

## A Study on the Chinese-English Translation of University Mottos

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**Abstract:** *The university motto, serving as the core embodiment of a university's spiritual culture, encapsulates its educational philosophy, value pursuits, and historical legacy. This study initially examines the linguistic features of Chinese university mottos, such as their conciseness, philosophical richness, and reliance on classical allusions. Subsequently, it analyzes specific cases to identify key strategies and techniques in translating Chinese university mottos into English, including the integration of literal and free translation, omission, and supplementation. The research concludes by emphasizing the necessity of balancing cultural depth with target-language expression norms and offers actionable recommendations for improvement. Ultimately, this work seeks to provide theoretical insights for the translation of Chinese university mottos and enhance the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese university mottos, linguistic features, English translation methods, cultural communication*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The university motto is a highly condensed representation of the university spirit, serving both educational guidance and cultural symbolism. Like a mirror, it reflects the unique spiritual demeanor and value pursuits of different institutions, playing a key role in shaping campus culture and guiding the behavior of teachers and students. With the accelerating internationalization of Chinese higher education and the increasing frequency of exchanges between university campuses and the world, the English translation of Chinese university mottos has naturally become an important way for Chinese universities to showcase themselves to the international community. Accurate, appropriate, and culturally rich translations of university mottos can successfully overcome the dual barriers of language and culture between the East and the West, clearly conveying the core spirit, educational philosophy, and long-standing historical heritage of Chinese universities to the international community. This, in turn, enables the world to understand Chinese universities more comprehensively and deeply.

However, there are significant differences between Chinese and Western language structures and cultural backgrounds, which pose many challenges to the translation of university mottos. The most prominent issue is the difficulty in achieving both form and spirit in translation. In terms of language structure, Chinese emphasizes meaning coherence, with flexible sentence structures that rely mainly on contextual logical relationships for semantic coherence. In contrast, English emphasizes formal coherence, with strict grammatical rules that depend on conjunctions and specific grammatical forms to clarify sentence structures. Regarding cultural backgrounds, Western culture, oriented towards individualism, places a high value on the acquisition of individual freedom and achievement. In contrast, Chinese culture, deeply influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional thoughts, particularly values collectivism and the responsibilities individuals should bear towards society. Therefore, when translating university mottos, it is essential to convey the philosophical depth and cultural connotations of the original text. Otherwise, the mottos may fail to function effectively in cross-cultural communication, making it difficult for international audiences to deeply understand the unique charm of the Chinese university spirit. Given this, this paper combines linguistic and translation theories to conduct an in-depth analysis of the linguistic characteristics of Chinese university mottos and systematically studies their English translation methods, aiming to provide practical references for cross-cultural translation practices.

## 2. LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF CHINESE UNIVERSITY MOTTOS

### 2.1. Conciseness and Refinement

Chinese university mottos are characterized by their concise and refined linguistic form, often presented in the form of exquisite four-character phrases or neat antithetical sentence patterns. This unique four-character structure has a profound historical origin. It is deeply influenced by the “four-character verse” tradition of *the Book of Songs*. Over the long course of history, it has gradually formed and solidified in the development of the Chinese language, becoming a major feature of Chinese linguistic culture. With its high degree of linguistic condensation, the four-character structure can cleverly express rich, diverse, and profound meanings with extremely concise and vigorous words. Not only does it possess harmonious and beautiful phonetics, a brisk and smooth rhythm, and a strong sense of rhythm and unique rhythmical beauty, providing an aesthetic pleasure, but it also has natural advantages in terms of memorization and dissemination<sup>[1]</sup>. It facilitates quick memorization and widespread recitation by teachers and students, leaving an indelible impression in people’s minds.

For example, Fudan University’s motto “博学而笃志，切问而近思” (Extensive learning and firm aspiration, keen questioning and close thinking) clearly points out the direction for learning and thinking for teachers and students in just ten characters. “博学” (extensive learning) encourages teachers and students to explore knowledge widely, without being limited to a single discipline or field. Whether it is the wonderful exploration of natural sciences or the in-depth study of humanities and social sciences, active participation is encouraged to broaden one’s knowledge horizon. “笃志” (firm aspiration) emphasizes the importance of having a steadfast goal. In the long journey of learning, facing the complex temptations and distractions from the outside world, one should always hold on to their inner objectives and not waver easily. For instance, some students may frequently change their majors due to the good employment prospects of popular fields. However, with the concept of “笃志” (firm aspiration), they should choose their goals based on their own interests and strengths and stick to them persistently. “切问”(keen questioning) advocates in-depth exploration of issues, dissatisfaction with superficial answers, bold questioning, and active communication and discussion with teachers and classmates to uncover the deeper connotations of knowledge. “近思”(close thinking) requires a close connection with reality, integrating the knowledge learned with daily life and social phenomena. For example, when studying economic theories, one should think about how to use these theories to explain current economic hot - spot issues. This motto covers multiple aspects, including extensive learning, firm aspiration, in - depth exploration, and thinking in connection with reality. It is concise yet has profound educational significance. Teachers and students can easily understand and actively practice it in their daily study and life, continuously improving their own quality and abilities<sup>[2]</sup>.

Another example is Beijing Normal University’s motto “学为人师，行为世范” (Learn to be a teacher, act as a model for the world). In just eight characters, it accurately summarizes the academic and moral standards that teachers should possess. In terms of academic knowledge, teachers need to have a solid and profound understanding of their subject matter, being well-versed in the knowledge system of the disciplines they teach and able to explain complex concepts in simple terms to answer students’ questions and serve as role models in knowledge transmission. In terms of moral demonstration, teachers’ every move and word has a profound impact on students. They must lead by example, setting a benchmark with noble moral character and good behavioral norms. This motto clarifies the dual responsibilities of educators in knowledge transmission and moral demonstration, conveying the core essence of normal education in a concise and powerful manner. It provides clear behavioral guidelines for teachers and students, inspiring every member of Beijing Normal University to continuously strive for excellence in the field of education and contribute to the cultivation of outstanding talents<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 2.2. Rich in Philosophical Wisdom

University mottos contain profound philosophical insights and educational wisdom, playing an important role in guiding students' growth and success. They focus not only on students' academic development but also on cultivating their moral character, values, and sense of social responsibility, guiding students to establish correct views of life and the world.

For example, Tsinghua University’s motto “自强不息，厚德载物”(Self-strengthening without cease, virtue carries all) is derived from *the Book of Changes* and embodies Confucian thoughts of “unity of

heaven and man” and “inner sage, outer king”. “自强不息” (self-strengthening without cease) emphasizes the enterprising spirit of individuals to constantly break through their limits and pursue excellence in adversity, implying the cosmology of *the Book of Changes* that “heaven moves vigorously, and the gentleman should constantly strive for self-improvement.” The universe operates with unyielding vigor, and people should emulate this spirit and never stop moving forward. “厚德载物” (virtue carries all) comes from “earth’s condition is receptive devotion, and the gentleman should carry things with great virtue”, advocating the use of an inclusive mind and noble character to bear all things, reflecting Confucianism’s emphasis on moral cultivation and social responsibility. This motto not only inspires students to pursue academic excellence but also guides them to combine their personal ideals with social welfare, demonstrating the Confucian ideal of “cultivating oneself, putting one’s house in order, governing the country, and bringing peace to the world”. This philosophical thought transcends the realm of pure academia, placing personal growth within the framework of social responsibility. It requires students to focus on the collective interest while improving themselves, reflecting the traditional Chinese ethical view of “the unity of family and state”. By combining the spirit of individual striving with moral cultivation, this motto reflects the importance of holistic personal development in traditional Chinese culture and provides comprehensive and profound guidance for students’ lives.

The motto of Renmin University of China, “实事求是” (seek truth from facts), is also a concise summary of an academic attitude and code of conduct that pursues truth and respects objective reality. It contains rich philosophical thoughts and practical wisdom, profoundly influencing the behavior of teachers and students in academic research and daily life<sup>[3]</sup>.

### 2.3. References to Classical Literature, Reflecting Cultural Heritage

Statistics show that about 70% of Chinese university mottos are derived from Confucian classics<sup>[2]</sup>. The use of classical literature in university mottos is not only a continuation of the wisdom of the five-thousand-year-old Chinese civilization but also a model of integrating traditional ethics with modern educational concepts. For example, Sun Yat-sen University’s motto, “博学、审问、慎思、明辨、笃行” (Extensive learning, careful questioning, cautious thinking, clear discernment, and firm practice), is taken from Chapter 20 of *the Doctrine of the Mean*. The original phrase is “Extensive learning, careful questioning, cautious thinking, clear discernment, and firm practice”, systematically explaining the Confucian path of “unity of knowledge and action” in scholarship. “博学” (extensive learning) emphasizes the breadth of knowledge, encouraging teachers and students to transcend disciplinary boundaries, as Confucius said, “君子不器”(The gentleman is not a vessel); “审问”(careful questioning) advocates a spirit of inquiry, in line with the exploratory attitude of “每事问”(asking about everything) in *the Analects*. “慎思”(cautious thinking) requires deep reflection, echoing the rational tradition of “心之官则思”(the mind’s office is to think) in Mencius. “明辨”(clear discernment) focuses on rational judgment, consistent with cognitive logic of “格物致知” (investigating things to extend knowledge), proposed by Zhu Xi, a prominent scholar, philosopher and educator in the Song Dynasty. “笃行” (firm practice) emphasizes the importance of putting knowledge into action, reflecting Wang Yangming’s philosophy of “事上磨练” (practicing through involvement in affairs), proposed by Wang Yangming, a prominent philosopher, educator and military strategist in the Ming Dynasty. This motto not only provides methodological guidance for academic research but also integrates the Confucian ideal of “内圣外王”(inner sage, outer king) into modern education, ensuring that teachers and students pursue academic excellence while always taking social responsibility as their mission.

These mottos not only convey educational philosophies but also reflect the ethical nature of Chinese culture<sup>[1]</sup>. By referencing classical literature, university mottos closely link the long-standing historical culture with modern educational concepts, allowing traditional culture to be passed down and continued in the campus environment. This enables teachers and students to be subtly influenced by the excellent traditional Chinese culture in their daily study and life, enhancing their cultural confidence and national identity.

### 3. METHODS FOR TRANSLATING CHINESE UNIVERSITY MOTTOS INTO ENGLISH

#### 3.1. Literal Translation

Literal translation, as a fundamental translation method, has the core advantage of largely retaining the original language form, including vocabulary, sentence structure, and rhetorical devices, thereby presenting a similar appearance in the translation. From the perspective of translation theory, this method helps preserve the cultural characteristics and unique charm of the source language, providing a more intuitive window for the target-language audience to engage with the source-language culture. For example, when a motto has unique grammatical structures or rhetorical features, literal translation can faithfully present them to the readers of the translation. However, literal translation is by no means a simple word - for - word translation. In practice, it requires great caution to avoid mechanical correspondence. This is because there are many differences between Chinese and Western languages. If one translates rigidly according to the literal meaning, it is highly likely that the translation will not conform to the grammatical rules and expression habits of the target language, making the translation obscure and potentially leading to cultural misunderstandings <sup>[1]</sup>.

Take the motto of Tongji University, “同舟共济”(Pull Together in the Same Boat), as an example. The literal translation “Pull Together” accurately conveys the meaning of “同舟”(cooperating and working together) and vividly corresponds to the imagery of “共济”(in the Same Boat), closely resembling the original in both form and meaning. This kind of literal translation preserves the original metaphor, allowing English-speaking readers to intuitively feel the spirit of unity and cooperation while also retaining the original linguistic beauty and cultural characteristics of the Chinese language. However, if one were to mechanically translate “同舟共济”as “Be in the same boat and help each other”, although the literal meaning seems complete, it would disrupt the concise and vivid nature of the idiomatic expression “Pull Together in the Same Boat” in English. Moreover, it might confuse readers due to its non - conformity with English - language conventions.

Another example is the motto of Beijing Forestry University, “知山知水，树木树人”(Know Mountains, Know Waters, Foster Trees, Foster People). The literal translation retains the original four-character parallel structure, with “know” corresponding to “知” and “foster” corresponding to “树”, maintaining the concise and brisk rhythm of the Chinese motto. Through this literal translation, English - speaking readers can intuitively understand the emphasis on understanding the natural environment (landscape) and the importance of talent cultivation (fostering trees and cultivating talents). However, if one were to ignore English-language conventions and translate it word-for-word as “Know the mountains and know the waters, plant trees and cultivate people”, not only would the translation become verbose, but “plant trees” would also fail to convey the deeper meaning of long-term nurturing and careful care associated with “foster trees” in the context of talent development. This would make it difficult for the target-language audience to accurately grasp the connotations of the motto.

#### 3.2. Free Translation

Due to their profound cultural connotations and unique linguistic structures, Chinese university mottos often contain rich cultural symbols. These symbols have unique and profound symbolic meanings within the source-language cultural system, carrying specific historical, cultural, and value-loaded information. However, when translating into English, indiscriminately retaining all cultural symbols in the translation may lead to a verbose and confusing text, severely affecting the effective communication of information and the understanding of the target-language audience. This is because the audience in the target-language culture may lack the corresponding cognitive and understanding basis for these unique Chinese cultural symbols <sup>[3]</sup>.

For example, the motto of Sichuan Agricultural University, “爱国敬业，艰苦奋斗，团结拼搏，求实创新”(Patriotism and Dedication, Hard-work and Struggle, Unity and Perseverance, Truth-seeking and Innovation”, if translated with all its cultural symbols, would result in a lengthy and complex text that is not conducive to understanding by the target-language audience. Using free translation, it can be rendered as “Patriotism and Dedication, Hard-work and Struggle, Unity and Perseverance, Truth - seeking and Innovation”. In this translation, some cultural modifiers that are difficult to directly correspond to in English and may cause comprehension difficulties have been omitted. Instead, the core concepts are directly highlighted, such as using “Patriotism and Dedication” to convey the meaning of



“爱国敬业”, succinctly and clearly communicating the key message. This approach avoids the comprehension difficulties caused by cultural differences, enabling English-speaking readers to quickly grasp the main theme of the motto.

Another example is the motto of East China University of Political Science and Law, “法治天下, 学问古今”(Rule by Law Worldwide, Academic Pursuit through Ages). The terms “法治”(rule by law) and “学问”(academic pursuit) have specific cultural connotations in the Chinese context. A literal translation would require extensive explanations of the unique Chinese connotations of “法治”(rule by law) and the traditional academic research encompassed by “学问”(academic pursuit), increasing the difficulty of understanding. By using free translation, the core concepts are succinctly expressed: “Rule by Law” captures the essence of “法治”, and “Academic Pursuit through Ages” conveys the idea of seeking knowledge across time. This translation omits some potentially burdensome cultural details, focusing more on communicating the university’s emphasis on the spirit of rule of law and academic research to the target-language audience, ensuring the effectiveness of information transmission.

### 3.3. Combination of Literal and Free Translation

The combination of literal and free translation is a method used in the translation process, where both literal and free translation techniques are flexibly employed based on the specific linguistic characteristics, cultural connotations of the motto, and the expression habits of the target language<sup>[4]</sup>. This method is particularly suitable for mottos that have both clear literal meanings and rich cultural connotations. By retaining some of the original form and content while accurately conveying the deeper meaning, this approach achieves a better balance between form and content.

For example, the motto of Xiamen University, “自强不息, 止于至善”(Constant Striving for Self-improvement, Pursue Excellence, Strive for Perfection), combines literal and free translation effectively. “Constant Striving for Self-improvement” is a literal translation of “自强不息”, where “Constant Striving” accurately conveys the dynamic sense of continuous and unceasing effort implied by “不息”, and “Self-improvement” clearly indicates the core idea of self-enhancement suggested by “自强”. On the other hand, “Pursue Excellence, Strive for Perfection” is a free translation of “止于至善”. Here, “至善” is flexibly translated as “Perfection”, which is more in line with the understanding and expression habits of English-speaking people regarding the abstract concept of “至善”. Moreover, the expressions “Pursue Excellence” and “Strive for Perfection” are common and natural in English, making it easy for the target-language audience to understand the meaning while also conveying the value pursuit of striving for excellence and continuous improvement advocated by the motto. This translation method, which cleverly combines literal and free translation, enables English-speaking readers to grasp the spiritual essence of the motto, which originates from ancient Chinese philosophy<sup>[5]</sup>.

Another example is the translation of “知行合一” as “Integrate Knowledge and Action”. “Knowledge and Action” is a literal translation of “知行”, preserving the basic vocabulary and allowing English-speaking readers to directly understand these two concepts. “Integrate” is a free translation of “合一”, which, compared to “Combine” or “Unite”, more accurately conveys the idea of integrating two elements into an organic whole. This highlights the interdependent and mutually reinforcing relationship between knowledge and action. Thus, “知行合一” can be translated as “Integrate Knowledge and Action”, which not only retains the literal information of the original text but also accurately conveys its philosophical ideas, enabling English-speaking readers to better understand this unique Chinese educational concept.

### 3.4. Creative Translation

Creative translation is a highly innovative and flexible translation method. It does not adhere strictly to the literal form of the original text or traditional translation rules. Instead, it focuses on the core spirit of the motto and closely integrates the language characteristics, expression habits, and cultural background of the target language to create a completely new translation that fits the cognitive and aesthetic habits of the target-language audience, thereby achieving better communication effects. When the cultural connotations carried by a university motto are highly unique and difficult to find direct equivalents in English, creative translation can fully leverage its unique advantages by skillfully

integrating Chinese cultural elements into English expressions, making them understandable and acceptable to the target-language audience<sup>[6]</sup>.

For example, the concept of “天人合一” (Unity of Heaven and Man), which originates from ancient Chinese philosophy and embodies the profound idea of harmony between humans and nature, would be difficult for English-speaking readers to understand if translated literally as “Unity of Heaven and Man”. This is because the concepts of “heaven” and “man” in English culture differ from their understanding in Chinese culture. A creative translation such as “Harmony between Man and Nature” uses the commonly understood and easily accessible English expression “harmony” to convey the state of harmony, and “between Man and Nature” clearly identifies the subjects of this harmony. This translation effectively communicates the core idea of “Unity of Heaven and Man” to English-speaking readers.

Another example is the translation of “修身齐家治国平天下”. Instead of a word-for-word translation, a creative approach can be taken to render it as “Cultivate oneself, regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world”. This translation does not rigidly follow the original wording but uses appropriate English verbs and nouns to vividly interpret the progressive relationship from personal cultivation to responsibility towards family, country, and the world. It makes the translation more in line with the thinking and expression habits of English-speaking readers, effectively conveying the spirit of the original motto.

### 3.5. Omission

Omission is a translation technique that involves removing certain words from the original text that are redundant or do not conform to the expression habits of the target language, without affecting the accurate conveyance of the core meaning. Chinese university mottos are often concise and carefully worded, with some words serving to emphasize, explain, or add cultural nuances in the Chinese context. However, if these words are translated directly into English, the resulting translation may become verbose and disrupt the conciseness and fluency of the text, affecting the overall effectiveness of the expression<sup>[7]</sup>.

For example, the phrase “团结 紧张 严肃 活泼” can be translated as “Unity, Alertness, Seriousness, Liveliness” by omitting some repetitive or unnecessary modifiers, retaining the core vocabulary and succinctly conveying the basic meaning of the motto. Another example is “勤奋学习, 努力工作” (diligent in study, hard-working in work), which can be simplified to “Be diligent and hard-working” by omitting the actions “勤奋” (study) and “努力” (work) that can be naturally associated with the adjectives “diligent” and “hard-working” in English. This makes the translation more concise and fluent, in line with English-language conventions<sup>[10]</sup>.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The English translation of Chinese university mottos is a form of cross-cultural dialogue that transcends linguistic barriers. The key lies in reconciling the tension between cultural faithfulness and target-language acceptability. Translators need to have a deep understanding of the linguistic characteristics and cultural connotations of university mottos, fully consider the differences between Chinese and English languages and cultures, and flexibly employ various translation methods and techniques, such as the combination of literal and free translation, creative translation, omission, and addition. The goal is to achieve accurate and appropriate translations. Throughout the translation process, it is essential to focus on promoting cross-cultural communication, balancing the transmission of cultural connotations with the acceptability to the target-language readers, and avoiding cultural misunderstandings or information distortion due to improper translation. In the future, with the acceleration of globalization and the deepening of cross-cultural exchanges, research on the English translation of university mottos should continuously pay attention to new linguistic phenomena and cultural dynamics, and keep exploring innovative translation methods. This will provide stronger support for the dissemination of Chinese university culture on the international stage, promote the exchange and integration of Chinese culture with the world's diverse cultures, enhance the international influence of Chinese higher education, and ultimately make the translated mottos not only international business cards for university spirits but also bridges for the mutual learning of civilizations.

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**Citation:** Yexiang Wang & Mingzhi Ran. "A Study on the Chinese-English Translation of University Mottos". *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*. vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 21-27, 2025. Available: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1304003>.

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