the original name, faithfully conveying the semantic meaning of source language terms, as well as maintaining the original linguistic structure and stylistic features (周领顺, 2013).

In terms of linguistic manifestation, realistic dish name translations predominantly adopt modifier-head phrases where the headword typically denotes the main ingredient and the modifying component usually comprises of past participles of cooking verbs and adjectives describing color, aroma, shape, or flavor.

For example,

(1) 火焖鞭笋 → Anji Bamboo Shoots with Jinhua Ham

(2) 北京鸭 → Peking Duck

(3) 西湖醋鱼 → West Lake Vinegar Fish

Preserving cultural presuppositions unveils the intrinsic connection between ingredients and the natural landscape, which is fundamental to interpreting Chinese culinary culture. Realistic dish name translation must focus on ingredient-centric clarity, enabling audiences to instantly recognize what they are eating and make informed choices. Also, it must emphasize origin-centric marking, explicitly denoting the geographical provenance of core components (e.g., “火焖鞭笋” as Anji Bamboo Shoots with Jinhua Ham) to enable audiences’ immediate recognition of regional attributes. This approach simultaneously reinforces geographical identity in ethnic cuisine, facilitating cross-cultural appreciation of the source culture’s terroir-bound heritage.

Manifestation of Cultural Presuppositions

Allusion-based and medicinal dish names embody the most profound implicit presuppositions in Chinese culinary culture—the former rooted in historical legends, the latter reflecting the philosophy of medicinal-food homology. To manifest these presuppositions, translators must adopt a dual-track strategy of transliteration and contextual annotation.

In terms of allusion-based names, Chinese culinary culture abounds in dish names rooted in historical legends, myths, folklore, or notable figures, infusing meals with rich cultural narratives and intellectual charm. However, the profound cultural connotations embedded in these names pose significant challenges for translation, demanding both brevity and clarity. In addition to the translated names of dishes that have been accepted by the target language audience, current strategies prioritize “literal translation with paraphrasing”.

For example,

(4) 佛跳墙 → Assorted Meat and Vegetables Cooked in Embers (Fotiaoqiang: “Lured by its fragrance, even the Buddha jumps the wall”)

(5) 它似蜜 → Stir-Fried Lamb in Gingery Sauce (“Sweet as Honey”: Legend claims Empress Dowager Cixi named it after being delighted by its flavor.)

(6) 莼鲈之思 → Sliced Perch and Water Shield Soup (“Longing for Perch and Water Shield” refers to a 4th-century official’s homesickness for his hometown dish.)

In Chinese culinary culture, food serves as a bond between emotion and memory. This emphasis on affective dimensions is unique among global cuisines. Dishes like “Nostalgia for Perch and Water Shield” narrate stories connecting food with sentiment, whereas Western culinary depictions often remain at the level of physical sustenance. In the translation of such dishes, we should focus on the names of people or places. It is advisable to emphasize on geographical or personal cultural significance in annotations to emphasize regional or historical identity.

In terms of medicinal cuisine, a cornerstone of traditional Chinese dietary therapy, it combines nutritional and therapeutic benefits (e.g., disease prevention, longevity). Its translation must balance cultural specificity and functional clarity.

However, challenges in translation lie in two aspects. For one thing, most Chinese medicinal ingredients lack direct English equivalents, so they are translated into Latin names, for example, “当归” is translated as “*Angelica sinensis*”, and “天麻” as “*Gastrodia elata*” (熊欣, 2013). For another thing, Latin scientific names are inaccessible to general audiences and obscure the dish’s purpose. Under the circumstance, except that widely recognized terms can retain literal translation, we use herbs or medicinal roots for lesser-known ingredients and add functional annotations to briefly explain health benefits.

For examples,

(7)天麻炖山鸡 → Stewed Pheasant with Herbs (Enhances cognitive function and alleviates headaches.)

(8)枸杞粥 → Goji Berry Congee (Nourishes the liver and improves eyesight.)

(9)双鞭壮阳汤 → Double Penis Soup (Simmered with deer and ox penis—Traditionally believed to boost virility.)

(10)茯苓包子 → Tuckahoe Stuffed Buns (Tuckahoe, a medicinal fungus, aids digestion.)

There is the great differences between Chinese and Western cultures on the concept of “medicine and food”. In order to make western translated audiences better understand and accept China’s “homology of medicine and food”, translators should adopt a “literal + explanatory” approach, that is combining the literal translation of main ingredients and cooking methods with concise annotations to clarify medicinal effects

In short, through explicit compensation, this strategy bridges cultural schema gaps, enabling Western audiences to grasp both the affective dimensions and the medical philosophy underpinning Chinese cuisine.

Transfer of Cultural Presuppositions

Chinese dish names emphasize aesthetic conveyance, with poetic imagery and rich associations constituting the charm of Chinese culinary culture. However, cultural differences lead to divergent associative effects, necessitating pragmatic translation through adaptation or free translation (陈福康, 1995:193-292). This issue predominantly concerns imagery-type (21.7%) and semi-imagery dish names (14.7%), where free translation or rewriting prioritizes target readers’ comprehension fluency.

In addition to its direct signification, some Chinese dish names contain rich associative meanings, forming another feature of food names. Imagery-type names often utilize ingredients’ color, aroma, taste, or form to cater to diners’ psychology, symbolizing auspiciousness or poetic ideals while omitting concrete culinary details. First-time diners may feel perplexed when faced with recipes. Therefore, these culturally loaded dish names require free translation to prioritize functionality over literalness by giving up the figurative meaning and exaggeration in the names of dishes and translating them in plain English. Unlike the commonly seen lengthy and uninspired literal translations abroad, the book employs the free translation “kindle the spirits” when referring to dim sum, while introducing the dim sum cultures of Yangzhou, Suzhou, Hangzhou and Guangzhou. This highlights how Chinese dim

sum transcends being mere delicate snacks; it often serves to delight diners' sensory pleasures. Taking the following adaptations as other examples.

(11) □金玉满堂 → Shrimp and Egg Soup (literal meaning: “Hall Full of Gold and Jade”)

(12) □连年有余 → Lotus Roots with Fish (literal meaning: “Abundance Year After Year”)

(13) □麒麟面 → Moose Face (cultural note: Qilin is an auspicious mythical creature, known in English as a unicorn or Dragon Horse. As the Qilin itself does not exist, we were unable to eat it, and the name of the dish was merely a bit of poetic fancy. Instead, the dish adapts a Manchu delicacy using moose meat.)

The translation strategy requires us to replace metaphorical or symbolic language with straightforward descriptions of ingredients or cooking methods.

As for semi-realistic and semi-imagery dish names, they blend literal descriptions (e.g., ingredients, cooking methods) with figurative or symbolic expressions (e.g., metaphors, cultural allusions). Translating such names requires a hybrid approach, that is literal translation for the realistic components and free translation or cultural adaptation for the imaginative elements.

For examples:

(14) 蜜汁火方 → Honeyed Ham (“honeyed” is literal; “火方” refers to cubed ham, translated descriptively)

(15) 红烧划水 → Red-Braised Paddle (“划水” is a poetic term to describe the fish's movement)

Considering that symbolic terms, or culturally specific references require adaptation to bridge cultural gaps, it is necessary to readjust and decode the name structure of the original dish. Taking the translation of the dish name “九转大肠” (Jiuzhuan Dachang) as a case. Its main ingredient is pork intestines, prepared through nine intricate steps including boiling, blanching, frying and braising (hence “nine transformations”). The golden-hued dish is also called “Nine-refined Golden Elixir”. Given East-West culinary aesthetic disparities, literal translation as “pork intestines” may trigger aversion (陈立群等, 2025: 52-56). Therefore, an effective approach involves that foregrounding the exquisite craftsmanship and auspicious coloration through the imagery-laden translation “Refined Elixir”; using the subtitle “Deep-fried pork intestines” with visual aids to mitigate cultural resistance; eventually retaining “Refined Elixir” after establishing acceptance. Thus the proposed translation can be presented, that is Jiuzhuan Dachang, also called “Refined Elixir”: Deep-fried Pork Intestines.

Furthermore, in traditional Chinese culture, certain noble plants and translucent jade-like imagery endowed with profound symbolic meanings are often used to name visually appealing dishes. For example, “芙蓉” (lotus) symbolizes egg whites; shrimp or tofu are likened to “白玉” (white jade); broad beans or green peas are compared to “翡翠” (jadeite); bean sprouts become “银芽” (silver sprouts); eggs are poetically renamed “木须” (muxu, a homophone for scrambled eggs).

However, such refined cultural associations often clash with the linguistic and aesthetic norms of another culture. Thus, the guiding principle for English translation is literal accuracy over metaphorical retention. Such poetic imagery must be stripped of metaphor and translated literally to avoid confusion.

For examples:

(16)清熘大玉 → Stir-Fried Jade Shrimps

(17)醋溜木须 → Sliced Lamb Stir-fried with Scrambled Egg and a Gleam of Dark Vinegar

(18)芙蓉炒蛋 → Scrambled Eggs

(19)翡翠虾仁 → Stir-Fried Shrimps with Peas

These transfer strategies demonstrate that functional reconstruction becomes imperative when complete presupposition transfer would cause reception fractures. Through adaptive translation methods, the English renditions simultaneously reveal the cultural narratives embedded in signature dishes, and achieve cross-cultural acceptability. This evidences that, whether assessed by translation purposes or target-reader orientation, such presupposition realignments through stylistic modulation effectively enhance communicative impact while demonstrating strategic flexibility and practicality.

3. CONCLUSION

As primary vessels of culinary heritage, dish names carry cultural presuppositions that constitute pivotal elements in cross-cultural communication. In translating Chinese dish names for global gastronomic dissemination, translators must thoroughly comprehend Sino-Anglophone cultural presuppositional divergences, adopting flexible strategies tailored to varying communicative purposes and target audiences.

Three core approaches emerge: (1) literal translation for retainable presuppositions (e.g., realistic dish names); (2) compensatory techniques like annotations or intratextual explanations when presuppositions require explication (e.g., allusion-based or medicinal names); and (3) adaptive rewriting for presuppositions necessitating transfer (e.g., imagery or semi-imagery names).

Confronting the linguistic diversity of dish nomenclature, translators should anchor decisions in cultural presupposition analysis, guided by the principle of adaptive fidelity to safeguard the essence of Chinese gastronomy during intercultural reconstruction.

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