
Translation Ethics and Cultural Identity Construction in Wooden and Bamboo Slip Documents: A Case Study of Frontier Culture Texts from Hexi

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Abstract: This paper explores the complex ethical issues involved in translating historical frontier culture texts from the Hexi wooden and bamboo slips and looks at how these translations shape cross-cultural identity building. It argues that a one-sided ethical approach is not enough to translate these specialized, culturally rich documents properly. By carefully analyzing the unique translation challenges—covering linguistic, cultural, and textual aspects—and assessing existing translation strategies, the study uses Andrew Chesterman’s multi-dimensional translation ethics framework as its main analytical tool. The research emphasizes that a mixed, context-based ethical model is essential. This proposed model calls for combining two key elements: the strict accuracy required by the “ethics of representation” and the flexible, reader-focused approach of the “ethics of communication”. Meanwhile, the model should be guided by the “ethics of service” and thoughtfully follow the “ethics of norms”. The paper concludes that this balanced, multi-layered method is critical to achieving two main goals: first, building an accurate scholarly account of the Hexi frontier’s unique historical identity; second, spreading this identity effectively and meaningfully to different international audiences. Ultimately, this research seeks to provide a clear theoretical and practical framework for translating similar non-mainstream historical texts from Chinese cultural heritage.

Keywords: Hexi Wooden and Bamboo Slips; Frontier culture; Translation ethics; Cultural identity construction; Historical documents

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1. Introduction

The Hexi Corridor, a historically contested and culturally rich thoroughfare on the ancient Silk Road, has unearthed a wealth of archaeological relics in the form of bamboo and wooden slips, most of which date back to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). These are not just cultural artifacts, but a massive underground archive that offers a direct look into the administrative operations, economic conditions, and daily lives of people on China’s early northwestern frontier ^[1]. They record military

supply arrangements, legal rules, official communications, soldiers' personal letters to their families, and ordinary item inventories in meticulous detail, together embodying a distinct frontier culture. This culture came into being as a unique blend, forged by the introduction of bureaucratic and agricultural systems from the Central Plains, the harsh realities of military garrison life, and the constant, often practical interactions with the various cultures of the Western Regions ^[2].

In today's context of global cultural exchange, as China actively promotes its historical heritage through initiatives like the "Belt and Road," translating these wooden and bamboo slip texts has become increasingly important. It acts as a vital bridge for international sinology research, comparative historical studies, and public cultural education outside Chinese-speaking regions. Yet translating the Hexi slips is fraught with extraordinary difficulties, turning it from a simple linguistic task into a complex act of cultural mediation. The source texts are written in classical Chinese—a language known for its conciseness, flexible sentence structure, and profound meaning. They are also filled with culture-specific terms referring to long-obsolete institutions, official titles, and material objects. What's more, the physical slips are often fragmented, damaged, and stripped of their original context, while their content is steeped in historical and geographical imagery deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions.

These challenges reveal major ethical conflicts in translation practice. At its core, translators of such materials face a constant dilemma: should their top priority be strict loyalty to the source text as a historical document, preserving its foreign characteristics and unique details even if it risks confusing or alienating target readers? Or should they focus on helping target audiences understand and engage with the content, which might require extensive adaptation, explanation, or even rephrasing—actions that could oversimplify or distort the original cultural context? This ethical dilemma is central to how translation shapes cultural identity.

While existing academic research on the Hexi slips covers a wide range of historical, archaeological, and philological analyses, and some studies have explored the technical aspects of translating specific terms or documents, there remains a clear gap in the scholarship. There is little systematic research that explicitly examines the translation ethics guiding these practices, or that critically analyzes how specific ethical choices directly shape the perceived "cultural identity" of the Hexi frontier for foreign audiences. This paper aims to fill this gap. Based on representative frontier culture texts from the Hexi slip collection, it will first identify the specific translation challenges from an ethical perspective; then use Chesterman's ^[3] ethical framework to analyze the impacts of different translation approaches; and finally propose a well-grounded, integrated translation strategy. The goal of this strategy is to faithfully construct and effectively communicate a nuanced, accurate, and engaging identity for this crucial part of Chinese history.

2. Theoretical framework: Ethics and identity in translation

2.1. The multi-dimensional landscape of translation ethics

Translation is an intrinsically value-laden activity, a site of constant decision-making with ethical repercussions. Moving beyond simplistic binaries of "faithful" versus "free" translation, contemporary translation theory offers nuanced frameworks for understanding these responsibilities. Andrew Chesterman's ^[3] typology of translation ethics provides a particularly robust and applicable model for analyzing historical text translation. He delineates four primary ethical orientations that, while conceptually distinct, often interact and conflict in practice.

The Ethics of Representation emphasizes the translator's duty to accurately and faithfully represent the source text, its authors, and their presumed intentions. The translator acts as a "trustee" or "voice" for the original, minimizing intervention. In the context of historical documents like the Hexi slips, this often manifests as a commitment to philological precision, preservation of textual anomalies, and a preference for scholarly annotation. It aligns closely with what Venuti would term a "foreignizing" strategy ^[4].

The Ethics of Service frames translation as a professional service provided to a client. The primary duty is to efficiently and effectively fulfill the translation brief or *skopos* established by the commissioner ^[5]. For Hexi slips, the "client" could be an academic press (demanding scholarly rigor), a museum (requiring accessible exhibit labels), or a

documentary filmmaker (needing narrative flow). The ethical imperative is to meet these specified functional goals.

The overarching goal about Ethics of Communication is to facilitate successful communication and understanding between members of different linguistic and cultural communities. The translator acts as a mediator or bridge-builder. This ethic may justify greater intervention in the text—explaining, contextualizing, or re-structuring—to overcome cultural barriers and ensure the message is received and understood by the target audience. It often correlates with domesticating strategies.

The Ethics of Norms highlights the translator's operation within a socio-cultural system governed by norms. These are the often-unspoken conventions regarding what constitutes an acceptable or appropriate translation within a given target culture, genre, or historical period ^[6]. Translating a historical document for an English academic monograph, for instance, carries different normative expectations than translating it for a popular history magazine.

The translator of Hexi slips must constantly negotiate among these ethical demands, with the prioritization of one over others fundamentally determining methodology and ultimately the image of the source culture that is produced.

2.2. Translation as an arena for cultural identity construction

Cultural identity is not an essential, pre-existing entity but a process of construction—a narrative that is continually articulated, performed, and contested. It involves both self-definition and external ascription. Translation is one of the most powerful discursive practices through which a culture's identity is represented, interpreted, and negotiated for external consumption. Every translational act, from the selection of what to translate to the minutiae of how to render a specific term, participates in this construction.

Lawrence Venuti's seminal work on the "invisibility" of the translator and the politics of "domestication" versus "foreignization" directly engages with this identity-shaping power. A strongly domesticating translation of Hexi frontier texts might make them feel familiar and relatable to a Western reader, but in doing so, it risks erasing their specific Chineseness, their bureaucratic uniqueness, and their embeddedness in a particular Sino-centric worldview. Conversely, a radically foreignizing translation might preserve these distinctive features but present the culture as opaque, exotic, and fundamentally "Other," potentially reinforcing stereotypes rather than fostering understanding.

Thus, for the Hexi frontier, the translation process does not merely transmit a pre-formed identity; it actively participates in constructing that identity for the target culture. The ethical choices outlined above become the tools with which this identity is sculpted: towards meticulous historical artifact, accessible human story, or something in between.

3. Deconstructing Hexi frontier culture: Connotations and translation impediments

3.1. The multi-layered connotations of frontier culture in the slips

The culture encapsulated in the Hexi slips is a complex, stratified entity. It can be analyzed through three interconnected layers.

The Institutional-Military Stratum is the most visible layer, comprising the hardware and software of Han frontier control. Slips detail the beacon system—a sophisticated network for visual communication using smoke and fire with strict protocols ^[7]. They document the construction and manning of fortified posts, the organization of conscripted garrison soldiers, and the implementation of military-agricultural colonies for self-sufficiency. This stratum reveals a state exerting rational, bureaucratic control over a vast and remote territory.

The Socio-Economic and Livelihood Stratum reveal the military apparatus and a functioning society. Soldier rosters list names, hometowns, and ranks, painting a picture of conscript diversity. Inventories of clothing, grain, and weapons detail the logistical challenges of supply ^[8].

The Conceptual-Emotional Stratum is the implicit, affective layer. It encompasses the ethos of duty and sacrifice, the resilience required by a harsh environment, the pervasive anxiety about nomadic incursions, and the profound melancholy of exile encapsulated in the trope of returning home. It also includes the early traces of cultural syncretism, seen in

loanwords, hybrid administrative practices, and material exchanges^[9].

3.2 The tripartite translation challenge: A confluence of obstacles

As for cultural-load terms, military-administrative terms like “候长,” “燧长,” “橐” have no English equivalents. Material culture terms like “糒,” “橐,” “阜练” refer to precise objects whose specifics are lost in generic translation^[10]. Simple domestication like a commander, food, bag, silk annihilates historical specificity.

As for transference of culturally-pregnant imagery, the texts are steeped in imagery that resonates deeply within the Chinese tradition but may be inert in English. “玉门关” (Jade Gate Pass) is not just a location; it is a literary symbol of the empire’s limit, of farewell, and of desolate grandeur. The “烽火” (beacon fire) signifies not just a signal but urgency, vigilance, and the connectivity of a vast border network. The emotional weight of a “家书” (family letter) from the frontier carries a particular pathos shaped by Confucian familial ideals^[11]. Translating the denotative meaning often leaves this cultural connotation behind.

As for the conflict between documentary form and target-text conventions, the physical and linguistic nature of the slips clashes with standard English textual expectations. They are fragments—often broken, faded, and semantically incomplete. The language is telegraphic, assuming shared context lost to time. Producing a literal, fragmentary English translation honors the text’s document-ness but may result in an unreadable, confusing output. Conversely, smoothing them into fluent, coherent paragraphs risks a re-narration that over-interprets and obscures their original, epigraphic character. This tension pits the ethics of representation against those of communication and norms.

4. Ethical orientations in practice and their constructed identities

4.1. The “Archaeological Specimen”: Identity constructed under representation ethics dominance

When the ethics of representation are paramount, the translation strategy is one of maximalist scholarly fidelity. Key features include: First, prevalent transliteration adds annotation: Core terms are rendered in pinyin, followed by a literal gloss and often a lengthy explanatory note. E.g., “烽燧”: fengsui (beacon-mound; a Han Dynasty border signaling system using smoke by day and fire by night). Second, preservation of textual disturbances: Lacunae are scrupulously marked with ellipses or brackets; unusual word order is retained; no speculative reconstruction is attempted. Third, paratextual heaviness: The translation is embedded within a fortress of scholarly apparatus: extensive footnotes, glossaries, archaeological descriptions, and paleographic notes.

This approach, exemplified in the foundational work of scholars like Michael Loewe, constructs an identity for Hexi culture as an “archaeological specimen.” It is presented as an object of precise, scientific study—authentic, detailed, and uncompromisingly foreign. This identity caters perfectly to the academic community, validating the culture’s historical significance. However, for a wider audience, it risks rendering the culture as a static, dehumanized “Other”, a puzzle for specialists rather than a relatable human experience. The emotional stratum is often subsumed by philological detail.

4.2. The “Relatable Historical Experience”: Identity constructed under communication ethics dominance

When the imperative of cross-cultural understanding drives the translation, strategies shift towards adaptation and accessibility:

Functional domestication refers to a strategy where unfamiliar terms are replaced with the closest functional equivalent in English, such as translating “戍卒” as garrison soldiers or frontier guards and “屯田” as military farms or agricultural colonies.

Textual fluency and cohesion are achieved by weaving fragments into coherent narratives, adding pronouns, inserting logical connectors, and making speculative but plausible completions to fill gaps, thus creating a smooth-reading historical account.

Contextual integration of imagery entails conveying the symbolic weight of terms like “玉门关” through descriptive language in the main text rather than relying on the reader’s prior cultural knowledge.

This approach, seen in some popular histories and thematic compilations, builds an identity of relatable historical experience. It makes the frontier world accessible and engaging, highlighting the universal themes of soldiering, loneliness, and administration. The potential pitfall, however, is cultural flattening. The unique particularities of the Han bureaucratic state, the precise mechanisms of the beacon system, and the specific texture of material life can be smoothed over. The identity constructed may feel generic, “ancients soldiers on a wall,” losing the very Chineseness that makes the Hexi frontier historically distinctive^[12].

4.3. Towards a syncretic ethic: Constructing a “Precise yet communicative” identity

Given the limitations of pure approaches, a more effective model involves a strategic, context-aware synthesis of ethical principles, aiming for a precise yet communicative identity^[13]. This is not a weak compromise but a conscious, tiered methodology.

Audience-driven, layered outputs—a practice aligned with service and communication ethics—means recognizing that a single translation cannot meet the needs of all readers, so create different versions for distinct groups.

For specialists, prioritizing representation ethics with full critical apparatus. For students and educated non-specialists, balancing fluent translation with annotations that explain key cultural terms and concepts without overwhelming the text. For the general public, organizing extracts around themes, using more domesticated language but with a strong introductory framework^[14].

Tiered treatment of cultural-loaded terms, which ties into representation and communication ethics, involves adopting a carefully adjusted lexical strategy. For tier 1, or core institutional terms, we use pinyin plus a brief functional explanation when the term first appears, then switch to just the pinyin or a well-chosen shorthand—for example, “Houguan (候官), a headquarters of a frontier sector, commanded by a hou (候) officer”; for tier 2, or important material terms, we use an explanatory translation with the original term in parentheses, such as “black, refined silk (zao lian 阜练)”; for tier 3, or general terms, we simply use direct equivalents, like translating “刀” as “knife” and “书” as “letter”.

Strategic use of paratexts, which applies to all ethical considerations, means making use of paratextual elements—including introductions, maps, timelines, glossaries, and illustrations—to take the explanatory pressure off the main text. A map that shows the beacon network, for instance, can better convey the network’s scale and logic than any footnote, and it serves both representation and communication goals at the same time.

This integrated approach builds a multi-dimensional identity for the translated work: it is academically credible, engaging to read, and culturally distinctive. It enables the Hexi frontier to be viewed not only as a complex historical system, but also as a real place where people once lived, loved, and had their own worries.

5. Conclusion

The English translation of Hexi bamboo slip literature is far more than a linguistic transfer; it is a consequential act of historical interpretation and cultural portraiture, fraught with significant ethical decisions. This paper has argued that neither a rigid adherence to source-text fidelity nor a wholesale adaptation for target-culture comfort can, in isolation, successfully construct a rich and accurate cultural identity for the Hexi frontier. The former risks creating an inaccessible, exoticized artifact; the latter risks producing an anodyne, de-historicized story.

The path forward lies in embracing a flexible, multi-ethical framework. Translators and commissioners must consciously navigate the intersecting demands of representation, communication, service, and norms. By adopting audience-sensitive strategies—such as producing layered translations, implementing a tiered approach to terminology, and harnessing the power of paratexts—it becomes possible to craft a portrayal of the Hexi frontier that is both precise in its scholarly detail and communicative in its human resonance. This balanced construction is essential for fulfilling the

dual mandate of cultural heritage translation: to advance knowledge within the academy and to foster meaningful public understanding across cultures.

Future research could productively extend this inquiry in several directions. Empirical reception studies could assess how different translation strategies actually impact various reader groups' perceptions of the culture. Comparative studies could analyze translation approaches for other Chinese manuscript corpora (e.g., Dunhuang, Juyan). Finally, the evolving digital landscape presents new frontiers, inviting exploration of how hypertext, multimedia annotation, and database-linked translations might reshape the ethical and practical terrain of representing ancient cultures like that of the Hexi frontier.

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