

the body) as “medical treatment” or “cure” implies therapeutic effects that could trigger regulatory scrutiny and deepen consumer disappointment or skepticism when expected effects are not achieved. Translating “qì xuè bù zú” (qi and blood deficiency) as “lack of blood” may lead to biomedical ridicule or confusion, reinforcing stereotypes of TCM as “unscientific”. Additionally, if promotional materials emphasize the “potency” of deer antler while ignoring animal-welfare considerations-especially in societies with strong animal-rights values-they may provoke media criticism or moral backlash (Liu et al., 2021). These cases demonstrate that responsible cross-cultural translation requires both cultural competence and anticipatory risk awareness. Only by balancing linguistic accuracy, cultural representation, ethical transparency, and regulatory compliance can translation effectively support the responsible international communication of shenrong culture.

5 Ethical Challenges in Translating Shenrong Culture Texts

5.1 The tension between cultural authenticity and communicative effectiveness

The foremost ethical challenge in the international dissemination of shenrong cultural texts lies in the structural tension between cultural authenticity and communicative effectiveness. On one hand, shenrong culture is deeply rooted in the TCM knowledge system, whose semantic framework is grounded in holistic perspectives, qi–blood theory, and the dynamic balance of Yin and Yang. Understanding ginseng and deer antler thus requires attention to philosophical, medical, and ritual dimensions simultaneously (Ding and Zheng, 2024; Hasan, 2024). Cultural authenticity demands that translators preserve these conceptual structures, metaphors, and cultural references as much as possible, allowing readers to access the complex worldview embedded in TCM and its symbolic understandings of health, longevity, and mind–body balance (Hasan, 2024; Ramadilla et al., 2024). However, for international audiences lacking TCM literacy, such faithful representation may result in perceptions of “information overload” or “conceptual opacity”, thereby reducing readability and persuasive power in real communicative contexts.

On the other hand, a communicative-effectiveness approach emphasizes adapting shenrong texts to the linguistic habits and cultural expectations of target audiences-simplifying terminology, replacing culturally specific metaphors, or reframing meanings through analogies familiar to the target culture (Ding and Zheng, 2024; Zeynalova, 2025). For example, rendering “bǔ qì yǎng xuè” as “boost immunity” or “enhance vitality” may increase immediate intelligibility, yet it detaches shenrong from its TCM framework of holistic regulation and re-encodes it within the categories of modern nutrition or functional foods (Hasan, 2024). Such “communication-friendly” transformations broaden audience accessibility but risk diluting or misrepresenting core cultural logic. The translator’s constant negotiation between fidelity to cultural authenticity and accessibility for target readers therefore constitutes an ongoing ethical decision-making process (Ramadilla et al., 2024).

5.2 Ethical variation across text types: advertisements, exhibitions, museum materials, and beyond

The textual forms involved in the cross-cultural dissemination of shenrong culture are highly diverse, including commercial advertisements, packaging copy, e-commerce descriptions, museum labels, exhibition narratives, popular-science writing, and even policy documents. These texts differ significantly in purpose, functionality, legal constraints, and audience structure, resulting in distinct ethical requirements for translation. Commercial advertisements and packaging texts are market-oriented and persuasive by design. They often employ simplified, amplified, or emotionally charged language to highlight product value and consumer benefits, making them prone to exaggeration or cultural symbolization (Ichim and De Boer, 2021; Hasan, 2024). Given the existing issues of ginseng adulteration and mislabeling, translation that further inflates functional claims or downplays compositional differences may directly damage consumer trust and even compromise public health. For such texts, ethical standards center on compliance, accuracy, and avoidance of misleading claims (Table 1).

In contrast, exhibition texts and museum materials prioritize educational functions, cultural transmission, and knowledge preservation. Shenrong-related content is often embedded within narratives of bencao history, medical culture, and local traditions, requiring translations that maintain high precision in terminology, accurately present historical contexts, and reconstruct cultural meaning with sensitivity (Ramadilla et al., 2024). The ethical focus of