

Optimization Paths of Chinese Web Dramas' International Communication from the Perspective of Translation Deviation of Culture-Loaded Words in English Context - A Case Study of Overseas-Focused Web Dramas

Changming Li, Bingqian Lv

University of Jinan, Jinan, Shandong, China

Abstract: As China's cultural "going global" strategy advances, Chinese web dramas have emerged as a pivotal carrier for cross-cultural communication. However, they confront prominent challenges such as "cultural discount" and communication barriers in English-speaking markets. Grounded in Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory, and cross-cultural communication theories, this study centers on the translation deviations of culture-loaded words (e.g., "filial piety," "involution") in the English subtitles of representative overseas web dramas, including *Day and Night* and *Joy of Life*. Employing a mixed-methods research design that integrates bilingual text comparison with empirical surveys (questionnaires and interviews) of English-speaking audiences, the study quantifies the impacts of translation deviations—such as rigid literal translation, excessive free translation, and lack of annotations—on audience viewing experiences and communication effectiveness. A dual-dimensional optimization framework, encompassing "translation improvement" and "communication adaptation," is constructed, featuring practical strategies including hierarchical annotation, dynamic adaptation, and literary transmutation. Additionally, supporting tools such as a translation quality evaluation scale and a standardized cultural brief template are developed. The findings aim to bridge the research gap between micro-level translation issues and macro-level communication effects, provide actionable guidelines for film and television companies as well as streaming platforms, and enhance the precision and influence of Chinese cultural communication in English contexts.

Keywords: Chinese Web Dramas' International Communication; Culture-Loaded Words; Translation Deviation; Cross-Cultural Communication; Path Optimization

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In the digital era, Chinese web dramas have rapidly gained global traction due to their diverse themes, accessible dissemination, and strong interactivity, evolving into a vital medium for showcasing Chinese history, society, and core values to the world (Ma, 2025)[2]. While achieving remarkable success in culturally proximate regions like Southeast and East Asia, their penetration into English-speaking markets—encompassing Europe, America, and English-speaking Southeast Asian nations—remains constrained. Beyond linguistic disparities, the fundamental barrier stems from the misinterpretation of cultural symbols, rooted in divergent values, historical backgrounds, and living customs between China and the West. Among these, culture-loaded words—vocabulary embodying unique cultural connotations, ways of thinking, and life experiences (e.g., "imperial examination," "Three Departments and Six Ministries," "involution")—play a decisive role in accurate cultural transmission. Their translation quality directly influences English-speaking audiences' comprehension of content, and translation deviations have become a key driver of aggravated "cultural discount" and hindered market expansion (Nida & Taber, 1969)[5]. Against this backdrop, the integration of translation studies with cross-cultural communication has grown increasingly imperative. Existing industry practices, such as the translation standards adopted by international streaming platforms like Netflix, often prioritize

linguistic fluency at the expense of conveying cultural connotations—for instance, translating “jianghu” as “underworld” in *Day and Night*, leading to misinterpretation as “gangland” (Ma, 2025). Thus, exploring the translation deviations of culture-loaded words in Chinese web dramas and optimizing communication paths is not only essential for breaking through international communication barriers but also meaningful for enriching cross-cultural film and television translation research.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Domestic research

Domestic studies on Chinese web dramas' international communication predominantly focus on macro-level topics, such as market strategies, communication channels, and content innovation (e.g., Li, 2023; Wang, 2024)[8,9]. Research on film and television translation mostly centers on the English translation of literary works, lacking systematic attention to web dramas as an emerging form. Few empirical studies specifically address the translation of culture-loaded words in web dramas within English contexts, and even fewer establish a tangible link between translation quality and communication effectiveness. This disconnect between theory and practice renders existing research insufficiently equipped to directly guide the overseas dissemination of web dramas.

1.2.2 Foreign research

Foreign translation theories, including Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory and Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory, have developed into mature systems, laying theoretical foundations for cross-cultural translation (Newmark, 1981; Nida, 1993). Functionalist translation theories—such as Reiss's Text Type Theory and Skopos Theory—further expand the research scope by emphasizing translation purposes and the characteristics of audio-visual texts (Reiss, 1971; Vermeer, 1989). However, most foreign studies take Western texts as research samples and lack targeted recommendations for adapting Chinese culture-loaded words to English contexts. Additionally, the translation standards of international streaming platforms fail to address the unique cultural connotations inherent in Chinese content, resulting in inadequate support for Chinese web dramas' cross-cultural communication.

1.2.3 Research Gap

Existing research either concentrates on macro communication strategies or general translation theories, neglecting micro-level analysis of how translation deviations of culture-loaded words specifically impact the international communication of Chinese web dramas. There is a dearth of empirical evidence quantifying the relationship between translation quality and audience understanding, as well as practical optimization paths that balance cultural authenticity with linguistic fluency. This study seeks to address these gaps.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

1.3.1 Research objectives

1. To empirically identify the types and underlying causes of translation deviations of culture-loaded words in the English subtitles of Chinese overseas web dramas.
2. To quantify the impacts of these deviations on English-speaking audiences' viewing experiences and comprehension.
3. To construct a dual-dimensional optimization framework integrating translation improvement and communication adaptation for Chinese web dramas' international communication in English contexts.

1.3.2 Research questions

1. What are the primary types and root causes of translation deviations of culture-loaded words in the English subtitles of Chinese web dramas?
2. How do these translation deviations quantitatively affect English-speaking audiences' understanding and acceptance?
3. How can the preservation of Chinese cultural core values be balanced with the fluency of English context in translation, and what practical optimization paths can be proposed?

1.4 Structure of the Paper

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 elaborates on the theoretical framework, introducing the core translation and cross-cultural communication theories employed. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, including sample selection, data collection, and analytical approaches. Section 4 presents an analysis of translation deviations, identifying their types and causes through text comparison. Section 5 focuses on transformation, proposing optimized paths for translation and communication. Section 6 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the research findings. Finally, Section 7 concludes

the study, summarizing its key contributions, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates multiple translation theories and cross-cultural communication theories to construct a comprehensive analytical framework, ensuring both the depth and applicability of the research.

2.1 Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory

Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory emphasizes that translation should prioritize the "dynamic equivalence" of meaning rather than the formal equivalence of language (Nida, 1993)[4]. For culture-loaded words, this implies that translations should enable English-speaking audiences to achieve a similar level of understanding and emotional resonance as Chinese audiences. This theory guides the study's focus on balancing the transmission of cultural connotations with audience comprehension.

2.2 Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory

Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory posits that the primary goal of translation is to convey the communicative effect of the source text, adapting to the target audience's linguistic habits and cultural background (Newmark, 1981)[3]. This theory provides a foundation for optimizing the expression of culture-loaded words in English, ensuring translations are both accurate and accessible.

2.3 Functionalist Translation Theories

Reiss's Text Type Theory classifies texts into informative, expressive, and operative categories, arguing that translation strategies should be adjusted according to textual characteristics (Reiss, 1971)[6]. As audio-visual narrative texts, web dramas require translations that balance information transmission, emotional expression, and audience engagement. Skopos Theory, proposed by Vermeer, emphasizes that the purpose of translation determines the choice of translation strategies (Vermeer, 1989)[7]. In this study, the core purpose of translating Chinese web dramas is cross-cultural communication, so translation strategies are oriented toward effective cultural transmission and audience acceptance.

2.4 Cross-Cultural Communication Theory

Cross-cultural communication theory highlights the impact of cultural differences on information transmission and reception (Hall, 1976)[1]. This study applies this theory to analyze how cultural disparities between China and English-speaking countries contribute to translation deviations and audience comprehension barriers, providing a theoretical basis for designing communication adaptation paths.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, is adopted, including bilingual text comparison (qualitative) and empirical surveys of English-speaking audiences (quantitative). This design enables a comprehensive analysis of translation deviations from both textual and audience perspectives.

3.2 Sample Selection

3.2.1 Web drama samples

Five representative overseas Chinese web dramas are selected as research samples: *Day and Night*, *Joy of Life*, *The Bad Kids*, *Reset*, and *Meet Yourself*. These dramas cover diverse themes-detective, historical, realistic, and romantic-and have garnered significant popularity on international streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, ensuring the representativeness and availability of subtitle data.

3.2.2 Culture-loaded word samples

Based on cultural attributes, the culture-loaded words in the selected web dramas are categorized into four types: Confucian cultural words (e.g., "filial piety"), historical terms (e.g., "imperial examination," "Three Departments and Six Ministries"), realistic neologisms (e.g., "involution," "double reduction"), and regional cultural words (e.g., "hot pot," "square dancing"). A total of 120 typical culture-loaded words are selected as core research samples following preliminary sorting and expert review.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Text data collection

Official English subtitles of the selected web dramas are collected from mainstream international streaming platforms (Netflix, Amazon Prime Video) and compliant

subtitle-sharing communities (Subscene) to ensure data authenticity and standardization. Bilingual parallel corpora are established by aligning Chinese original lines with English subtitles.

3.3.2 Audience survey data collection

A questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews are conducted among 200 English-speaking audiences, including 100 from North America, 50 from Europe, and 50 from English-speaking Southeast Asian countries. The questionnaire includes items on demographic information, viewing experiences, and comprehension of typical translated culture-loaded words. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with 30 participants-15 native English speakers and 15 non-native English speakers with proficient English skills-to explore their perceptions of translation quality and cultural connotation transmission.

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Qualitative analysis

Bilingual text comparison is used to identify translation deviation types (e.g., rigid literal translation, excessive free translation, lack of annotations) and analyze their underlying causes (e.g., cultural differences, inadequate application of translation theories, insufficient audience orientation).

3.4.2 Quantitative analysis

Statistical analysis of questionnaire data is performed using SPSS 26.0, including descriptive statistics (e.g., audience demographic characteristics, comprehension rates of translated words) and inferential statistics (e.g., correlation analysis between translation deviation types and audience comprehension rates) to quantify the impacts of translation deviations.

4. Analysis of Translation Deviation of Culture-Loaded Words

4.1 Types of Translation Deviation

Based on the analysis of bilingual text corpora and integration with translation theories, three primary types of translation deviation of culture-loaded words in English subtitles are identified:

4.1.1 Rigid literal translation

Rigid literal translation refers to word-for-word translation of culture-loaded words without considering cultural differences or target language conventions, leading to

misinterpretation. For example, “Dali Temple”-a judicial organ in ancient China-is literally translated as “Dali Temple,” which English-speaking audiences easily misperceive as a religious venue. Another instance is the translation of “Three Departments and Six Ministries”-ancient Chinese central administrative institutions-as “three provinces and six ministries” without historical background annotations, making it difficult for audiences to grasp their functions.

4.1.2 Excessive free translation

Excessive free translation prioritizes linguistic fluency at the expense of transmitting cultural connotations, resulting in the loss of unique cultural information. For example, “filial piety”-a core Confucian value emphasizing respect for parents and elders-is simplified to “respect for parents,” omitting the cultural connotation of Confucian ethics. This leads English-speaking audiences to perceive it as a general moral obligation rather than a profound cultural value.

4.1.3 Lack of annotations

Lack of annotations refers to the failure to provide necessary cultural or contextual explanations for highly culture-specific words, increasing audience comprehension barriers. For instance, the realistic neologism “involution” is directly translated as “involution,” an academic term unfamiliar to most English-speaking audiences, resulting in low comprehension rates. Similarly, “square dancing”-a popular public fitness activity in China-is translated as “square dancing” without explaining its cultural context, leading foreign audiences to confuse it with Western square dancing.

4.2 Causes of Translation Deviation

4.2.1 Cultural differences

Fundamental cultural disparities between China and the West constitute the root cause of translation deviations. Confucian culture, ancient Chinese history, and unique social phenomena have no direct equivalents in English-speaking cultures, making it challenging to achieve complete equivalence in translation. For example, the cultural connotation of “filial piety” is deeply rooted in Chinese Confucianism, which lacks a corresponding cultural concept in Western individualistic cultures.

4.2.2 Inadequate application of translation theories

Translators often rely on traditional literal

translation or free translation methods without fully leveraging modern translation theories such as Functional Equivalence Theory and Skopos Theory. For instance, failing to consider the “dynamic equivalence” principle leads to rigid literal translation, while overemphasizing linguistic fluency at the cost of cultural connotation violates the core tenets of Communicative Translation Theory.

4.2.3 Insufficient audience orientation

Translators lack an in-depth understanding of the cultural backgrounds and linguistic habits of English-speaking audiences, resulting in translations that do not align with audience cognitive levels. For example, using academic terms to translate daily neologisms disregards the audience’s familiarity with such vocabulary, reducing content accessibility.

4.2.4 Lack of industry standards

Currently, there are no unified translation standards for culture-loaded words in Chinese web dramas, leading to inconsistent translation quality. Streaming platforms and film and television companies lack standardized translation guidelines and quality evaluation systems, resulting in arbitrary translation practices.

5. Transformation: Optimization Paths for Translation and Communication

To address the identified translation deviations and communication barriers, this study constructs a dual-dimensional optimization framework integrating “translation improvement” and “communication adaptation,” proposing specific, operable strategies.

5.1 Translation Improvement Strategies

5.1.1 Hierarchical annotation method

A hierarchical annotation strategy is adopted based on the degree of cultural load of words, balancing cultural preservation with comprehension fluency:

- Highly culture-loaded words (e.g., “imperial examination,;” “Three Departments and Six Ministries”): Employ “literal translation + parenthetical annotation” to retain the original cultural form while providing key background information. For example, “imperial examination (ancient Chinese talent selection system)” and “Three Departments and Six Ministries (central administrative institutions in ancient China)”.

- Moderately culture-loaded words (e.g., “hot

- pot,” “filial piety”): Adopt “free translation + cultural label” to ensure linguistic fluency while highlighting cultural attributes. For example, “hot pot (a popular Chinese communal dish)” and “respect for parents (a core Confucian value)”.

- Lowly culture-loaded words (e.g., “dumpling,” “tea ceremony”): Use direct translation with common English equivalents, as they have been widely recognized in cross-cultural communication.

5.1.2 Dynamic adaptation method

Translation strategies are adjusted according to the linguistic habits and cultural backgrounds of different English-speaking regions to enhance audience acceptance:

- For North American audiences: Emphasize clarity and conciseness. For example, translate “square dancing” as “square dancing (a Chinese public fitness activity)”.

- For British audiences: Adapt to local linguistic preferences. For example, translate “square dancing” as “community dancing (a popular Chinese outdoor activity)”.

- For English-speaking Southeast Asian audiences: Leverage cultural proximity and appropriately retain Chinese elements. For example, translate “filial piety” as “xiao (filial piety, a core Confucian value)” with pinyin, capitalizing on their familiarity with Chinese culture.

5.1.3 Literary transmutation method

For literary and poetic lines containing culture-loaded words, literary transmutation is employed to preserve both semantic accuracy and literary beauty. For example, the line “人生忽如寄” from *Joy of Life* is translated as “Life is like a fleeting sojourn” instead of a rigid literal translation, conveying the poetic connotation while ensuring English fluency.

5.2 Communication Adaptation Paths

5.2.1 Channel-end optimization

Collaborate with international streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime to implement “cultural annotation pop-ups.” When audiences click on culture-loaded words in subtitles, detailed explanations-e.g., clicking “Dali Temple” pops up “Supreme Court in Tang Dynasty”-are displayed to reduce comprehension costs.

5.2.2 Audience-end guidance

Produce short videos explaining culture-loaded

words (released on TikTok, YouTube, and other platforms) in collaboration with native English speakers. These videos popularize the cultural background of words such as “involution” and “imperial examination” prior to the web dramas’ release, laying a cognitive foundation for foreign audiences.

5.2.3 Evaluation-end standardization

Establish a “translation quality evaluation scale for Chinese web dramas in English contexts” with four dimensions: semantic accuracy, cultural transmission, linguistic fluency, and audience acceptance. Each dimension is assigned specific evaluation indicators and scoring standards to provide a scientific tool for post-translation evaluation.

5.3 Supporting Tools Development

5.3.1 Translation comparison table for culture-loaded words

Compile a *Comparison Table of Culture-Loaded Words Translation in Chinese Web Dramas*, encompassing four categories of culture-loaded words (Confucian, historical, realistic, regional) and providing optimized translations, annotations, and applicable scenarios. For example, “double reduction” is recorded as “double reduction policy (reducing students’ homework and tutoring)”.

5.3.2 Standardized cultural brief template

Design a standardized “pre-translation cultural brief” template to clarify core cultural concepts, plot context, target audiences, and communication intentions for each web drama. This template assists translators in grasping key cultural information and formulating optimal translation strategies.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes two key theoretical contributions: First, it bridges the research gap between micro-level translation deviations and macro-level cross-cultural communication effects, constructing an analytical framework for the relationship between “translation deviation-audience understanding-communication effectiveness.” This enriches the theoretical system of cross-cultural film and television translation. Second, it integrates multiple translation theories (Functional Equivalence Theory, Communicative Translation Theory,

Functionalist Translation Theories) and cross-cultural communication theory to form a specialized theoretical framework for the translation of Chinese web dramas, offering a new theoretical perspective for similar studies.

6.2 Practical Implications

The practical value of this study is reflected in three aspects: First, the proposed translation improvement strategies (hierarchical annotation, dynamic adaptation, literary transmutation) and communication adaptation paths (channel-end optimization, audience-end guidance, evaluation-end standardization) are highly operable, providing direct guidelines for film and television companies and streaming platforms. Second, the developed supporting tools (translation comparison table, cultural brief template) can be directly applied to translation practice, enhancing translation efficiency and quality. Third, the research findings help Chinese web dramas break through communication barriers in English-speaking markets, strengthen their international influence, and contribute to China’s cultural “going global” strategy.

6.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has certain limitations: First, the sample size of web dramas and culture-loaded words is limited; future research can expand the sample scope to include more themes and regions. Second, the empirical survey focuses on English-speaking audiences from North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia; future studies can cover more diverse regions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Third, the study focuses on English contexts; future research can explore translation and communication strategies for other language contexts (e.g., Spanish, French) to promote the global dissemination of Chinese web dramas.

7. Conclusion

This study investigates the translation deviations of culture-loaded words in the English subtitles of Chinese overseas web dramas and explores optimization paths for international communication. Through bilingual text comparison and empirical surveys of English-speaking audiences, the study identifies three primary types of translation deviation-rigid literal translation, excessive free translation, and

lack of annotations-and their underlying causes, including cultural differences, inadequate application of translation theories, insufficient audience orientation, and lack of industry standards. Grounded in multiple translation and cross-cultural communication theories, a dual-dimensional optimization framework integrating "translation improvement" and "communication adaptation" is constructed, featuring practical strategies and supporting tools.

The research findings not only enrich the theoretical system of cross-cultural film and television translation but also provide actionable guidelines for industry practice. By optimizing the translation of culture-loaded words and adapting communication strategies, Chinese web dramas can better overcome "cultural discount" and communication barriers in English-speaking markets, enhancing the precision and influence of Chinese cultural transmission. This study contributes to the sustainable development of Chinese web dramas' international communication and provides a reference for the cross-cultural dissemination of other cultural products.

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