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Translation Methods for Translating Cultural Meanings of Numerical Conceptions in Chinese Numerical Proverbs

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Abstract

Language can be a reflection of a region's culture, religion, and history (Chen, 2009). Chinese numerical proverbs, considered as invaluable gems of China, are known for their concise yet profound nature. They encapsulate the essence of Chinese culture, which has a history spanning over 5000 years. Furthermore, the numerical concepts in these proverbs have strong connections to ancient Chinese philosophy, politics, and society. However, many native Chinese speakers tend to overlook the cultural and linguistic significance of numbers in Chinese proverbs. Instead, they opt to translate the proverbs using familiar and widely recognized English words, but in doing so, they neglect the cultural meanings indicated by the numerical concepts of the proverbs. This presents a challenge for non-native Chinese learners in comprehending the cultural meanings of numerical concepts in Chinese proverbs through English translation. Previous research has shown that some translators did not place much emphasis on investigating the cultural significance of numerical concepts, treating them as fictional words with no textual reference. Therefore, based on research collected from CNKI (https://www.cnki.net/index), this study has gathered 132 studies on Chinese numerical proverbs, total with 46 journals, 2 books, 4 proceedings and 80 dissertations. Moreover, there are entirely 21 papers focus on exploring their cultural meanings. Qualitative research methods are being applied to gather and analyze research data. The analysis aims to uncover the cultural meanings of Chinese numerical proverbs and their relationship with the ancient practices of Chinese society. The findings of this research will contribute to identifying relevant translation methods that can be used to convey the cultural meanings of Chinese numerical proverbs and address the issue of cultural loss in translations between Chinese and English.

Keywords: Chinese Numerical Proverb, Numerical Concept, Translation Methods, Cultural Loss, Cultural Meaning

Numerical Conceptions in Chinese Numerical Proverbs

Past Studies of Chinese Numerical Proverbs

According to data from CNKI over the past 47 years, 132 research papers have been published exploring Chinese numerical proverbs and their translations from different angles. Out of these, 101 studies were published between 2010 and 2020. Moreover, all of the past studies have been classified into four different types, as illustrated in the table and figure below:

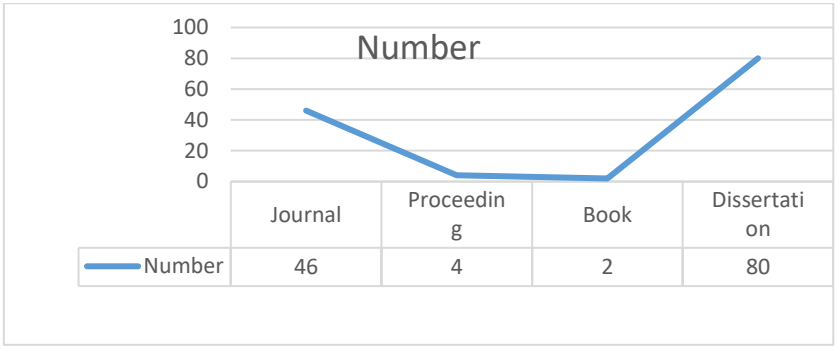

Fig 1 Studies on the Chinese numerical proverbs in the past 50 years

Table 1

The Four types of Chinese numerical proverbs' studies

Chinese Numerical Proverbs' studies		
Types	Number	Rate
Journal	46	34.85%
Proceeding	4	3.03%
Book	2	1.52%
Dissertation	80	60.61%
Total	132	100%

Through the data from Table 1, it is evident that the types of past studies on Chinese numerical proverbs include 46 journal articles (34.85%), 4 conference proceedings (3.03%), 2 books (1.52%), and 80 dissertations (60.61%). The majority of the journal articles are limited to 2-3 pages and do not provide a clear explanation of the studies on Chinese numerical proverbs; instead, they vaguely describe them. Conversely, the dissertations on Chinese numerical proverbs are primarily master's theses that focus more on linguistic aspects and Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. The master's students in these dissertations thoroughly analyze the bias, structure, and linguistic features of numerical concepts, providing examples for better comprehension.

Therefore, the 132 studies can also be categorized into five subfields of Chinese numerical proverbs, as shown in the following Table 2 and Figure 2. The most prevalent subfield is the ontology study of Chinese numerical proverbs, comprising 49 studies or 37.12% of the total, which primarily focuses on the structure of proverbs and the placement and combinations of numerical concepts within the proverbs. Following this is the field of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TEFL), with 29 studies that mainly address recognition biases and teaching strategies. However, only 13 studies delve into the translation methods and strategies employed in translating Chinese numerical proverbs, typically comparing different translation texts and summarizing the selected translation methods rather than proposing or discovering

new translation techniques to elucidate numerical concepts in Chinese numerical proverbs. Furthermore, these translators often consider numerical concepts as function words and employ an omission translation method that does not convey their meaning in the source language.

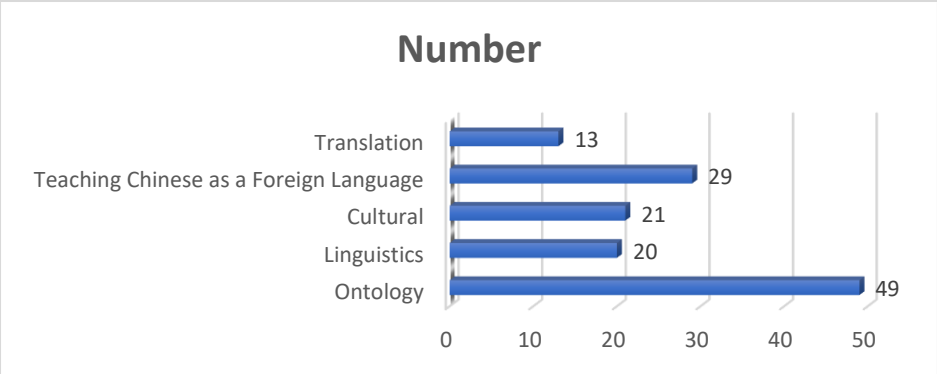

Fig. 2 Five types of Chinese numerical proverbs studies

Table 2
The number and rate of five types of Chinese numerical proverbs studies

Chinese Numerical Proverbs		
Types	Number	Rate
Ontology	49	37.12%
Linguistics	20	15.15%
Cultural	21	15.91%
Teaching Chinese as a Second Language	29	21.97%
Translation	13	9.85%
Total	132	100%

Numerical conceptions of numerical proverbs: function or content word

Among these studies, they can be classified into three categories. One group of scholars, consisting of 38 researchers, explicitly stated that these numerical concepts function merely as linguistic elements with no inherent meanings, being used solely to modify other morphemes within a proverb. Thirteen scholars did not focus on the numerical concepts but on the structures instead. As a result, 36 scholars acknowledged and highlighted the importance of numerical concepts in proverbs as meaningful words.

In the first type, Qian (2011) first highlighted three structures of proverbs. He then observed that numerical conceptions are consistently utilized as verbs and predicates. For instance, in the proverb "二三其德" (be in two minds) from "The Book of Songs", the numbers "two" and "three" are treated as a verb to underscore "change many times". This suggests that an individual changes their virtues frequently without a fixed pattern. Furthermore, he noted that numerical conceptions can function as gerunds directly preceding verbs to modify them, often serving to amplify and emphasize quantity, scope, and duration, as seen in "一波三折" and "千变万化". Consequently, he disputed the assertion that numerical conceptions serve as content words.

Li (2015) also considered numerical concepts to be functional words. He posits that through long-term usage, certain numbers have evolved and lost significance. This has led to an

exaggeration and reduction in the meaning of numbers within proverbs, such as "three, five, nine, hundred, thousand, and ten thousand." Li highlighted that these numerical concepts in proverbs now serve as symbolic rather than literal representations of numbers.
On the other hand, Zhang (2015) noted that while numerical conceptions were initially meant for counting, they grew more intricate when incorporated into proverbs. These conceptions not only represent quantity but also carry their unique historical context or original phrase to accurately convey their meaning. For instance, the numerical conceptions in the proverb "五脏六腑" signify specific internal organs. Li (2015) also emphasized the significance of numerical conceptions in proverbs. She argued that other scholars view numerical conceptions as function words because of the ancient Chinese cultural background and conventions. However, as special components in Chinese language, numerical conceptions convey intricate meanings in proverbs. For instance, the phrase "三纲五常" signifies the three principles and five virtues in ancient Chinese relationships between family and society.
Chen (2018) gathered proverbs from "Boya Chinese" and compiled a list of Chinese numerical proverbs in his dissertation, categorizing them into three types based on numerical conceptions: content, including 106 proverbs ("四室同堂"); function, including 97 proverbs ("十全十美"); and ambiguity, including 24 proverbs ("略知一二"). He focused on elucidating the true meanings of these numerical conceptions in proverbs and established them as content words. By applying this framework to understand Chinese numerical proverbs, he conducted a detailed analysis on the challenges related to bias faced by students learning Chinese as a foreign language. His research highlighted various aspects contributing to these challenges, such as writing, semantics, phonetics, grammar, and emotional nuances.
Therefore, scholars who viewed numerical concepts as function words are more focused on the structure and grammar of proverbs. On the other hand, academics who recognize the significant role of numerical concepts as content words prioritize cultural, linguistic, and TCFL studies of proverbs.

Translation Strategies and Methods been Adopted in the Past Studies
According to historical research, translation activities in the Western world can be traced back to Cicero in ancient Rome, while the earliest translation endeavors in China date back to the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period (Zhang, 2017, p. 1). Translation has been closely intertwined with the progress of human civilization, playing a pivotal role in advancing both Eastern and Western cultures. Although the discipline of translation has made significant advancements (Zhao, 2019, p. 63) in the past century, Chinese translators often tend to utilize Western strategies and methods instead of traditional Chinese approaches when spreading Chinese culture globally, thus enhancing cross-cultural communication. Therefore, the translation theory proposed by Eugene Nida, Lawrence Venuti and Susan Bassnett are popular adopted by Chinese translators to interpretating some cultural texts from Chinese to English.

Translation theories proposed by Nida
Nida (1914) is a prominent philologist, translator, and translation theorist, known for his significant contributions to the field of translation theory, particularly in the realm of linguistics. By the 1960s, he had established himself as a key figure in the study of translation theory. Nida's extensive body of work includes over 200 articles and 40 publications, making him one of the most renowned figures in American translation theory. His central concept in translation theory is "functional equivalence," which stemmed from his work on Bible

translation. Nida further developed this concept into two types of equivalence: dynamic equivalence and formal equivalence. These two types are rooted in the theories of "surface structure" and "deep structure," influenced by Noam Chomsky's transformational generative grammar. Formal equivalence, also known as formal correspondence, places emphasis on rendering the message in both form and content. In contrast, dynamic equivalence, favored by Nida, aims to convey meaning in a way that is natural to the target language, rather than adhering strictly to the form of the source text.

Dynamic equivalence, as defined by Nida and Taber (2004, p. 24), is determined by the extent to which the recipients of the message in the target language react to it in a manner similar to those in the source language. Nida advocated for conveying the underlying structure of the original language into the superficial structure of the target language, employing a more direct description of the target language's vocabulary to clarify the original meaning for enhanced reader comprehension. Despite common misconceptions associating "dynamic" purely with influence, Nida opted to replace it with "functional equivalence" in 1993 (Wei & Li, 2013).

Translation theories proposed by Susan Bassnett

Susan Bassnett holds the position of Professor of Comparative Literature at the Center for Translation and Comparative Cultural Studies at the University of Warwick. She is a prominent figure in the "Cultural Turn" movement and a highly influential contemporary British cultural translation theorist, poet, culturalist, translator, and translation theorist. With over 40 books and edited works to her name, she has made significant contributions to the field. Bassnett and André Alphons Lefevere were pivotal in promoting the "Cultural Turn" in the 1990s. Basnett has been referred to as the key figure of this movement, inspiring numerous studies in translation and postcolonialism. In 1990, Susan Basnett and Lefevere co-authored the book "Translation, History and Culture," introducing the concept of the "cultural turn" in translation studies. Their exploration of translation through a cultural lens has expanded the boundaries of translation research and enriched our understanding of the field.

Translation theories proposed by Venuti

Venuti (1953-), Italian-American scholar, professor at Temple University, translation theorist and translator. His prominent publications: Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation (1995), The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference (1998) and one editor-in-chief proceedings: Rethinking Translation: (Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology, 1992). Venuti puts the deconstructionist idea of translation into practice and proposes the translation strategy of opposing the smoothness of translation. The translation strategy aims to oppose the colonialist view of translation and Anglo- American ethnocentrism and imperialist cultural values in terms of ideology; in terms of principles and methods of translation, Venuti proposed to “preserve differences” rather than “seeking common ground”.

Venuti’s translation idea can be summarized in three points: the translator's invisibility. He thought that the English culture and ideology make translators consciously cater to the culture of the target language so as to adopt a fluent and transparent translation (Wei, 2017, p. 22). It is a recreation of the translation progress, which may erase the cultural difference between two languages (Liang, 2019, p. 83). Hence, the translators should show the translator’ subjectivity and maintain cultural differences. In this study, it can be shown as the literal translation method for translating the literal meaning and expressing the numeral

conception from Chinese to English, which can help foreigners understand the number of characters in Chinese and the unique character among proverbs.
Venuti put forward the theory and practice of translation against the smoothness of translation, but the aim was not to eliminate linguistic and cultural differences in translation but to express and transfer such linguistic and cultural differences in translation (Qiu, 2002, p. 42). It is also a fundamental point of view of the deconstructionist idea of translation and the same point for translating the Chinese numerical proverb in linguistic and cultural two layers from Chinese to English in this study. Moreover, the translation theory proposed by Venuti is the most systematic and scientific one, which can be adopted for translating culturally loaded words from the native language to the target language.

The Significance of this Study

This scholarly endeavor employed a textual analysis approach to delve into and elucidate the cultural underpinnings and significance of numerical concepts within proverbs, contextualized by ancient Chinese philosophy and historical narratives. The research findings meticulously delineate the various categories of cultural connotations embedded in Chinese numerical proverbs, spanning philosophical, religious, traditional literary, and national preferences. These classifications offer a structured framework that can facilitate a deeper understanding for learners of Chinese as a second or foreign language, particularly in grasping the cultural nuances and historical backdrop of numerical idioms in Chinese proverbs.

Cultural Meaning in Chinese Numerical Proverbs

Philosophy

Wang (2012) indicated that numerical concepts are closely linked to Chinese traditional philosophy. For instance, the number "one" in ancient Chinese philosophy can be connected to "Monism," which considers it as the origin of the universe and all living beings. Ma (2013) highlighted that the numbers "four" and "five" are associated with the I Ching, representing the "Four Emblems" and the "Five Elements."

Religions

Qiang (2013) associated the numeral “three” with “Taoism”, one of the five major religions in China. The concept of “three lives, three races, and three purities” in Taoism theory is closely tied to numerical ideas of “three”. Chen (2013) also discussed how numerical beliefs are interconnected with the religion. Apart from the number “three”, two other numbers, "seven" and "nine", are referred to as “阳数” (relative amount of yang).

Traditional Literatures

Li (2011) observed that the cultural significance of numerical concepts in proverbs can be linked back to traditional literature. He highlighted that the number "six" can be associated with "The Six Arts", comprising ritual, music, archery, and carriage. Li (2013) corroborated this perspective, citing the example of the proverb "三顾茅庐" originating from the book "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms" to reinforce the argument.

National Preference

Piao (2011) noted that a significant aspect of the cultural significance of numerical concepts stems from the ancient Chinese societal inclination. For instance, the number "ten" in Chinese holds great value, symbolizing abundance and perfection, reflecting the Chinese people's

aspiration for entirety. Building upon this, Li (2013) delved further into the semantic and cultural implications of numerical concepts in traditional sayings, unveiling that the choice of numerical conceptions is influenced by societal preferences. Take for instance the number "eight," phonetically resembling the Chinese word "发" (meaning "rich"). This elucidates why the Chinese populace holds a special affinity towards this number compared to others.
Thus, it is evident that numerical concepts derive from various sources including ancient Chinese philosophy, religions, traditional literature, and national preferences. These factors contribute to the rich and intricate cultural significance of numerical conceptions, distinguishing them as content words rather than function words.

Chinese Numerical Proverbs' Translation Studies
There are only 13 papers focusing on the translation studies of Chinese numerical proverbs. More than half of them emphasize the comparison between two translation texts by well-known translators, rather than exploring the translation theories used for translating Chinese numerical proverbs. And the main translation theory being discussed is between (Nida, 1986; Backer, 1992). These studies can be categorized into two main types.

Ignore the Numerical Conceptions in Proverbs
Some translators believed that the majority of numerical concepts are abstract terms, which do not necessitate emphasis on numerical translation. Deng & Li (2011) viewed numbers as a distinctive area within the study of language and also in Chinese sayings. In these proverbs, numbers frequently do not represent precise quantitative ideas, but instead convey a general, imprecise meaning. As a result, they recommend that translators should utilize Eugene Nida's translation theory put forward in 1986, known as the "Functional Equivalence Theory," to achieve a more balanced bilingual translation.
Hu (2014) analyzing the proverbs translation texts selected from "Selected Modern Chinese Essays" and counted 69 Chinese numerical proverbs, which basically have a vague meaning of their numerical conceptions. To compare with different translation texts in this book, he summarized 4 translation methods been adopted during the translation process. Firstly, containing numerical conceptions, such as "三三两两" been translated as "in twos and threes", which can easily been accepted by the foreigners while correctly interpreted the numerical conceptions from Chinese to English. Secondly, keep part of the numerical conceptions. For example, "成千上万" been interpreted as "thousands upon thousands" due to the English count cultural background. In English, there is one unit for every three orders of magnitude, so there is no corresponding word for "ten thousand", and the word "thousands" is usually used to express this. Thirdly, omission the numerical conceptions, such as "一五一十" been translated as "owned up to" which fit the target culture and give up the source language cultural background. Fourthly, Blurring, such as "千姿万态" been interpretated as "a great variety of shapes", which express the abstract meaning of the proverb.

Translating Numerical Conceptions in Proverbs
With the rapid development of China, influenced by cross-cultural communication, the translation trend is shifting from foreignization to domestication. Increasingly, translators are recognizing the cultural significance of numerical concepts and are exploring suitable translation theories to interpret the specific cultural connotations in Chinese proverbs into English. Li (2004) discussed the abstract and cultural significance of numerical concepts in

proverbs, analyzing translation texts using various methods. Li determined that Backer's (1992) theory is adaptable to different contexts, making it a suitable strategy for interpreting the cultural implications of numerical concepts in proverbs. Guo & Zhang (2019) also pointed out three normal translation methods for interpretating the numerical conceptions in proverbs, including literal, free and omission translation methods. Besides that, they purposed a new translation strategy for Chinese numerical proverbs which been called as “Non-digital translation of figures”. However, they compare the two-translation version by David Hawkes and Yang Xianyi and summarized that although some numerical conceptions contain vaguer meanings, it’s essential to correctly interpret the accurate numbers and its cultural background to the target readers.

Numerical Conceptions and Cultural Loss in Proverbs’ Translation

For a more accurate interpretation of numerical concepts in proverbs along with their original cultural significance for foreign learners of Chinese, certain scholars offer insights and recommendations in their research to promote global cross-cultural communication and increase the dissemination of multicultural and multilingual knowledge. They also propose translation techniques and emphasis cultural loss challenges in translation to enhance the understanding of foreign students in learning both proverbs and Chinese numerical culture simultaneously.

Lin (2008) observed the challenges in translating numerical concepts in proverbs due to their ambiguous nature. She found that most numerical concepts convey abstract meanings and built a database of 537 proverbs from the Chinese-English Dictionary published in 1997. To address this, she discussed two main translation methods - equivalence translation and omission translation. When numerical concepts function as function words, the translator should primarily use omission translation. For instance, "两面三刀" can be translated to "double-faced and tricky." On the other hand, when numerical concepts have specific content meanings in proverbs, equivalence translation can be used or annotations can be added as a supplementary method. For example, "九牛二虎" can be interpreted as "strength of nine bulls and two tigers - tremendous efforts." Lin emphasized that translators must consider both literal and figurative meanings, understand the dynamic and static aspects, manage the relationship between form and meaning, and judiciously apply various translation methods to convey the semantic essence of the proverbs accurately.

Li (2011) conducted a comparative analysis of the semantic meanings and cultural contexts of basic numbers in Chinese and English. He identified three main factors contributing to this cultural imbalance. The first factor relates to mythological and religious beliefs, the second involves traditional cultural values and modes of thinking, and the third is linked to differences in linguistic symbol systems. Li suggests that translators should employ the literal translation method for numerical concepts and the free translation method for semantic meanings as the primary translation approaches. In addition, translators may utilize imitation or shifting translation methods, such as substituting synonyms to convey accurate numbers in Chinese, for instance, translating "乱七八糟" as "a sixes and sevens." He strongly emphasizes the fundamental principles of translation, which are "faithfulness, dignity, and elegance," encompassing literal, figurative, and implicit meanings of proverbs.

Qiang (2013) discussed the disparities in translating numerical concepts from Chinese to English, highlighting two main challenges. One issue is the divergence in customary expressions, such as the proverb "七上八下" (meaning "at sixes and sevens"), originating from the I Ching and signifying confusion. The Chinese character "七" (qī) symbolizes the

number seven and carries the semantic meaning of Shao Yang in I Ching which is one of the Four emblematic Symbols. Similarly, the Chinese character "八" (bā) represents the number eight and conveys the semantic meaning of Shao Yin in I Ching which is also one of the Four emblematic Symbols. According to I Ching, in (the system of) the Yi there is the Grand Terminus, which produced the two elementary Forms. Those two forms produced the four emblematic symbols, which again produced the eight Trigrams. And these four emblematic symbols represent: Shao Yang, Shao Yin, Lao Yang and Lao Yin. In the I Ching symbols, Shao Yang represents 7, Shao Yin represents 8, Lao Yang represents 9 and Lao Yin represents 6. The Yang represents the rise and the Yin means the fall, while the Shao Yang and Shao Yin are more stable and the Lao Yang and Lao Yin are more changeable, so seven is Yang and eight is Yin, Yang means up and Yin means down. Thus, "七上八下" was originally a more stable nature of the Shao yang and Shao yin, but it kept changing later on, making it impossible to decide whether it was yang or yin. Both characters encompass the semantic meanings of nouns, symbolizing two of four emblematic symbols in I Ching. Later, the proverbs used to describe the frightened look of a disturbed mind.

Another example is the proverb of “乌七八糟”. The Chinese characters for "七" (qī) and "八" (bā) represent the numbers seven and eight, and both characters carry the semantic meaning of disorder or chaos. There are three origins that explain the semantic meanings of these two numbers. The first origin can be traced back to The Rebellion of the Seven Kingdoms of the Han Dynasty and the Rebellion of the Eight Kings of the Western Jin Dynasty, where these two numbers were used to describe chaos. The second origin can be traced back to the "Yellow Emperor's Canon of Internal Medicine," which describes a woman's physiological change occurring in seven-year cycles and a man in eight-year cycles. If they do not live in accordance with the natural cycles of the four seasons, yin and yang, and the alternation between sunrise and sunset, their lives will be disorganized, leading to chaos. The last origin can be traced back to the "Book of Changes (I Ching)," where the seventh and eighth trigrams are associated with pure evil and chaos. This proverb means very messy and dirty. Or used to describe someone or something despicable and repulsive.

This proverb originates from a long novel, known as 《四世同堂》 (The Four Generations) authored by Mr. Lao She, which depicts the lives of the four generations of the Qi family and the suffering of the common people during the Japanese invasion. The original phrase in chapter 5, "可是，整个的北平都在污七八糟中，她所知道的‘能人’们，都闭着眼瞎混。" It was used to depict the chaotic state of Beiping, where even the so-called "capable people" were caught up in this turmoil.

When translators convey Chinese numbers into English, they often opt for free translation over literal translation, which can easily be accepted by the target readers. For instance, they may substitute "six" for "seven" due to cultural influences, leading to instances of mistranslation. On the other hand, Qiang also mentioned the variances in numerical cultural background between Chinese and Western societies stem from four significant factors - religions, myths and legends, ethnocultural psychology, and variations in cognitive processes. Consequently, Qiang recommended that numerical concepts in proverbs be initially translated verbatim for foreign students, followed by an elucidation of their cultural significance, which may involve the application of free translation methods.

Most researchers in the field of translating Chinese numerical proverbs primarily emphasize semantic translation over deeper exploring cultural meanings. They discuss the importance of translating literal meanings literally, but this aspect is often overlooked in their studies. Translating the cultural implications of the numerical concepts connected to Chinese

philosophy and religion remains a significant challenge for translators aiming to accurately interpret them from Chinese to English.

Conclusion

This study is a literature review that primarily focuses on previous research in translation methods and the cultural significance of numerical concepts in Chinese proverbs. The research indicates two main academic perspectives on Chinese numerical proverbs. One perspective regards the numerical concepts as function words, while the other perspective views them as content words that stem from historical, religious, national, and philosophical contexts, enriching them with intricate and vivid meanings.

To conclude, the majority of research on Chinese numerical concepts has primarily examined the structure and ambiguous meaning of these concepts for pragmatic and grammatical analysis, falling under the realm of ontology analysis. As the second most popular area of study in proverb research, cultural investigations into numerical concepts largely pertain to the domain of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, necessitating scholars to delve deeper into the cultural contexts for non-native speakers to grasp the historical and numerical cultural significance embedded in the proverbs. These studies predominantly focus on teaching methodologies and cognitive biases rather than translation challenges. Furthermore, only three dissertations have delved into the intersection of translation and cultural studies. Nevertheless, these dissertations, authored by master's students, primarily offer insights into cultural discrepancies and rationales without proposing concrete suggestions for translating numerical concepts in proverbs, leaving room for further exploration in future research.

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