# The Challenges for Going Global in the Translation of Chinese Culture and Arts

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**Abstract:** As a communicator of cultures, the translation in institutions of culture and arts has come to the fore, which has not yet been the focus of in-depth studies in China. The previous studies emphasized the overt errors in translation quality assessment on linguistic level. This paper aims at answering the questions of what are the challenges in translating Chinese culture and art in the context of institutions. For this purpose, we conducted a survey by means of semi-structured interviews from 21 museums and galleries in China, focusing on translation community, the purpose of translation, the strategies and methods of translation, and the reception of translation. The findings are that the problems in the translation of culture and arts in China have been as follows: the inadequate capacities of translation teams, and the dilemma in the purposes of translation. The findings could clarify the logical relations between the two problems, promoting the translation and dissemination work of the cultural and art institutions.

**Key words:** cultural translation; cultural dissemination; translation team; translation purpose

## 1. Introduction

In the long river of human history, conflicts, violence, and conquest among different nations and states are accompanied by the borrowing, exchange, and coexistence among different cultures. The continuous history and culture of the Chinese nation over five thousand years is a precious treasure of human civilization and people have devoted their heart and soul and their entire lives to the civilization. It is also a history of exchanges between Chinese and other civilizations. Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, China has undergone profound changes with the support of the progressing economy. It can been witnessed that an increasing number of domestic museums, art galleries, opera and theaters, and other institutions have presented the historical culture of Chinese civilization to the people of the world through exhibitions, performances, and other forms.

However, Chinese cultural and art institutions face the challenges in effectively disseminating Chinese culture, such as telling China's story well, attracting international visitors. For example, how the curators select the objects, and present the information and translate it in an interactive way in order to help visitors understand and accept pieces of information, and be willing to take some of the cultural elements into their cultural memories. These challenges also suggest a constant concern for those who engaged in cultural translation work, especially the translators.

Cultural communication is one of the primary tasks of cultural institutions, including the presentation and representation of objects in an interactive ways. In the process of translation and communication, stakeholders realize it is a systemic mission to fully investigate the factors in translation and communication. In 1948, Lasswell published an article titled "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society", in which he proposed five elements of communication studies: (1) Who communicates, (2) the content of communication, (3) through which channel, (4) to whom, and (5) with what effect. He points out that research on the communication process often focuses on one or several of these issues, such as the study of communicators, analysis of communication content, analysis of mass media like broadcasting, newspapers, and film, audience and viewer analysis, and analysis of the impact of communication[1] In the process of cultural communications, cultural institutions can effectively show diverse cultures to both Chinese and international visitors and by focusing on the communicator, content, medium, audience, and reception effect.

Cultural translation is a necessity to draw these cultures closer to their readers. It originates from anthropological studies on cultural contact [2][3]. Communication scholars and sociologists use cultural translation to examine how people from foreign cultures integrate into local cultures[3] . And there is an consensus within the translation community that "cultural translation" is beyond "translating culture", and translation involves not only the conversion of verbal and nonverbal signs, but the interaction and transformation between the cultures carried by languages. However, the diversity of cultures and the multidimensional complexity of cultural interpretation pose challenges to cultural translation. For example, the diversity of culture are reflected in ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic aspects, and cultural groups have fixed mentalities and aesthetic preferences. In other words, cultural translation is contextualized translation, situated within a cross-cultural coordinate system, where different thinking patterns and cross-cultural communication methods interact and blend during the translation process. In the process of cultural translation, it is vital to strengthen the bond and shared values between different cultures, making it a powerful tool for human cross-cultural communication[4]. And it's essential to maximally incorporate some components of other cultures into the original culture[5], to achieve the progress of multiculturalism. More specifically, museums are multicultural institutions that carry and convey different cultural

memories to their visitors, presenting diversified perspectives. These visitors, with their own cultural memory frameworks, thinking patterns, ideologies, and values, engage in multidimensional interactions with the narrations of museums. Consensus and contradiction, communication and distance make this dynamic process full of uncertainties. Therefore, one mission of museums is to enhance the understanding of various cultures and alleviate the contradictions between ethnic relations[6].

Therefore, we conducted a comprehensive survey of those who responsible for translation work in domestic cultural and art institutions and carried out in person semi-structured interviews with translators from 21 museums and art galleries in China. The study specifically would analyze the current translation work frameworks in theses institutions and basic problems in the process of global dissemination of these cultural and artistic institutions, and explain the logical relationships among various factors, providing a relatively comprehensive set of data for the reference of the academic and professional communities on translation work.

**Literature Review**

Cultural translation has long undertaken the mission of cultural transmission home and broad. Not only Buddhism translation in China but Bible translation in western world suggest translation is an effective tool to culture communication. And scholars have explored the key elements in effective culture translation and communication. For instance, Burke[2]proposes six elements of cultural translation in the context of studying translations during early modern Europe (from the late 16th century to the end of the 18th century): (1) who translates; (2) the purpose of the translation; (3) the content of the translation; (4) for whom the translation is intended; (5) principles and strategies of translation; (6) effects of the translation. Burke[2] mentions that most translation work in Europe at the time was completed individually, while some major translations were conducted by collaborations, such as the translation teams for the Bible consisting of professional translators and other experts, and even rulers and church clergies of the time. The purpose of the Bible translation was to serve the church and the rulers. He also mentions that Matteo Ricci, during his mission in China, engaged in extensive translation works, some of which he completed alone, and some in collaboration with Chinese scholars. Burke also discusses that during the era of Peter the Great in Russia, the translated books were those demanded by Russia at the time in mathematics, science, and technology, as well as books that aligned with the prevailing social views and values. The principles and strategies of translation varied widely, determined by factors such as the purpose and content of the translation. Cultural translation and transmission had a significant impact on European nations at the time; for example, the translation of the Bible and other texts elevated the status of national languages and created a wealth of new linguistic terms.

Chinese scholars have systematically found that cultural translation encounters various challenges at different degrees, mainly in four aspects: (1) who the translator is, (2) the content of translation, (3) translation principles and strategies, and (4) the target audience. Firstly, some translators are anonymous. For Chinese literary translation, two main models: the translator whose native language is an international language, and the translator whose native language is Chinese; however, the same model cannot ensure the same translation effects. For example, both the translators of poet Han Shan's works and "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" are Western sinologists, but the translation of Hanshan's poetry has become part of American life, while "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" has not been widely accepted among the public [7][8]. Secondly, the complexity of the selection of translation content. For instance, the motivation of translating literary works often involves other external factors such as ideology and poetics [9] . Thirdly, a preference for domestication methods in the translation process[4] [10][11][12]. It has only been in the last several decades that international translators have actively engaged with Chinese literature and culture with domestication methods to make modifications to the original works[10]. Fourthly, less consideration for reception of international readers. Less knowledge of Chinese literature by international readers[13] and much academic content remained in translation lead to a small number of readers and marginalization of the translated culture's status[9][14][15] . Only when translations are accepted, disseminated, can Chinese literature and arts make their way abroad[10] . Thus, the process of translating and disseminating Chinese culture needs to be improved in some aspects, including the translators, strategies and methods, content selection, and understanding of the visitors, which needs further investigation, communication, and negotiation to ensure the broad dissemination of Chinese culture.

Moreover, translation work of cultural and art institutions has three basic characteristics: first, there is a system of knowledge, objectives, and standards within the institution; second, the translation work is completed by teams; third, the anonymity of the translator (unknown both inside and outside the institution) results in a lower status for translators[16]. Thus, it should pay attention to the following three aspects. First, institutions should manage translators, the translation process, and translation products comprehensively[16]. For example, the official languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish, so all government documents are bilingual, and staff are required to be proficient in both languages. Similarly, the European Union has 23 official languages, so all official documents are available in these 23 languages. However, when formulating language translation policies, institutions also need to consider the cost and readership of translations, such as minority and immigrant languages, which may not be translated due to high costs and low readership[17]. Second, institutional translation work not only needs unified objectives but also clear translation purposes to achieve the institution's translation functions. The core function of institutional translation is management, i.e., managing in a multilingual environment through translation. Institutional translation not only serves communicative and dissemination functions but also political functions, such as using translation to depict hierarchy, kinship, and identity[17]. Thus, the principles of content selection not only affect the meaning of the text but also its social and political functions. Third, the core issue in institutional translation is regulation, such as what the core text models are and what principles and strategies are used for translation [17].

Translation work in cultural and art institutions typically involves multiple cultures, disciplines, and media, making it a complex, multidimensional task. During the process of cultural representation, there is also an active interaction among institutional staff, text authors and translators, textual symbols, as well as readers. Therefore, a common knowledge, unified objectives, a comprehensive standard system, and a timely feedback system for visitors and readers can ensure the orderly and effective progress of translation work, faithfully reproduce and convey Chinese historical culture, maximize input into the cultural memory framework of visitors, and successfully complete the important task of cultural and artistic dissemination.

Some scholars have studied functions of museum translation, for example, Liao[18]proposes five main functions of museum translation: informative function, interactive function, political function, social-inclusive function, and exhibitive function. And some scholars studied museum translation with methods of text analysis, to improve translation quality[19]. For studies of translators and curators, Neather[20]conducted surveys with museum staff from 12 museums in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macao, focusing on the museum translation work. The results reveal that neither museum staff nor external translation teams were able to handle translation tasks effectively, for instance, due to museum staff's lack of confidence in their language capabilities and their skepticism about external translators' knowledge in interdisciplinary subjects (history, etc.). Neather points out that his focus group interview method had certain limitations, such as low participation from museum workers with lower positions or less experience[20]. For studies of visitors, Liao suggests that translators in museum exhibitions should communicate with interactions with visitors should be prioritized by translators, but presentation of the museum information has not taken local cultures and visitors into consideration[18].That is to say, museum exhibitions do not fully recognize the complexity of cultural translation and the importance of cultural communication effects. Thus, it is urgent to thoroughly describe and discuss the current state of translation in Chinese cultural institutions and the issues they face.

We conducted a series of surveys on translation work in national cultural and artistic institutions, including interviews with participants from 21 art and cultural institutions. The interviews covered four aspects: translation teams, translation purposes, translation strategies and methods, and translation effectiveness. This paper will analyze the interview data, ultimately illustrating translation work in cultural and artistic communication, and elucidating the key factors in these aspects above.

**Methodology**
**(1) Research aim and questions**
The purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges in translating Chinese culture and art in the context of institutions globally. The translation of these cultural and art institutions has some factors needed to be explored further. It needs not only linguistic competency of at least 2 languages, but the expertise of culture, art and history. Besides it has to take the study of visitors into consideration. In order to promote the cultural translation and dissemination of these institutions, the research has to make a clear a clear picture of the translation work in order to identify the factors hindering the cultural translation and dissemination of these institutions.

The research questions are as follows. (1) How are the linguistic competency and cultural knowledge of translators or translation teams? (2) What are the translation purposes of their translation work? (3) What are their translation strategies and methods? (4) How is the reception of their translation work?

**(2) Participants**
We have invited 21 participants to take part in our investigation and interviews. All of the interviewees are from 21 museums and galleries in China. These institutions cover five major regions across the country. North China (12 institutions), East China (4 institutions), Central China (2 institutions), South China (1 institution), and Northwest China (2 institutions). Among these 21 institutions, there are 10 national-level museums and 5 national-level art institutions. The interviewees are those who are responsible for translation work, such as curators, managers of translation and communication, or translators. Each of them could share their experience, perception and confusion on the translation work in their own institution.

**(3) Process**
We conducted semi-structured interviews with these participants, who are involved in the process of designing and translating museums and galleries. The interviews have been carried on in one week. Each of interviews takes more than 20 minutes. Although all of the interviewees are committed to telling the Chinese story well, attracting more international visitors, and better communicating Chinese culture with visitors, they would like to share different perceptions, expectations, and confusions on translation work. The interviews include 4 groups of questions, and the topics of these groups are concentrated on the following topics: translation teams, translation purposes, translation strategies and methods, and translation effectiveness. Based on the analysis of the data above, the current state of translation work in cultural and artistic communication would be clarified and the problems would be identified.

**Results and Discussion**
**(1) Three Modes of Translation Teams**
Translation teams in museums and galleries fall into three models: internal staff (11 institutions), external staff (8 institutions), and internal and external staff (2 institutions). For the model of internal staff, 11 institutions adopt this model, and their translation teams are composed of directors, researchers, curators, managers, and so on. They take more duties than translation. More specifically, some of them are experts of culture, history and archaeology, and some of them have a good mastery of languages, for example, they have certifications of higher language proficiency. Among these 11

institutions, 2 museums and 1 gallery claim that their translation team are of higher level, whose members are language experts.

For the model of external, there are 11 institutions, with their translation teams consisting of external members. 10 of these institutions work with translation agencies, and they need those who have the capacities on the languages from translation agencies. There is 1 art institution, showing that they need someone who could not only deal with the languages, but have profound cultural knowledge. Then they often find external experts from universities.

For the model of teams composed internal and external staff are rare, with only two museums adopting this model. These 2 museums are the top ones in China, and they hold more external exhibitions in the country. Theoretically, this model is stable, its members are fixed, and their collaborations are very smooth and sustainable. The organization of internal members and external members have been under thorough consideration to fully make full use of strength of each one. For example, text translations for external exhibitions are completed by internal staff, and translations from Chinese to other languages are done by external target-language experts.

**(2) Two Translation Purposes**

Museum and gallery translation serve the international visitors, with the consistent purpose to present, communicate and disseminate cultures to them. The interviewees in this investigation show their shared expectation and goal: first, they need to show the cultures in depth to international visitors and facilitate them to understand and appreciate the profound culture of China; second, the translation could attract more international visitors. For example, a director of a municipal museum stated, "First and foremost, we value the accuracy of translation the most. We hope to translate the culture in depth. To tell the Chinese story well is simplifying the language." A senior official from a national-level art institution also expressed, "We hope to accurately convey the meaning of the Chinese texts. We want international visitors to understand and resonate with them." Thus, we could make a conclusion on their purposes as follows. First, they should translate the Chinese texts into other language versions accurately, adequately and intelligibly. Second, the international versions of Chinese culture, such as English translation, would be well understood and better accepted by international visitors in order that they would have a clear and deep understanding of Chinese culture and take some of cultural elements into their cultural memories.

**(3) A Minimal level of Translation Strategies and Methods**

From the perspective of institutional translation, formulating translation strategies and methods is standard of the work. In a multilingual environment, effective management can only be achieved by establishing a set of rules[17].Translation strategies and methods serve the purposes of translation, and without them, it is difficult to achieve the goals of these institutions. For museums and galleries, translating Chinese cultures globally, and how to tell the "Chinese story" effectively in cultural translation, involve not only language conversion but also cultural adaptation. Much attention to the various identities and mindsets of diverse visitors should be paid during the translation process. Since various factors are contributing to the success of translation and dissemination, the institutions need a consistent and systemic regulation on the translation work, in order to coordinate the diversified translation factors.

However, in this survey, almost all interviewees did not show the detailed and standardized strategies and methods for their translation work. They repeatedly mentioned only two key terms: "accuracy" and "experience from peers" as their measures. For example, "Due to a lack of professional knowledge, we translate word for word to remain faithful to the original." "We ask for help from the previous translations from peers, while translating." "We often look for suitable expressions from reference books and dictionaries." "The biggest difficulty in translation is that we haven't found a proper vocabulary list indicating how to express Chinese cultural elements appropriately." "We strive to translate our unique Chinese culture, and most of time we either omit or simplify what we don not know." These responses show a low level of knowledge of translation strategies and methods resulting in difficulties to handle the basis requirement of translation and dissemination. Thus, the translation theories and methods are very important to meet the needs of accuracy and elegance. Why and how to do the translation work as expected might be the urgent issue to deal with.

**(4) Awareness of Translation Effectiveness**

The interviews show all these museums and galleries have realized the importance of collecting feedback from international visitors, and it could measure the effect of their translation and dissemination. However, there is one institution claiming that they are carrying out a systematic survey of how international visitors receive translated texts. This institution has a team of translation, and some members could do this reception work.

For most of these institutions have not taken visitors' study into their routine work yet, this leads to the gap between the translated texts and their reception. A senior official at a museum said, "We've always wanted to know how much (cultural information) international visitors actually understand, but no one in the museum is handling this work." Visitors include expert readers and common readers. They have different expectations on the translated texts. Take an example of expert readers. Another official at an art institution shared their confusion." We invited translators from translation companies to provide high-quality English version of the cultural texts, but their products received negative comments from our reviewers." That is to say, there is a huge gap between the translators and expert readers. Besides, there is also a gap between translators and the average readers, whose educational backgrounds, aesthetic standards, and reading expectations vary greatly.

We could conclude that if the translated texts are composed from an expert's perspective, it might lead to reading difficulties for common readers, and vice versa. Therefore, translators in cultural translation not only need to understand the meaning of the text but also are aware of the expectations of potential recipients[16]. That it to say, translators in cultural and artistic institutions need both profound cultural and linguistic expertise, and an understanding of the background of international visitors (e.g., their memories of Chinese culture) and their expectations (e.g., what knowledge

they hope to gain from an exhibition) , to formulate translation strategies and methods to meet visitors' common expectations.

## Challenges in Translation work of Cultural and Artistic Communication

Based on the description of the 4 aspects above, we find that the challenges in translation work for cultural and artistic communication could fall into two major trends. The first is the insufficient capabilities of translation teams; the second is the dilemma between translation purposes. They are intricately connected and need more exploration from cultural and artistic institutions and in-depth research by scholars in translation studies.

### (1) Insufficient Capabilities of Translation Teams

The translation teams are constrained by several factors, such as their perceptions of translation work, and their positioning in the international communication process. If the institution underscore the importance of the translation work, it would achieve a better dissemination.For example, a national-level art institution has a professional translation team, and it emphasizes on collecting feedback from international visitors. Moreover, it is currently recruiting members worldwide to promote its cultural dissemination. Similarly, in early modern Europe, there were three modes of translation at the time: first, European church translators translated directly; second, church translators provided oral explanations to their Chinese scholars, who then wrote the translations down, with both parties subsequently conducting joint reviews; third, church translators did the translation, and then Chinese partners made grammatical corrections[21]. For the 3 models of translation teams in China, each of them has its limitations. First, the internal model shows that its members lack understanding of the concepts, processes, and functions of translation and have not undergone training in translation theory and practice, thus take the translation as a simple task of word to word conversion. Second, the external model shows that the quality of translations from translation agencies is not as satisfied as expected, especially the inadequacy in cultural interpretation. A provincial museum staff member said, "Translation agencies claim their translators are all postgraduates from foreign language majors, but we are not completely satisfied with their translations as we can still find grammatical errors. Moreover, we are skeptical about their translation of cultural terms, feeling that they do not understand Chinese cultures." Thus, institutions are dissatisfied with the work of translation agencies, particularly regarding their failure to convey "culture." Third, the internal and external model is ideal and resembles the successful early modern European model mentioned above, utilizing the expertise of both internal and external staff to produce better translations. However, if there is no effective communication between the internal and external members, their respective strengths are not utilized, and the quality of the translations suffers, not to mention the effectiveness of the translations. A provincial museum staff member responsible for reviewing translations mentioned, "Sometimes when we question the accuracy of a translation, we contact the external translators, but they insist that they have always translated in this way... Thus, we are considering looking for new translators."

In conclusion, translation teams currently face three major challenges: (1) insufficient language competency; (2) less knowledge of cultural elements in cultural translation; (3) ineffective communication among members. These difficulties prevent cultural translation and dissemination from fulfilling their purpose of spreading Chinese culture globally.

### (2) The Dilemma in Translation Purposes

Cultural and artistic institutions have set two basic goals in the tide of "bringing Chinese culture to the world", "to translate the depth of culture" and "to attract more international visitors." "Translating the depth of culture" involves selecting content for translation and formulating translation strategies and methods, essentially addressing "what to translate" and "how to translate."

Translation in cultural and artistic institutions also faces three challenges. First, spatial factors bring both opportunities and challenges. While multi-modal texts provides visitors multiple options to know about cultural information, the presentation of information is constrained by space, especially wall panels and labels. Limited space requires translators to make a careful selection of what to be presented on the panels and labels. Second, most of information to be translated is full of mono-cultural terms and concepts, which ask the translators to covey them in an intelligible way. Although these can generally be made clearer through expansion and explanation in translation[22], the cognitive models, values, and aesthetic distances embodied in the texts are not merely issues of translation methods. Third, cultural and artistic communication serves a broad international visitors, who have various experiences and expectations of Chinese culture. Thus, there will inevitably be gaps between the texts presented by cultural institutions and the texts expected by visitors, and these gaps might lead to negative reception effects.

How translation teams achieve their goals needs careful consideration. Firstly, museums and galleries provide some services to visitors, such as audio guides and panels, and they might make visitors get access to different stories. However, in reality, some of visitors might choose one medium as their preference. For example, visitors are likely to choose only the medium of information they are most accustomed to. Then, visitor preference of the medium should be known by translation teams to present a satisfying design, such as what to translate. Moreover, they have to find better translation methods to meet the needs of visitors. For instance, translators have to carefully rewrite the Chinese texts to suit the spatial restriction of wall panels. Sometimes, translators have to make additions and omissions, so regulations on the translation strategies and methods would be formulated to ensure the consistent and effective reception results. Therefore, the priority is to investigate what the international visitors like to know about and what way of presentation they prefer. That is to say, systemic investigation on international visitors' preferences and expectations is an effective tool to make a well-established strategies and methods in order to achieve adequate translation and better reception.

Secondly, translators need to make their translations appealing to more international viewers and readers, and researches on international visitors have to be carried out thoroughly. We need to study the cultural memory frameworks of

international visitors, to find out both similarities and differences. Translation teams might use these similarities as links to bridge different cultural memory frameworks and then use the differences to extend or reconstruct the original cultural memory framework or the Chinese cultural memory framework. For example, translators might first identify the connections between different cultural contents and Chinese cultural contents, with reference to the survey results and parallel corpora. Besides, translators would make use of methods in effective communication to find a better way of presenting translated information, such as social psychology.

**(3) A map of the key factors in translating culture and art institutions**

We adopt the Grounded Theory (GT)[23], a commonly used method in qualitative research, to perform three-level coding on interview data. After the three-level coding, 126 core concepts are extracted and a map of the key factors in translation work is drawn out, which highlights the relationships and issues in translating cultural and art institutions (see Figure 1).
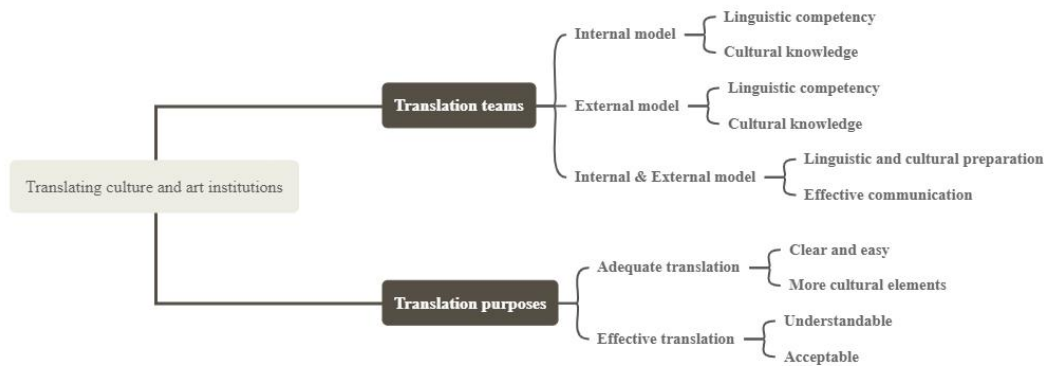


Figure 1 A map of the key factors in translating culture and art institutions

As shown in Figure 1, there are two key issues to the aim of translation and dissemination work in these institutions and main factors function at different levels. Generally, the translation teams face significant challenges in three areas (within the dashed lines), which are also the main reasons why translation purposes (within the dashed lines) are unattainable. For example, the limitation of each model of translation teams could not ensure the fulfillment of the goals. Specifically, the easy and clear presentation of translated text needs language and culture expertise. Moreover, the effective translation ask translators to achieve a high-level of communication, such as a better preparations for the cultural memory construction. As Jauss points out in his reception theory, both the reader and the text have their own horizons of expectation, and the aesthetic distance between these horizons can cause the reader's aversion to the text[24] . That is to say, translators should know well of the expectations of international visitors to be closer to them.

**Conclusion**

This study, through extensive surveys of professionals engaged in cultural and artistic exchange and related translation work, has revealed the current challenges and issues in cross-cultural communication of culture and arts in China. It employs qualitative research methods to find out the key factors in translation and dissemination. The institutions should pay more efforts on key factors, as shown in figure 1. The weaknesses of current translation teams, such as linguistic incompetence, lack of culture knowledge and inefficient communication, lead to inconsistent strategies and methods, and undervalued the visitors' study. The translation goals involve a comprehensive and systemic organization of the translation teams and detailed plan of strategies methods, and a thorough work on reception work.

This study might further deepen the understanding of translation work in cultural and artistic institutions in China. Both the institutions and the translation community should pay more efforts to these key factors in cultural translation and dissemination, to promote the development of China's cultural and artistic endeavors on a global scale, and contribute to enhancing communication and understanding between different national cultures and building a community with a shared future for humanity.

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