

How Does “A Steed Raising Red Dust” Traverse the Screen?-Analyzing the Treatment and Communication Strategies of Culture-Loaded Words in the Subtitle Translation of *Chang'an's Lychees* Based on Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract: With the deepening implementation of China's “Going Global” strategy for the cultural industry, the film and television adaptation of historical literary works and their overseas dissemination have become important pathways for telling China's stories well and conveying China's voice. Ma Boyong's historical novel *Chang'an's Lychees* has been widely praised for its meticulous depiction of the texture of the Tang Dynasty's golden age under a “microhistorical perspective.” Its film and television adaptation carries a wealth of cultural symbols and historical details from the high Tang period. The work tells the thrilling story of Li Shande, a minor Tang official, as he undertakes the “impossible task” of transporting fresh lychees from Lingnan to Chang'an, showcasing the bureaucratic ecosystem, logistics, transportation, and cultural landscape of the Tang Dynasty.

Subtitle translation, as a key bridge connecting the original work with a global audience, not only undertakes the task of language conversion but also faces the immense challenge of effectively conveying profound Chinese cultural connotations. Compared to literary translation, audiovisual subtitle translation is constrained by spatiotemporal factors (onscreen space and display time) and modality (the need to synchronize with visuals and sound), making its strategy selection particularly unique. This study focuses on the subtitle translation of the film and television drama *Chang'an's Lychees*, using Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory as a framework to analyze the English translation strategies employed for culture-loaded words within it (such as official titles, artifacts, customs, poetic allusions, etc.). By exploring these issues, this study aims to provide practical cases and

theoretical reflections that can be used for reference in the subtitle translation of Chinese historical film and television works, thereby aiding the accurate and effective international communication of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Subtitle Translation; Culture-Loaded Words; *Chang'an's Lychees*; Functional Equivalence Theory; Historical Film

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1 Overview of Subtitle Translation Research

Audiovisual subtitle translation is a special form of translation characterized by immediacy, orality, spatial constraints, and multimodal synergy. Gottlieb (1992) defined subtitles as “a written, additive, immediate, synchronous, and multimedia form of translation.” These characteristics determine that subtitle translation is subject to many constraints: firstly, the written nature of subtitles means that information conveyed through elements specific to spoken language, such as voice and intonation, cannot be represented in the subtitles by the same means; secondly, the additive nature dictates that subtitles cannot occupy excessive space, otherwise it will affect the viewing experience; thirdly, the immediacy requires subtitles to be simple and easy to understand, as viewers cannot go back and re-read them; fourthly, the synchronous and multimedia nature means subtitles are also constrained by time and must synchronize with dialogue and visuals.

The purpose of subtitle translation is to convey the information in the film to the audience, which is particularly important for foreign viewers. Although most of China's exported film and television works are equipped with foreign

language subtitles, international audiences still often fail to understand the content, primarily due to inadequate translation of culture-loaded words in the subtitles[1].

1.2 Research on Culture-Loaded Word Translation

Liao Qiyi (2002), in *Explorations of Contemporary Western Translation Theories*, provided a clear definition of culture-loaded words: “Culture-loaded vocabulary refers to words, phrases, and idioms that denote things unique to a particular culture. These vocabulary items reflect the unique ways of activities gradually accumulated by a specific area over its long historical process, distinct from others.

Culture-loaded words can be categorized into five main types based on their cultural connotations: ecological culture-loaded words, material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words, and linguistic culture-loaded words. During the translation process, these words often become the difficult points because they frequently involve lexical gaps, meaning conflicts, differences in semantic associations, and pragmatic meaning non-equivalence, among other issues[2].

1.3 Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional Equivalence Theory, proposed by the American translation theorist Eugene Nida, emphasizes that translation should achieve equivalence between the source and target languages in terms of informational content, style, and linguistic form. This theory posits that the purpose of translation is to enable target language readers to obtain a similar feeling and understanding as the source language readers, emphasizing the function and effect of the translation in the target culture, rather than mere formal correspondence.

In the translation of culture-loaded words, functional equivalence theory requires the translator to preserve the cultural connotations of the original word while striving to make the translation evoke similar associations and meanings in the target culture. Bassnett (2004) pointed out: “Language only exists within a cultural context; culture only exists where there is natural language structure,” indicating that translation cannot focus solely on language without effectively conveying the culture within it. Bassnett believes that translation is cultural

exchange, and this is the primary purpose of translation[3].

Functional equivalence theory provides important guiding principles for the translation of culture-loaded words. During the translation process, methods such as literal translation and free translation, borrowing and recreation should be combined to convey the cultural connotations and semantic information of the original word as much as possible. At the same time, attention should be paid to the comprehension and acceptance level of the target readers to achieve a match between the function and effect of the translation in the target culture and that of the original text.

2. Categorization of Culture-Loaded Words in *Chang'an's Lychees* and Case Analysis of Their Translation

2.1 Treatment of Material Culture-Loaded Words

Material culture-loaded words refer to vocabulary reflecting the material life, artifacts, food, etc., of a specific culture. *Chang'an's Lychees* is replete with material culture-loaded words unique to the Tang Dynasty, such as “Lizhi (lychee)”, “Binglao (frozen yogurt)”, “Kaiyuan Tongbao (Kaiyuan Tongbao coin)”, “Chidie (imperial edict)”, “Fang (district)”, etc. The translation strategies for these words directly affect foreign audiences' understanding of Tang Dynasty material culture.

For the treatment of core cultural images, the translator often adopts literal translation. For example, the word “Lizhi” is consistently translated as “lychee” in the film's subtitles. Although this translation loses the homophonic pun in Chinese between “li” and “li, which means benefit”, carrying an auspicious meaning, it retains the direct referential meaning of the object. Coupled with the visual of bright red lychee fruits on screen, it can establish an intuitive recognition of the object for the audience. In contrast, using a transliteration like “lizhi,” while preserving the Chinese phonetic characteristic, would require additional cognitive effort from the audience and might compromise comprehension efficiency under the immediacy constraints of subtitling[4].

For more specialized material culture words, the translator employed strategies such as transliteration with annotation or free translation equivalence. For instance, “Kaiyuan Tongbao” is

translated as “Kaiyuan Tongbao coin,” which preserves the cultural specificity through transliteration while clarifying the item's categorical function via “coin.” On the other hand, “Chidie” (an ancient official document) is freely translated as “imperial edict,” capturing its

essential function as an official document but losing the nuanced distinction of the specific document type in Chinese. The comparison of translation strategies for material culture-loaded words are shown in table 1 as following.

Table 1. Comparison of Translation Strategies for Material Culture-Loaded Words

Source Word	English Translation	Translation Strategy	Functional Equivalence Assessment
Lizhi	lychee	Literal Translation	High Equivalence: Clear reference, supported by visuals
Kaiyuan Tongbao	Kaiyuan Tongbao coin	Transliteration + Category Word	Moderate Equivalence: Function clear, cultural specificity partially retained
Chidie	imperial edict	Free Translation/ Functional Equivalence	Basic Equivalence: Function conveyed but formal specificity lost
Binglao	frozen yogurt	Domestication	Moderate Equivalence: Concept approximated but historical accuracy lacking
Fang	district	Functional Equivalence	High Equivalence: Function similar, comprehension unimpeded

2.2 Treatment of Institutional and Social Culture-Loaded Words

Institutional and social culture-loaded words involve concepts related to ancient China's bureaucratic system, political institutions and social structure, representing another major challenge for cultural translation in *Chang'an's Lychees*. These terms include official titles “Youxiang” and institutional names such as “Shengren (Emperor)”, “(Chancellor of the Right)”, “Huangchengshi (Capital City Commissioner)”, “Caoyun (water transport)”, etc.

For official titles, the translator often employs an analogical translation strategy, using approximate titles from the target culture for correspondence. For example, “Youxiang” is translated as “Chancellor.” Although the Tang Dynasty chancellor system is not entirely equivalent to the British position of Chancellor, both convey the core concept of a “high-ranking official,” facilitating the audience's quick understanding of the character's status. Similarly, “Huangchengshi” is explanatorily translated as “official in charge of the capital's security,” clarifying the role's function rather than its literal form.

Although this domestication strategy improves comprehension efficiency, it may also lead to issues of cultural distortion. For instance, the term “Shengren” in the specific context of the Tang Dynasty often referred to the emperor, but translating it as “Sage” might lead English

audiences to associate it with a wise figure in philosophy rather than a political ruler. In this case, “Emperor” might be a more functionally equivalent translation, even though it loses the ideological connotations of “Shengren” in Chinese[5].

“Cao yun”, as an ancient transportation method, is translated as “water transport.” While this simplifies the concept, combined with the visual context of boats and canals on screen, it can convey the basic functional information. This translation exemplifies the balance between the principle of conciseness in subtitle translation and functional equivalence-providing the most essential information within limited time and space, relying on the multimodal context to supplement details.

2.3 Treatment of Linguistic Culture-Loaded Words (Poetry, Allusions, Puns)

Linguistic culture-loaded words, including special linguistic forms such as poetry, allusions, and puns, present the greatest challenge in subtitling *Chang'an's Lychees*. The title itself, “A steed raising red dust delights the lady”, originates from a quatrain by the Tang poet Du Mu in “Passing by the Huaqing Palace.”How to translate such poetic allusions becomes a critical issue.

In the film, this line of poetry is translated as “A steed raising red dust delights the lady.” The translation attempts to preserve the original poem's imagery (steed, red dust, lady) and creates a certain poetic effect through the use of

present tense and gerund form. However, the level and oblique tones (phonetic patterns) of the original Chinese poem and the historical allusion behind “Feizixiao” (the lady smiles - referring to Consort Yang Yuhuan) are difficult to fully retain in translation. The audience might understand the literal meaning but would require more cultural background to appreciate its historical metaphorical significance.

For other culture-specific expressions appearing in the drama, the translator flexibly employed various strategies, similarly using a common English expression to correspond to the Chinese function of emotional persuasion.

For cultural information that cannot be fully translated within the limited space of subtitles, the film utilizes a multimodal compensation strategy. For instance, the Tang-specific “Chashouli” (a specific hand gesture salute), the subtitle might simply translate it as “salute,” while the specific form of the action is visually demonstrated to the audience through the visuals. This collaboration between linguistic and non-linguistic signs is an important pathway to achieving functional equivalence.

3. Strategy Summary and Reflection on Communication Effects from a Functional Equivalence Perspective

3.1 Summary of Strategy Models

Based on the analysis of culture-loaded word translation in *Chang'an's Lychees*, a pattern of strategies preferred by the translator for handling different types of culture-loaded words can be summarized: literal translation is often used for core object nouns (e.g., lychee) to preserve cultural specificity without hindering comprehension; free translation or domestication strategies are frequently employed for complex institutional concepts (e.g., Chancellor), prioritizing comprehension efficiency; and for linguistic cultural phenomena, various strategies are flexibly applied, including idiomatic substitution, paraphrasing/simplification, and multimodal complementarity[6].

These strategic choices reflect the nature of constrained communication in subtitle translation-under spatiotemporal limitations, the translator must balance cultural fidelity and comprehensibility, sometimes making compromise choices. Functional equivalence theory provides a theoretical framework for this trade-off: it is not necessary to pursue formal

correspondence but rather the closest possible equivalence in functional effect.

3.2 Assessment of the Degree of “Equivalence” Achieved

Evaluated from a functional equivalence perspective, the subtitle translation of *Chang'an's Lychees* achieves varying degrees of functional equivalence across three levels: information transmission, cultural fidelity, and aesthetic experience.

At the information transmission level, most subtitles achieve a high degree of functional equivalence; the audience can understand the basic plot and character relationships. For example, the line “Cleared the debt in one lump sum” is translated as “in one go”, which is concise and conveys the meaning, meeting the immediacy requirement of subtitling[7].

At the cultural fidelity level, the translation achieves a moderate degree of functional equivalence. A large number of Tang cultural concepts are conveyed through simplification and domestication strategies, but some cultural nuances and historical-cultural connotations are lost. For instance, “da hong ren - literally ‘big red person’, meaning a very popular and trusted person” is translated as “right-hand man,” conveying the core meaning, which is important assistant, but losing the cultural connotation in Chinese where the color red symbolizes auspiciousness and popularity.

At the aesthetic experience level, the degree of equivalence achieved by the translation is relatively lower. The linguistic beauty of poetry and the witty humor of puns are significantly diminished in the translation process. For example, the translation of the sentence preserves the basic imagery but finds it difficult to replicate the original poem's rhythmic patterns and historical associations[8].

This unbalanced equivalence across different levels is the norm in cultural translation and also reflects the practical application value of functional equivalence theory-selecting an appropriate level of equivalence based on the translation purpose and context, rather than pursuing an impossible complete equivalence.

3.3 Implications for Cultural Communication

The practice of subtitle translation for *Chang'an's Lychees* offers important implications for the international communication of Chinese history and culture: balancing

comprehensibility and cultural authenticity is key to effective communication.

Excessive domestication strategies, while improving short-term comprehension efficiency, may lead to cultural flattening and a loss of historical specificity. For example, analogizing all Tang official titles to British institutions might give audiences the misconception that “Chinese history is no different from the West.” Conversely, excessive foreignization strategies may create comprehension barriers, affecting the viewing experience and communication effectiveness.

An ideal cultural communication strategy should be gradient: for culture-loaded words critical to the core plot, reader-friendly strategies should be used to ensure comprehension; for secondary but distinctive culture-loaded words, a degree of heterogeneity can be appropriately retained to stimulate the audience's interest in learning; simultaneously, the multimodal advantages of film and television should be fully utilized, compensating for translation losses in linguistic signs through non-linguistic signs such as visuals, sound, and music.

The successful communication case of the *Chang'an's Lychees* IP demonstrates that film and television works can serve as gateways to cultural learning. Many viewers developed an interest in Tang Dynasty history after watching the series and actively searched to learn more about the cultural background. This phenomenon of film and television triggering cultural exploration is precisely the deep-level equivalence pursued by functional equivalence theory—not only conveying surface information but also stimulating the audience's interest and desire to explore the source culture.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Research Summary

Using functional equivalence theory as a framework, this study analyzed the translation strategies and communication effects of culture-loaded words in the subtitles of the film and television drama *Chang'an's Lychees*. The research found that the translator adopted differentiated strategies based on the type and importance of the culture-loaded words: literal translation was often used for material culture-loaded words, domestication for institutional culture-loaded words, and complementary strategies for linguistic

culture-loaded words. These strategies overall achieved functional equivalence in basic information transmission, but there were certain losses at the levels of cultural fidelity and aesthetic experience.

The study also found that audiovisual subtitle translation, as a form of multimodal translation, achieves functional equivalence not only through linguistic choices but also through the synergistic effect of non-linguistic signs such as visuals and sound. This multimodality partially compensates for the limitations of linguistic translation, providing unique advantages for cultural communication.

4.2 Research Limitations

This study has certain limitations. Firstly, due to resource constraints, large-scale audience feedback surveys were not conducted; the evaluation of functional equivalence effects was primarily based on textual analysis and theoretical deduction. Secondly, the analysis was limited to publicly available subtitle examples, which may not cover all types of culture-loaded word treatment cases. Furthermore, the study focused mainly on English subtitles and did not conduct a comparative analysis with versions in other languages.

4.3 Future Research Prospects

Future research can delve deeper in the following directions: Firstly, conduct empirical audience studies using methods such as questionnaires and eye-tracking to objectively assess the actual comprehension effects and cultural communication effects of different translation strategies. Secondly, perform cross-linguistic comparisons to analyze how translators from different cultural backgrounds handle the same culture-loaded words, exploring the impact of the translator's role on cultural communication. Finally, extend the research to other historical film and television works to establish a more systematic framework of principles for translating historical culture-loaded words, providing practical guidance for the international communication of Chinese film and television.

The successful case of *Chang'an's Lychees* demonstrates that subtitle translation based on functional equivalence theory can serve as a bridge for effectively communicating Chinese history and culture while maintaining entertainment value. As Chinese film and

television works increasingly go global, how to maintain cultural authenticity while ensuring viewing accessibility through carefully designed translation strategies will continue to be an important direction for academic research and practical exploration. Only by finding the right balance between these two can the effective communication of “a steed raising red dust” traversing the screen, language, and culture be truly achieved.

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