

FOR BETTER ACCESSIBILITY: STRATEGIES ON PLATE TRANSLATION IN MULTIMODAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

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Museums are open and inclusive places for knowledge dissemination and cultural communication. As both contact zone and translation zone, museum representation intersects with translation via texts, exhibits, illustrations, space, light and audio-visual resources. These various factors influencing meaning-making in the museum can be summarized as multidisciplinary, multimodal, multilingual and multifunctional. Given the self-contained, static, and isolated nature of written texts in museums, texts in the museums must prioritize clarity and conciseness, in the process of which critical considerations include selective elaboration, necessary adaptation and better accessibility. Turning to the specific Chinese-English description plates in a famed history museum, the first large-scale modern national museum, in Shaanxi province, this paper is principally concerned with how multimodal elements and translated texts are combined to increase language accessibility for foreign visitors. Through two rounds of field visits and the careful analysis into the original texts and translated versions, the study mainly investigates the translation and transformation process of information in these labels and uncovers how texts on the artifact plates achieve better accessibility via different methods. It is found that the most frequently used strategies in the selected museum is omission, which primarily involves omitting culture-specific elements, omitting supplementary, explanatory, or descriptive information and omitting text that forms intertextual relationships with other symbols in the artifact's environment. Other methods include supplementation, namely supplementing information regarding the historical context involved, and hypronym-based translation for easy understanding.

Key words: *accessibility, multimodal, museum, plate, translation strategies.*

ПІДВИЩЕННЯ МОВНОЇ ДОСТУПНОСТІ В МУЛЬТИМОДАЛЬНИХ ІСТОРИЧНИХ МУЗЕЯХ: СТРАТЕГІЇ ПЕРЕКЛАДУ ІНФОРМАЦІЙНИХ ТАБЛИЧОК

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Музеї виступають відкритими та інклюзивними просторами для поширення знань і міжкультурної комунікації. Як простір контакту та зона перекладу музейна репрезентація взаємодіє з перекладом через тексти, експонати, ілюстрації, просторове оформлення, освітлення й аудіовізуальні ресурси. Ці чинники, що впливають на процес створення смислів у музеї, мають міждисциплінарний, мультимодальний, багатомовний і мультифункціональний характер. Ураховуючи самодостатній, статичний та ізольований характер письмових текстів у музеях, тексти в музеях повинні бути чіткими та мати стислу форму, при цьому важливими аспектами є вибіркове розширення, необхідна адаптація та покращена доступність. Звертаючись до конкретних китайсько-англійських описових табличок у відомому історичному музеї, першому великому сучасному національному музеї у провінції Шеньсі, у цій статті, насамперед, розкрито, як мультимодальні елементи та перекладені тексти поєднуються для підвищення мовної доступності для іноземних відвідувачів. За допомогою відвідин двічі та ретельного аналізу оригінальних текстів і перекладених версій наше дослідження переважно розглядає процес перекладу та трансформації інформації на музейних табличках і виявляє, як тексти на табличках із написами до артефактів досягають кращої доступності за допомогою різних методів. Результати дослідження свідчать, що серед найбільш поширених стратегій забезпечення доступності англійських перекладів китайських написів до музейних артефактів у вибраному для дослідження музеї є: пропуски, зокрема опускання культурно-специфічних елементів, додаткової або описової інформації, а також інтертекстуальних посилань на інші елементи музейного простору. Інші методи включають доповнення, а саме додавання контекстуальних історичних відомостей та переклад із використанням гіперонімів із метою полегшення розуміння.

Ключові слова: мовна доступність, мультимодальність, музей, інформаційна табличка, стратегії перекладу.

Introduction. Museums are open and cultural institutions dedicated to the dissemination of knowledge and culture. They serve to collect, preserve and exhibit tangible and intangible heritage related to humanity and its environment (International Council of Museums, 2007). According to data released by the National Cultural Heritage Administration, the number of museums in China increased from 4,692 to 5,788 during the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016–2020), with an average of one new museum being opened every two days. By May 2023, the total number had reached 6,565, with over 90% offering free admission. Annual museum visits also surged from 700 million to 1.2 billion, averaging an increase of 100 million visitors per year.

In addition to their exhibition and educational functions, museums in China also play a vital role in facilitating mutual exchange and mutual learning between Chinese civilization and that of other countries. Previous experience has shown that Chinese museums serve as crucial windows for overseas audiences to understand China's traditional culture. According to the *2019 Assessment Report on the Overseas Influence of Chinese Museums* released by the China Cultural Heritage Exchange Center (2020), comprehensive and history-themed museums dominated the top ten rankings for overseas influence. History-focused institutions, such as the Emperor Qinshihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum, stood out in visitor reputation, receiving over 14,000 positive reviews from international visitors, with terms like «breathtaking» and «must-see» frequently cited. Meanwhile, the overseas exhibition series Terracotta Warriors: The Eternal Guardians, organized by the Shaanxi History Museum, garnered media coverage in 12 countries, including Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, with its influence spanning Oceania, North America, Europe, and Asia. Notably, The Australian listed it among the «Best Exhibitions of 2019». This not only reflects the strong momentum of history-themed museums in showcasing China's profound culture but also highlights the growing demand for high-quality museum translation.

Literature Review. Linguistic Features of Museum Texts. Museums are first and foremost communicative spaces (Clifford, 1997), yet they also function as spaces of translation (Sturge, 2007; Ravelli, 2006). Within these spaces, diverse languages and symbols interact profoundly through processes of cultural negotiation (Cronin & Simon, 2014, p. 182), achieving a tripartite act of «translation», namely from local culture to artifact, from artifact to source text, and from source text to translated text.

Since museum exhibits are predominantly static, language becomes essential in constructing their identity and meaning (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, p. 115; Ferguson, MacLulich, & Ravelli, 1995, p. 4). Museum «texts» establish interactive relationships with visitors through specific organizational frameworks, thereby revealing the nature and characteristics of exhibits and offering glimpses into cultural worlds (Ravelli, 2006, p. 95). This interaction, mediated by museum texts, typically exhibits the following four key features: 1) **Multidisciplinary**. Different types of museums and exhibits engage with diverse fields of knowledge, requiring visitors to possess relevant contextual understanding. 2) **Multimodal**. Museum «texts» extend beyond written language

to include audiovisual resources, diagrams, flowcharts, lighting design, and spatial arrangements. 3) **Multilingual**. Prominent global museums often feature linguistic landscapes in at least two languages, with some employing three or more. China's National Standard for Cultural Artifact Display Labels (GB/T 30234-2013) stipulates that exhibition labels must use Chinese, foreign languages, and ethnic minority languages, with Chinese as the mandatory. English is designated as the primary foreign language, while other languages may be added based on exhibition needs. 4) **Multi-functional**. Modern museums transcend the mere function of display; they integrate educational, interpretative, and recreational functions via those artifacts exhibited.

However, despite the diversity of textual forms and functions within museums, existing studies (Hein, 1998; Serrell, 1997) reveal that visitors' time in museums is highly limited, and their interpretation of symbols is rarely linear. Instead, visitors engage in «problem-solving» and «sense-making» across various elements based on their own knowledge and perceptions (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 122). Given the self-contained, static, and isolated nature of written texts in museums, which require visitors to bridge temporal, spatial, and cultural gaps (Ravelli, 2006, p. 54), museum texts must prioritize clarity and conciseness, in the process of which critical considerations include selective elaboration, necessary adaptation and better accessibility. The first means that only key concepts warrant detailed explanations and excessive technical information risks the overload of information; the second refers that technical terms and conceptual explanations must align with visitors' baseline knowledge, while the third indicates texts must clearly deliver information and avoid any redundancy.

Linguistic Features of Museum Artifact Labels. Artifact labels constitute a critical component of museum texts. Well-designed labels and accompanying texts, when integrated with non-textual elements such as lighting, color schemes, diagrams, and spatial arrangements, enhance visitor experiences (Daniel Schmidt et al., 2020; Whitehead, 2012; Serrell, 2015, p. 234; McLean, 1993), thereby fulfilling museums' educational mission (Zhou, 2023; Bitgood, 1991, p. 115). As concentrated hubs of cultural information, artifact labels exhibit three key linguistic characteristics.

The first one is limited words. Although there are numerous artifact labels within the museum, they occupy a lower tier in the museum's textual hierarchy, with an optimal length of 50 to 60 words (Dean, 1994; V&A Museum Text Guide, 2013). Overloading the limited space of artifact labels with excessive text can reduce visitors' reading desire and negatively impact visual aesthetics. Research (Scollon and Scollon, 2003) indicates that in bilingual settings, the language positioned at the top or left is often the dominant one. However, because Chinese is a semantic language with high information density within sentences, its English translations tend to be longer (Neather, 2021). Therefore, if the entire Chinese text is translated into English, it would inevitably result in the English translation (positioned to the right and bottom) occupying too much space on the artifact label, potentially undermining the dominant status of Chinese, which requires the translation process into English necessarily involving the adjustment and reduction of information.

The second one is strong intertextuality. The term «intertextuality», introduced by French philosopher Julia Kristeva, posits that texts are interconnected and mutually referential. In a narrow sense, intertextuality occurs between texts, while in a broader sense, it emphasizes the relationship between texts and other forms of knowledge or symbols, highlighting the interactive, reciprocal, and open nature of textual meaning (Pan Linlin, 2020). From a semiotic perspective, artifacts in the museum setting undergo multiple semiotic transformations through static text (including both original and translated text), visual illustrations, audio guides, etc within a composite semiotic system composed of lighting and environmental elements, thereby constructing meaning. In this process, the interaction between different symbols creates a unique intertextual landscape. In the three-dimensional space of a museum, intertextuality can be understood both as mutual referencing between texts and as referencing within the same space, across different spaces, and against the broader cultural background (Neather, 2012). Understanding and reconstructing intertextual relationships can liberate artifact translation from the pursuit of superficial textual equivalence, redirecting it toward the intertextual network between text and non-text elements. This approach provides greater flexibility for museum translation, particularly in the translation of artifact labels.

The third one is high accessibility. The accessibility of museum texts refers, on one hand, to whether the text is visible and legible (readability), which is related to the organization, layout, and design of the text within the visual environment. On the other hand, it also involves whether the text is easy to understand (intelligibility) (Ravelli, 2006, p. 50), which is connected to the flow of internal information, sentence length, vocabulary, and the level of specialized information. Excessive technical details, overly long sentences, or overly obscure terminology on artifact labels can negatively impact the experience of general visitors. Given the varying educational backgrounds of visitors and the limited space on artifact labels, how to translate and present artifact information in a clear and comprehensible manner within such constraints, namely deciding what to retain and what to omit from the original text during translation, is a crucial consideration for translators.

According to Serrell's recommendations for writing artifact labels (Serrell, 2015, p. 118), short sentences should be prioritized on labels, and the accumulation of excessive information should be avoided. Metaphors and other rhetorical devices should be minimized, and quotations should generally be omitted unless absolutely necessary. The language should steer clear of both didactic grandiosity and oversimplification. The content presented on artifact labels should align as closely as possible with the visitors' immediate experiences, thus facilitating a sense of connection and resonance.

Methodology. Given the overseas influence and popularity of history museums, as well as the widespread and unique nature of artifact labels, this study selects the Shaanxi History Museum as the research site. It focuses on the bilingual artifact labels within the museum, examining them from the perspective of language accessibility. Through a comparative analysis of the source and target texts, the study mainly investigates the translation and transformation process of information in these labels.

Research Site. As a space and venue for the concentrated display of historical artifacts, the Shaanxi History Museum is the first large-scale modern national museum in China, renowned as the «Treasure House of Chinese Civilization». As a history museum, it employs history and related humanities disciplines as its knowledge framework. Through permanent exhibitions, thematic exhibitions, temporary exhibitions, and online exhibitions, it systematically presents the development of ancient civilization in Shaanxi from the emergence of early humans 1.63 million years ago to the period before the Opium War in 1840.

Due to the vast number of artifacts in its collection, this study focuses on the Shaanxi Ancient Civilization Exhibition (Galleries 1, 2, and 3) as the research site. The exhibits center around the development of Shaanxi province from the prehistoric period all the way to the post-Tang periods. Guided by the principle of «using artifacts to illustrate history», the exhibition reflects Shaanxi's ancient civilization from various perspectives. With a focus on the dynasties of Zhou, Qin, Han, and Tang, it highlights the significance of Shaanxi in Chinese history (Shaanxi History Museum official website).

Preliminary Preparation. To comprehensively collect the necessary linguistic data, field visits to the Shaanxi History Museum were conducted on October 8 and 29, 2024. On October 8, photographs were taken of all artifacts and their labels. Then the linguistic features of the Chinese descriptions and English translations on the labels were analyzed, and common translation strategies used in the museum were summarized with typical examples selected. On October 29, a second visit was made to observe and record the environment of the selected artifacts and their labels in detail. The original and translated texts of the audio guides and video introductions (if available) for these artifacts were also documented.

Methods. The careful analysis into the original texts and translated versions are conducted following the approach of descriptive translation studies, namely paying attention to the function, process and product of translation activities (Toury, 2012). By describing what activities does occur in the process of translating artifacts label with the aim for better accessibility via close reading and comparing label texts, this studies tries to on the whole summarize what kind of translation strategies are likely to involve under the similar array of specified conditions in the research sites alike.

Findings and discussions. Textual analysis reveals that the artifact labels in the research site vary in design, shape, color, and placement. The labels are rectangular in Galleries 1 and 2, while circular labels are used in Gallery 3. Some labels are placed at a lower position in front of the artifacts, aligning with the museum's «bow culture», while others are displayed alongside the artifacts on exhibition walls, allowing for easy reading at eye level. The labels in Galleries 1 and 3 primarily feature white text on a black background, whereas Gallery 2 uses black text on a white background. The content of the labels typically includes the artifact's classification, dynasty, excavation site, as well as descriptions of the artifact's overall appearance, design concept, historical context, and function.

From the perspective of enhancing text accessibility, the most commonly used strategies in the English translation of artifact labels in the museum include omission, supplementation, and hypernym-based translation.

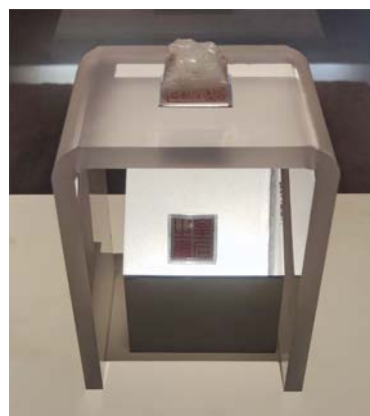
Omission. The omission strategy in the translation of artifact labels primarily involves omitting culture-specific elements, omitting supplementary, explanatory, or descriptive information, and omitting text that forms intertextual relationships with other symbols in the artifact's environment.

Culture-specific elements are words, phrases, or idioms that denote unique aspects of a particular culture. They reflect the distinct ways of life accumulated by a specific ethnic group over a long historical process, differing from other ethnic groups (Liao Qiyi, 2000, p. 232). Such terms often lack direct equivalents in English. While translators might typically use annotations to supplement cultural information for target-language readers (Zheng Dehu, 2016), the physical constraints of the labels necessitate concise translations, which, together with cultural background of general target-language readers, often lead to the direct omission of these culturally rich elements. In addition, given the intertextual network within the museum, where the artifact itself, explanatory visuals, and audio guides all reference the label text, translators can reduce the word count by omitting information that is visually or contextually apparent (Neather, 2008). By omitting unnecessary information and simplifying the content, the text thus becomes more accessible to a broader audience within the museum's spatial and contextual constraints.

Example 1: 皇后玉玺 (Empress' Seal)

Chinese: 出土于汉高祖刘邦与皇后吕雉合葬墓长陵东侧约1000米。《汉旧仪》载：“皇后玉玺，文与帝同，皇后之玺，金螭虎钮。”此印玉质为珍贵的羊脂玉，螭虎钮，印面阴刻篆文“皇后之玺”，书体流畅。从质地、钮式和文字推测，可能是吕后生前所用印章，也是迄今所见唯一的汉代皇后玉玺，弥足珍贵。

Translation: Unearthed one kilometer east to Changling Mausoleum, this seal was inscribed with four characters of seal script meaning Empress' Seal. It is made of Hetian white jade with a monster-shaped protrusion. Its quality, style and inscription all indicate that this seal belonged to Han Empress Lyu Zhi (241BC-180BC). It is also the only Han empress' seal discovered so far.



Upon comparing the original text with its translation, it is evident that certain elements have been omitted in the latter. These include: ① 汉高祖刘邦与皇后吕雉合葬墓

(the joint burial site of Liu Bang, Emperor Gaozu of Han, and his Empress Lü Zhi). ② 《汉旧仪》载：“皇后玉玺，文与帝同，皇后之玺，金螭虎钮。” (According to Han Jiu Yi, namely Ancient rules of the Han Dynasty, the Empress's seal bears the same inscription as the Emperor's, with a gold dragon and tiger knob). ③ 印面阴刻篆文“皇后之玺”，书体流畅 (The seal face is inscribed with the seal script “Seal of the Empress”, showcasing a fluid calligraphic style. ④弥足珍贵 (It is exceedingly precious).

Among these, ① and ② primarily omit explanatory information. ① provides an explanation for Changling Mausoleum while ② offers evidence that the artifact is indeed the Empress seal, as indicated by the «Seal of the Empress, with a gold dragon and tiger knob». ③ and ④ mainly omit text that forms an intertextual relationship with other symbols within the artifact's environment. Visitors can clearly see the seal script «Seal of the Empress» and its style (fluid calligraphy) at the bottom of the seal via the mirror in the display case, rendering the translation unnecessary. As for ④, it is on the other hand conveyed through the manner of its display. This artifact is prominently displayed independently at the front left of the second exhibition hall on the second floor of the museum. Among eight randomly observed tour groups, both self-paid tour guides (five groups) and museum docents (three groups) stopped to explain this exhibit, with an average explanation time of two minutes and thirty-eight seconds. The display case is always crowded with visitors. To facilitate viewing of the inscription at the bottom of the seal, the museum has uniquely employed the principle of mirror imaging for a direct display, unlike other artifacts that have diagrams printed next to their display plaques. This method is exclusive to this artifact within the museum. The artifact itself, along with its three-dimensional space and mode of display, interacts to highlight its historical value, further emphasized by words such as «only» in the English translation.

Example 2: 独孤信多面体煤精组印 (26-faced jet seal of Dugu Xin)

Chinese: 此印为西魏名将独孤信不同时期之印。印用煤精制成，呈球体8棱26面，其中14面镌刻有印文，分别为“臣信上疏”“臣信上章”“臣信上表”“臣信启事”“大司马印”“大都督印”“刺史之印”“柱国之印”“独孤信白书”“信白牋”“信启事”“耶敕”“令”“密”。14面印文用途各异，分为公文用印、上书用印和书简用印，是研究北朝印玺制度的珍贵实物资料。

Translation: This 26-faced jet seal with 14 faces inscribed with names of official posts is owned by a famous general, Dugu Xin in the Western Wei Period. Each official title on the seal was used for a specific purpose. With such a unique design, this seal is a very precious evidence for the study of seal management of that time.

In this case, the elements omitted in the English translation mainly include: ① 不同时期之印 (seals from different periods); ② 球体8棱 (the eight edges of the spherical body); ③ 14面镌刻有印文 (the specific names of the inscriptions on the 14-faced seal); and ④ 分为公文用印、上书用印和书简用印(the three different purpose of this seal, namely for official documents, for memorials, and for personal correspondence). Among these, ① and ④ are explanatory information; ② forms an intertextual relationship with the exhibit itself, as the described shape can be directly observed from the exhibit; ③

lists the names of various seals, which can be seen in detail on the schematic diagram next to the artifact's label, which also forms an intertextual relationship with explanatory images. In addition, the Chinese introduction contains expressions that require certain cultural background to understand, such as «shangshu» (memorial to the throne), «shang-zhang» (petition), «shangbiao» (report to the emperor), and «qishi» (announcement), as well as various official titles like «Grand Marshal», «Grand Governor», and «Provincial Governor», which are typical culture-loaded elements. If these were merely transliterated into Chinese phonetic alphabet, it would be difficult for foreign visitors to understand; if we combine Chinese phonetic alphabet with annotation, it would make the translation lengthy and overcrowd the label with text. Moreover, excessive Chinese phonetic alphabet in the English text could reduce reading efficiency and hinder comprehension.



Supplementation. The names of artifacts in historical museums are replete with a multitude of proper nouns and historical facts that bear unique historical characteristics. If these names are merely transliterated, visitors may find it difficult to grasp their meanings. Therefore, it is often necessary to provide brief supplementary information regarding the historical context involved.

Example 3: 利簋 (Li Gui)

Translation: Food Container (*Gui*) of Official Li

During the Shang and Zhou dynasties in China, bronze was referred to as «gold», a precious metal reserved exclusively for the royal family. After the defeat of the Shang army, Li, an official, was granted bronze by King Wu of Zhou, the founding king of the Chinese Zhou dynasty, as a reward. He then cast a bronze *Gui* vessel as an eternal memento. Since this bronze *Gui* was crafted by Li, it came to be known as the Li Gui. Thus, the term «Li» in the name of this artifact does not signify «benefit» or «profit», whose Chinese characters are the same as 利, but is instead the name of a person. In translating, the interpreter clarified Li's status as an ancient official by adding the term «Official», which facilitates a better understanding for foreign visitors. A similar approach can be observed in the translations of other artifacts, such as the «Wine Vessel of Official Li» for 盞方尊 (Li Fang Zun) and the «Bronze Tripod of General Duo You» for 多友鼎 (Duo You Ding) in the same museum.

Example 4: 白玉翁仲 (Baiyu Weng Zhong)

Translation: White Jade in Shape of a Legendary General

According to historical records, Weng Zhong was a valiant general during the Qin Dynasty who once terrified the Xiongnu (nomadic tribes). Later generations erected statues of him in front of palaces, temples, and tombs to ward off evil spirits. If translators were to merely transliterate the label as «White Jade of Wengzhong», it would create excessive textual noise. Visitors would struggle to visualize «Weng Zhong» and might raise further questions like «is Wengzhong a person» and «why his image is carved into jade». By omitting his name and supplementing the translation with his role (a legendary general), combined with the artifact's image on the display label, visitors can better grasp the specific historical reference and symbolic meaning behind the artifact's name. This approach aligns the translation with the visual context of the exhibit, thus enhancing cross-cultural comprehension.

Hypernym-Based Translation. China's historical and cultural heritage is profound and intricate, with ancient daily utensils reflecting a vast diversity. Take dining vessels as an example: cooking utensils include ding (鼎), li (鬲), yan (甗), and fu (釜); food containers encompass gui (簋), fu (簠), dun (敦), and dou (豆). Wine vessels are even further categorized into warming vessels, drinking cups, storage jars, ladles, and serving trays, each with multiple sub-types. If all these terms were transliterated (e.g., ding, li, yan), the information would become cluttered and obscure to foreign visitors, failing to convey the functional essence and cultural significance of these artifacts. In such cases, hypernym-based translation serves as a pragmatic compromise.

A hypernym refers to a broad, generalized term that categorizes an object. In historical museums, translations of ancient utensils, official titles, or architectural terms often adopt superordinate based on their purpose or classification to enhance comprehension. As shown in the examples below, translations typically follow a «function plus transliteration» format. For instance, the White Pottery Gui (白陶鬶) is translated as «Wine Vessel (*Gui*)», where «Wine Vessel» clarifies its purpose, the italicized transliteration (*Gui*) preserves the original Chinese term and the material white pottery could be observed directly upon the seeing of the vessel. This approach balances accessibility for foreign audiences with the need to highlight the richness of ancient Chinese culinary culture.

Table 1

Names of some common dining vessels

Chinese	Translation
鬶、盃、觚、壘、爵、甌、彝	wine vessel
鬲、甗	cooking vessel
簋、豆、盥	food container
罍	wine warmer

Conclusion and limitations. Amid the ongoing «museum fever», recent research has expanded beyond merely examining what is exhibited and how it is displayed but

increasingly focusing on exhibition effectiveness, audience reach, and public engagement. As quintessential multimodal spaces, museums integrate architecture, thematic narratives, artifacts, and interdisciplinary, multilingual, and multifunctional «texts» into a cohesive medium for meaning-making. This article, grounded in the perspective of linguistic accessibility, analyzes the constraints of translating artifact labels in historical museums and proposes context-aware strategies tailored to their multimodal environment. By prioritizing clarity without sacrificing cultural specificity via dynamic omission, judicious supplementation and hypernym-based translation, the study aims to advance the cross-cultural communication of China's historical heritage.

Certainly this study is without limitations. For one thing, it only chooses one history museum, despite its nationwide reputation, as the research site, thus making the findings somehow lack universality. For another, this study adopts a qualitative approach by closely comparing the Chinese labels with their translations. Further research could be done to count up the frequency of each strategies and thus acquire a more comprehensive map on the overall usage of different translation strategies for better accessibility.

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