

# Translation Methods of TCM Prescription Names in A Dream of Red Mansions

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**Abstract:** As an encyclopedia of Chinese feudal society, A Dream of Red Mansions has always been an academic hot topic. The description of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) plays a vital role in promoting plot development and carrying forward TCM culture. Based on the three principles of translating TCM prescription names, this paper analyses 16 TCM prescription names in the first 80 chapters of the novel in order to find the translation methods of prescription names. It is found that TCM prescription names containing main medicine mainly adopt literal translation because of its brevity; due to the length, TCM prescription names containing healing effects mainly use free translation to conform to the principles of information and conciseness; TCM prescription names containing numbers or colors employ literal translation to in accordance with the principle of back-translation; TCM prescription names containing cultural information usually use free translation and transliteration with a view to meet the principles of information and conciseness.

**Keywords:** A Dream of Red Mansions; TCM Prescriptions; English Translation of Prescription Names; Classification of TCM Prescription Names

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## 1. Introduction

A Dream of Red Mansions is the pinnacle of Chinese classical novels, which covers many aspects of traditional Chinese culture, such as architecture, diet and poetry. TCM is also an integral part of it, and many TCM prescription names are mentioned in the novel. There are 16 verified TCM prescriptions in the first 80 chapters of the novel, which mostly appear in dialogues and are closely related to the fate of characters and plot development. Previous studies on the English translation of A Dream of Red Mansions mainly focused on English versions (Wang Jinbo<sup>[1]</sup>; Wang Yanmeng & Xu Mingwu<sup>[2]</sup>), translation strategies (Song Dan<sup>[3]</sup>; Zhang Huiqin & Xu Jun<sup>[4]</sup>), and cultural studies. Cultural studies involve poetry translation (Song Dan<sup>[3]</sup>), name translation (He Li & Li Shan<sup>[5]</sup>), dietary translation (Huang Qin & Chen Lei<sup>[6]</sup>) and others. No systematic research has been carried out on English translation of TCM prescription names in the novel. “The naming method of prescription names is rather complicated”<sup>[7]</sup> and some of the prescription names in the novel are too long and rich in cultural information. Besides that, there is no unified standard for the English translation of prescription names. Therefore, it is necessary to find suitable translation methods for different categories of prescription names in the novel with a view to help readers understand the plot and enrich character image. Yang Xianyi’s English version enjoys high translation quality and focuses on promoting traditional Chinese culture into the world. Given that, this paper takes Yang’s version as a reference and discusses the English translation method of different kinds of TCM prescription names in the novel in order to promote the overseas development of A Dream of Red Mansions and TCM culture.

## 2. The classification of TCM prescription names in A Dream of Red mansions

Naming methods of TCM prescriptions are various in kinds. Generally, there are three main classification methods: Li Zhaoguo<sup>[7]</sup> divided prescription names into 11 categories, including TCM prescription names containing medicines, main medicines, quantities of medicines, minister medicines, colors and others. Zhong Zhouhai<sup>[8]</sup> divided prescription names into four categories according to the components, functions, component plus function and others. Jiang Jichang<sup>[9]</sup> classified prescription names into seven categories: TCM prescription names containing main medicines, central functions, therapeutic effects, viscera with the five elements, numbers, historical allusions, and particularities. Zhao Jinshuang and Yu Chenghao<sup>[10]</sup> proposed eight categories according to medicines, quantities of medicines, and dosage changes of some medicines in prescriptions, healing effects of prescriptions, and symptoms of prescriptions. Based on the characteristics of the prescriptions in the novel and the previous classification methods, the 16 prescriptions are divided into four categories: TCM prescription names containing main medicine, healing effects, numbers or colors, and cultural information.

Table 1 TCM Prescriptions

Number	Chinese Name	English Name	Classification
1	人参养荣丸	ginseng tonic pills	TCM prescription names containing main medicine
2	香薷饮	herbal medicine	
3	梅花点舌丹	plum-blossom powder	
4	益气养荣补脾和肝汤	Decoction to Improve the Respiration, Fortify the Blood and Tranquelize the Live	TCM prescription names containing healing effects
5	延年神验万全丹	longevity pills	
6	活络丹	tonic for the blood	
7	清心丸	restorative pills	
8	祛邪守灵丹	pills to dispel evil influences	
9	开窍通神散	Powders to clear the mind	
10	调经养荣丸	The fortifying pills	
11	八珍益母丸	eight-treasure-leonurus pills	TCM prescription names containing numbers or colors
12	六味地黄丸	six-flavour-digitalis pills	
13	紫金錠	purple-gold pills	
14	左归丸	left restorative	TCM prescription names containing cultural information
15	右归丸	right restorative	
16	天王补心丹	Heavenly-king-fortifying-the-heart pills	

### 3. Translation methods of TCM prescription names in A Dream of Red Mansions

Li Zhaoguo<sup>[7]</sup> put forward that the translation of TCM prescription names should follow “the principles of conciseness, information and back-translation”. In doing so, the translated name is concise in form, accurate and rich in content, and the structure is similar to the original name.

#### 3.1 TCM prescription names containing main medicine

“As an indispensable medicine in the prescription, the main medicine plays a major role in the treatment of the main disease or the main syndrome.”<sup>[11]</sup> This kind of prescription name usually follows “main medicine+ (other) + dosage form”. In translation, the Latin scientific name of the main medicine can be literally adopted, and transliteration can also be used to conform to the principle of conciseness and information.

##### 3.1.1 main medicine + dosage form

This is the basic form of the prescription name in this category, such as “香薷饮 (herbal medicine)” taken by Daiyu.

“香薷饮”, a heat-dispelling agent, is from Prescriptions of the Bureau of Taiping People’s Welfare Pharmacy, which consists of Elsholtzia, honeysuckle flower, fresh lentil flower, magnolia officinalis and forsythia. From the perspective of TCM, elsholtzia is the main medicine in the prescription, and the dosage form is drink. From the perspective of translation, Yang Xianyi simplified it as herbal medicine, which is too general in semantics and form, and could not fully convey out the information in the original name to readers. It can be translated into “Elsholtzia Drink” by using Latin scientific name of the main medicine, or translated into “Xiangru Drink” through transliteration. Both the two translated names are concise in form and follow the pattern of original name “main medicine+dosage form”, conforming to the principle of conciseness and back-translation. In terms of content, the information in the original name are fully reflected in the translated name, conforming to the principle of information. In this way, target text readers can understand the original prescription through translated name.

##### 3.1.2 main medicine+function+dosage form

This pattern includes the main medicine and central function of the prescription, such as “人参养荣丸 (ginseng tonic pills)” in chapter 3.

This prescription is taken by Daiyu, which is composed of ginseng, Atractylodes, Poria cocos, and other herbs. It is used for tonifying Qi and nourishing blood, which is the meaning of “养荣”. From the perspective of TCM, ginseng is the main medicine, the central function is to tonify Qi and nourish blood, and the dosage form is pill. In terms of translation, Yang Xianyi translated it into “ginseng tonic pills” through literal translation. The central meaning of the original name is fully conveyed out. The equivalent word of “人参” is “ginseng”; “tonic” contains the meaning of “a medicine that makes you feel stronger and healthier”, which is in line with the meaning of “养荣”. The translat-

ed name is concise in form and accurate in meaning, in accordance with the principles of conciseness, information and back-translation.

### 3.1.3 main medicine+position+dosage form

This pattern includes the main medicine and the position where it is taken, such as “梅花点舌丹 (plum-blossom powder)”. This prescription is composed of *Prunus mume*, *venenum bufonis*, and other herbs. It is used for clearing heat and detoxifying, reducing swelling, and relieving pain. From the perspective of TCM, *Prunus mume* is the main medicine; “点舌” refers to keep the medicine in the tongue, representing the position of taking medicine. In terms of translation, Yang Xianyi employed free translation: the main medicine *Prunus mume* refers to the plum blossom commonly seen in life and its equivalent word is plum blossom. Compared with the scientific name, the equivalent word “plum blossom” is more easily to help readers construct the concept of the main medicine. Taking position is not the key information in the original name, so Yang omitted it in the translated name. This can also maintain the conciseness. “丹” is equivalent to “pill”, not “powder”. It is more reasonable to use pill here. Hence, the translated name is “Plum-blossom Pills”.

Table 2 Translation of TCM prescription names containing main medicine

Chinese Name	English Name	Translation Method
人参养荣丸	Ginseng Tonic Pills	Literal translation
香薷饮	Elsholtzia Drink/ Xiangru Drink	Literal translation or transliteration
梅花点舌丹	Plum-blossom Pills	Literal translation

## 3.2 TCM prescription names containing healing effects

Healing effects refer to the function of the medicine. Most of the TCM prescription names in the novel contain the healing effects. This type of prescription may need more words to explain the meaning, so the translated name may not fully consistent with the original name.

### 3.2.1 Three kinds of healing effects

TCM prescription names containing three kinds of healing effects are usually long, and it is necessary to pay attention to the conciseness of the translated name, such as “益气养荣补脾和肝汤 (Decoction to Improve the Respiration, Fortify the Blood and Tranquillize the Live)”. .

The composition of this prescription is mentioned in the novel: ginseng, *Atractylodes*, *poria* and other herbs. This composition is similar to the prescription that tonifying blood and Qi. It can nourish Qi and blood, and alleviating the disharmony between liver and spleen. Yang Xianyi employed literal translation here, resulting in redundancy in the translated name. Translators can combine the methods of literal translation and free translation. “益气养荣” can liberally translate into “tonics”; “补脾和肝” just use literal translation. The translated name is “Decoction for Tonics and Restoratives of Spleen and Liver”, which is moderate in length and rich in information.

### 3.2.2 Two kinds of healing effects

TCM prescription names containing two kinds of effects is generally composed of six words, and the healing effects appear in the pattern of “effect + effect + dosage form”. For example, “延年神验万全丹 (longevity pills)”, “祛邪守灵丹 (pills to dispel evil influences)”, “开窍通神散 (powders to clear the mind)”, and “调经养荣丸 (the fortifying pills)”. In view of their similar pattern, this paper just selects “祛邪守灵丹” for analysis, and the rest three prescription names just provide translated names.

This prescription is taken by Baoyu. Baoyu became extremely crazy after Zijuan, Daiyu’s servant, made a joke with him that Daiyu would go home, so his grandmother gave him this as a cure. The healing effects are to remove the diseased factor in the body and restore the body to health. Yang Xianyi translated it into “pills to dispel evil influences” through free translation, which only convey out the meaning of “祛邪”, but lack the meaning of “归正”. In TCM, “祛邪” is usually translated as “eliminating pathogens”. Translators can borrow this expression and translate “扶正” into “regain health”. Hence, the translated name is “Pills to Eliminate Pathogens and Regain Health”. The information and structure of the translated name are basically the same as that of the original name.

### 3.2.3 Central function

TCM prescription names containing the central function are short in length, in the form of “effect+dosage form”, such as “活络丹 (tonic for the blood)” and “清心丸 (restorative pills)”. “活络丹” is selected for analysis.

This prescription is used for promoting blood circulation. In terms of translation, Yang Xianyi translated it as “tonic for the blood”

through free translation, which failed to translate the meaning of activating blood circulation. It violated the principle of information. Since the central function is to let blood run smoothly in the body, it can be translated as “Pills for Activating Blood Circulation”, which can not only accurately reflect the information in the original prescription, but also make the translated name the concise and natural.

Table 3 Translation of TCM Prescription Names Containing Healing Effects

Chinese Name	English Name	Translation Method
益气养荣补脾和肝汤	Decoction for Tonics and Restoratives of Spleen and Liver	Literal translation+free translation
延年神验万全丹	Longevity Pills	Free translation
祛邪守灵丹	Pills to Eliminate Pathogens and Regain Health	
开窍通神散	Powders to Induce Resuscitation	
调经养荣丸	Pills to Regularize Menstruation and Nourish Blood	Literal translation
活络丹	Pills for Activating Blood Circulation	Free translation
清心丸	Pills for Calming the Mind	

### 3.3 TCM prescription names containing numbers or colors

Some TCM prescription names in the novel contain numbers or colors related to the medicine, which are basically composed of “number/color + dosage form”.

#### 3.3.1 TCM prescription names containing number

This kind of prescription names follow the pattern of “quantity of herbs + main medicine + dosage form”, such as “八珍益母丸 (eight-treasure-leonurus pills)” and “六味地黄丸 (six-flavour-digitalis pills)”.

“八珍益母丸” consists of leonurus and other eight herbs. It contains nine kinds of herbs in total. This prescription is mainly used for blood deficiency and irregular menstruation. From the perspective of translation, Yang Xianyi literally translated it into “eight-treasure-leonurus pills”, referring to eight precious leonurus. This expression can’t show the relationship between “八珍” and “益母”, which deviate from the connotation of the original name and disobey the principle of information. Yuan Binghong<sup>[12]</sup> proposed to translate it as “Leonurus Pills with Eight Precious Ingredients”, which clearly shows the relationship between the two. Generally, the translated name is accurate and concise, through which target text readers can easily get the information of original name.

“六味地黄丸” consists of six herbs: rehmannia, cornus officinalis, dries yam, rhizoma alismatis, mounan peel and Poria cocos. “地黄” rehmannia is the main medicine, which is included in the six herbs. From the perspective of translation, literal translation is adopted here. “味” in the original name is a quantifier, which is not necessarily to be translated. The word “flavour” is mostly used to refer to smell, which is totally different from the meaning of “味”, so “味” can be omitted. The translated name is “Digitalis Pills of Six Ingredients”.

#### 3.3.2 TCM prescription names containing color

This prescription usually follows the pattern of “color + dosage form” and the color is mostly related to the color of herbs. Literal translation is a good choice. For example, “紫金錠 (purple-gold pills)”.

This prescription is composed of realgar, clam, vermilion and other herbs. It is used for detoxifying, resolving phlegm, reducing swelling and relieving pains. Most of them are rectangular in dark brown or brown and some are tablets. In Qing Dynasty, the imperial court had the custom of giving medicines before the Dragon Boat Festival, which were made into spindle, cylinder and other shapes. Therefore, according to the background of A Dream of Red Mansions, this prescription does not refer to tablets, but troche. In terms of translation, Yang Xianyi translated color words literally. However, the translation of dosage form to “pills” does not conform to the background of the novel, and it should be replaced by the term “troche”. Hence, the translated name is “Purple-gold Troche”.

Table 4 TCM Prescription Names Containing Color or Number

Chinese Name	English Name	Translation Method
八珍益母丸	Leonurus Pills with Eight Precious Ingredients	Literal translation
六味地黄丸	Digitalis Pills of Six Ingredients	
紫金錠	Purple-gold Troche	

### 3.4 TCM prescription names containing cultural information

Culture information includes not only cultural elements unique to China, but also cultural elements introduced from foreign countries.

This paper discusses TCM position words and Buddhist culture in prescription names.

### 3.4.1 TCM position words

TCM position words are mostly related to the knowledge of pulse diagnose, and usually refer to the position of pulse diagnose, such as “左归丸 (left restorative)” and “右归丸 (right restorative)”. Due to the two prescription is a set of opposite concepts about kidney, this paper analyzes “左归丸” as an example.

In this prescription, “左” contains cultural information. From the perspective of TCM, when feeling the pulse, the pulse condition of the left hand can feedback the deficiency of kidney-yin. After the cure of the disease, the pulse condition of the left hand will return to normal, which is in accordance with “左归”. From the perspective of translation, cultural information of “左” can’t be explained in details due to the conciseness of the translated name. In this way, Yang Xianyi literally translate it into “left”; “restorative” contains the meaning of “Something that is makes you feel healthier, stronger, or more cheerful after you have been feeling tired, weak or miserable” and it is used to express the central meaning of “归”. The translated name is “Left Restorative Pills”, which is close to the original name and the length is also acceptable.

### 3.4.2 Buddhist culture

Buddhism is one of religions in ancient China. There are also some prescription names that contain Buddhist culture, such as “天王补心丹 (heavenly-king-fortifying-the-heart pills)”. “天王” contains cultural information, which refers to the kings in Buddhism. According to legends, heavenly king gave this prescription to a monk. This prescription is to calm the mind and nourish the heart. In translation, Yang Xianyi adopted literal translation: “天王” is translated into “heavenly king”; “补心” is translated into “fortifying the heart”. The basic meaning of the prescription name is expressed and the cultural information is also revealed. The words are connected by hyphens, which can also let readers know this is a prescription name as the first sight.

Table 5 TCM Prescription Names Containing Cultural Information

Chinese Name	English Name	Translation Name
左归丸	Left Restorative Pills	Free translation
右归丸	Right Restorative Pills	
天王补心丹	Heavenly-king-fortifying-the-heart pills	Literal translation

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the TCM prescription names in A Dream of Red Mansions, this paper systematically classifies and discusses translation methods of TCM prescription names containing main medicine, healing effects, numbers or colors, and cultural information so as to provide some reference for the translation of prescription names. The prescription name is an epitome of TCM culture. In A Dream of Red Mansions, it also has association with the characters and plot development. The translation of TCM prescription names in literary works should not only combine the professional knowledge of TCM, but also consider plots and reading effects of readers. The translation of TCM prescription names needs to be further normalized and standardized.

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