

Film Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Eco-translatology: A Case Study of *The Lychee Road*

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Abstract

As China's film and television industry accelerates its international expansion, subtitle translation has emerged as a pivotal nexus of cross-cultural communication. Historical films set in the Tang Dynasty pose distinctive challenges for subtitle translation due to the high density of culture-loaded terms, including official titles, ritual conventions, and cultural artifacts. Taking the official English subtitles of the film *The Lychee Road* as its corpus, this study conducts a case analysis of the film's subtitle translation along the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, drawing on the "three-dimensional transformation" framework of Eco-translatology proposed by Hu Gengshen to conduct a case analysis of the film's subtitle translation along the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. The study finds that, under the dual ecological constraints of subtitling spatiotemporal limits and the cognitive gap among Western low-context audiences, the translator adopts domestication as the dominant strategy: striving for fluency along the linguistic dimension, prioritizing simplification along the cultural dimension, and securing communicative intent along the communicative dimension. Cultural discount is essentially an inevitable by-product of the translator's adaptive choices within a specific translational eco-environment, and its occurrence is ecologically determined. Explanatory translation, differentiated translation, and paratextual construction can each enhance the target text's degree of holistic adaptation and selection from different levels, thereby alleviating the loss of cultural information. This study extends the application of Eco-translatology to Tang-Dynasty film and television subtitle research and provides strategic references for the overseas dissemination of Chinese historical films.

Keywords

eco-translatology, three-dimensional transformation, subtitle translation, culture-loaded terms, cultural discount, *The Lychee Road*

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's film and television industry has flourished and accelerated its expansion into international markets with subtitle translation serving as a core nexus of cross-cultural communication. However, Chinese historical films—particularly those set in the Tang Dynasty—present severe translation challenges amid the strict spatiotemporal constraints of subtitling, because of their extremely high density of culture-loaded words.

The film *The Lychee Road* is adapted from Ma Boyong's novel of the same title. It tells the story of Li Shande, a low-ranking official in the Shanglin Office (the imperial garden administration), who is appointed "Lychee Envoy" and tasked with transporting fresh lychees from Lingnan to Chang'an. The film abounds with cultural elements such as Tang official titles, forms of address, and cultural artifacts, making it an ideal case for investigating this category of subtitle translation. The academic significance of this study lies in examining the applicability and explanatory power of the "three-dimensional transformation" framework of Eco-translatology for the subtitle translation of Tang-Dynasty films. Its practical significance lies in providing strategic references for the translation of culture-loaded words and the compensation of cultural discount in the overseas dissemination of Chinese historical films.

This study addresses the following three research questions:

First, what adaptive selection and transformation strategies are employed in the English subtitle translation of *The Lychee Road* along the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, respectively?

Second, what are the concrete manifestations of cultural discount in the film's subtitle translation, and what ecological motivations underlie it?

Third, for subtitles of Tang-Dynasty historical films, which compensation strategies can effectively enhance the target text's degree of holistic adaptation and selection?

2. Literature Review

Existing research on film subtitle translation generally falls into two strands: media norm studies and cross-cultural transfer studies. Internationally, Díaz-Cintas and Remael laid the disciplinary foundation with their audiovisual translation framework, addressing the technical constraints and cultural norms of multimodal translation [1]. On the cultural dimension, Baker's classification framework for culture-loaded terms and Venuti's domestication and foreignization theory provide classic analytical tools [2, 3]; Keane's research on the global export of Chinese film and television points out that institutional cultural elements in period dramas—such as official systems and rituals—are the core factors contributing to the cognitive gap among Western audiences [4]. Domestic scholarship aligns with this trajectory: Li Yunxing proposed strategies of "condensation, simplification, and direct rendering" [5]; studies by Jin Hui, Cao Li and others have examined the translation of official-title culture-loaded words and confirmed the cultural discount in Tang-Dynasty film and television, yet they focus heavily on tactical summaries and devote insufficient attention to underlying mechanisms [6, 7].

From a theoretical perspective, audiovisual translation research has generated classic paradigms such as Skopos theory and Multimodal Discourse Analysis, yet these frameworks fall short of Eco-translatology in terms of explanatory power. Skopos theory emphasizes the functional adaptation of strategies but struggles to coordinate the interaction among multimodal elements; polysystem theory focuses on external normative constraints but gives insufficient attention to translator subjectivity and intra-textual ecology. Eco-translatology is centered on the principle of "adaptation and selection". Through its three-dimensional (linguistic, cultural, and communicative) framework, it integrates media constraints, cultural context, audience reception, and translator agency into a unified analytical system, offering stronger explanatory power. Internationally, Dollerup recognizes the core logic and theoretical value of Eco-translatology; Cronin expands the boundaries of translational ecological research from a political-ecology perspective; and Valdeón explicitly calls for extending Eco-translatology into audiovisual translation. Domestically, Hu Gengshen has progressively constructed a complete theoretical paradigm of Eco-translatology, while scholars such as Liu Yunhong have further advanced its local interpretation [8-11].

At the level of applied research, ecologically oriented explorations of multimodal translation have already appeared internationally: Hejazi and Davoudi applied the Eco-translatology framework to multimodal advertising translation, verifying its applicability to audiovisual texts, though such research has not yet extended to Chinese Tang-Dynasty historical subjects [12]. Domestic film and television applications of Eco-translatology have concentrated on mythology and revolutionary ("red") themes: scholars such as Liao Lanling and Feng Shuqi used Chang'an as a sample to verify the framework's applicability to film and television subtitles [13, 14]; Wang Yan and Li Ziwei extended the research to red-themed and mythological subjects

respectively [15, 16]. Yet existing studies generally show a tendency to “emphasize the classification of strategies while neglecting the analysis of motivations,” and systematic investigation of Tang-Dynasty historical subjects remains insufficient.

In sum, existing research exhibits a twofold research gap: internationally, ecologically oriented audiovisual translation research has not yet covered Chinese Tang-Dynasty historical subjects; domestically, research on cultural discount in Tang-Dynasty films lacks the systematic framework of Eco-translatology, and the application of three-dimensional transformations has not yet penetrated the internal logic of ecological adaptation. Taking *The Lychee Road* as its case and drawing on the Eco-translatology framework, this study, on the one hand, extends the thematic boundaries of international ecological audiovisual translation research and enriches the scholarship on Chinese historical costume dramas; on the other hand, it deepens the theoretical reach of domestic cultural-discount research and offers a new analytical path for the subtitle translation of Tang-Dynasty films going global.

3. Theoretical Framework

Eco-translatology was developed by Hu Gengshen in 2001. Its core tenet is that “translation is adaptation and selection”: the translator must both adapt to the translational eco-environment and make adaptive selections of the target text within that environment, and the optimal translation is the one with the highest “degree of holistic adaptive [17].

Several core concepts form the analytical tools of this study and are defined uniformly as follows:

First, the translational eco-environment. It refers to the ecological system formed jointly by the source text, source language, and target language—an integrated whole where linguistic, communicative, cultural, and social dimensions interact with agents such as the author, readers, and clients. It is the objective field in which the translator carries out adaptation and selection [18].

Second, translator-centeredness. It conceptualizes the translator as the nexus of multiple contradictions in the translation process, and as the core ecological subject who actively makes adaptive selections within the translational eco-environment.

Third, three-dimensional transformations. This is the core methodology of Eco-translatology and comprises three dimensions: the linguistic dimension focuses on adaptive selection and transformation of linguistic form; the cultural dimension attends to the transfer and interpretation of cultural connotations between the two languages; and the communicative dimension centers on adaptive selection and transformation of the bilingual communicative intentions.

Film subtitles are simultaneously subject to the dual ecological constraints of spatiotemporal limits and cross-cultural reception, while also offering compensatory conditions through multimodal synergy. The traditional binary analytical framework of “literal versus free translation” can hardly account for linguistic form, cultural connotation, and communicative effect simultaneously. The holistic perspective of Eco-translatology and its three-dimensional transformation method are better suited to systematic study of such subtitle translation.

4. Case Analysis

This study takes the official English subtitles of *The Lychee Road* as its corpus and analyzes them along the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. The analytical procedure follows the path of “presenting examples—interpreting patterns—drawing on Eco-translatology to explain the reasons,” with examples numbered in order of appearance. *In the following examples, ST = Source Text, TT = Target Text.*

4.1 The Translational Eco-environment of *The Lychee Road*

From the source text ecology perspective, *The Lychee Road* is set in the Tianbao period of the Tang Dynasty and constructs a high-density, high-context cultural system encompassing three core categories of culture-loaded elements: (1) Tang-Dynasty official titles (e.g., military governors, supervisors, palace attendants, the

Lychee Envoy); (2) ritual forms of address (e.g., “the Sage,” “your humble servant”); (3) institutional artifacts (e.g., yellow-slip amendment).

From the target-text ecology, the translator faces two core constraints while also benefiting from multimodal compensation: first, the spatiotemporal constraints of subtitles—the translation is limited by both display duration and screen space; second, the cognitive gap of Western low-context audiences, for whom institutional cultural elements are relatively unfamiliar; and third, multimodal synergy compensation, whereby some cultural information can be rendered through visual elements on screen.

Under the interactive constraints of the source and target ecologies, the translator develops an overall translational orientation led by domestication and prioritizing narrative coherence—an adaptive outcome driven by the “survival of the fittest” mechanism inherent to the translational eco-environment.

4.2 Adaptive Selection and Transformation on the Linguistic Dimension

The linguistic dimension concerns the translator’s adaptive adjustments to linguistic form at the lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic levels. Subtitle translation is constrained by both character limit and display duration, and this medium-specific attribute directly shapes the translator’s linguistic choices. In *The Lychee Road*, the translator mainly employs strategies of condensation/omission, sentence restructuring, affirmation-to-negation rendering, and the literalization of metaphors.

Condensation and omission are the most common linguistic-dimensional adaptive selections in subtitle translation, as the translator often compresses or omits redundant information, modifiers, or cultural imagery in the source text.

Example 1:

ST: 上林署这帮庸鱼碌虾

TT: This place is full of squareheads.

In the source text, “*yong yu lu xia*” (庸鱼碌虾) is a derogatory colloquial blend “庸庸碌碌” (mediocre and worthless) with “鱼虾” (fish and shrimp), figuratively referring to incompetents. The translation simplifies it to “squareheads” (stupid, wooden people), omitting the cultural imagery of “fish and shrimp” and retaining only the core derogatory meaning.

Sentence restructuring is another important manifestation of linguistic-dimensional adaptive transformation. Chinese tends toward parataxis, frequently omitting the subject and using subjectless sentences; English tends toward hypotaxis, requiring complete sentence structure.

Example 2:

ST: 自幼便立志到长安

TT: Since childhood, I dreamed of coming to Chang’an

The source text is a subjectless sentence, with the subject “I” implied by context. The translation supplies the subject “I” and renders “立志” as “dreamed of,” bringing the sentence into conformity with basic English syntactic structure.

Affirmation-to-negation rendering is a commonly used linguistic strategy: when a positive expression in the source text sounds awkward in the target language, the translator switches to a negative expression.

Example 3:

ST: 办不成是要掉脑袋的

TT: If we fail, it would cost us our heads.

In the source text, “掉脑袋” is a colloquial expression for the consequence of death. The rendering “cost us our heads” recasts it through the frame of “cost” (to pay a price) into a construction more idiomatic in English.

The literalization of metaphors is also a typical manifestation of linguistic-dimensional adaptive selection.

Example 4:

ST: 你这饼太大了

TT: this job is too much for me.

The source expression “饼太大了” is a metaphor in which “饼” (cake/pancake) stands for “task or errand,” alluding to the cultural allusion of “drawing a cake to satisfy hunger” (i.e., an unrealistically empty promise). The translation explicitly names the vehicle as “job,” omitting the “cake” imagery and its cultural association, so that Western audiences can grasp the sentence without cultural background.

In sum, linguistic-dimensional transformation centers on the goal of “fluency and intelligibility.” Through various adjustment strategies, the translator makes the target text conform to target-language norms within the limited spatiotemporal confines of subtitles, ensuring smooth reading for the audience.

4.3 Adaptive Selection and Transformation on the Cultural Dimension

Adaptive selection and transformation along the cultural dimension is the focus of this study. Eco-translatology holds that the core of cultural-dimensional transformation lies in attending to cultural differences between source and target languages, avoiding distortion of the original from the target culture’s perspective. Culture-loaded words are extremely dense in *The Lychee Road*; this study analyzes them under three subcategories: official titles, social appellations, and cultural objects and allusions.

(1) Official Titles

The Tang-Dynasty official system was complex, and official titles carried multiple layers of cultural information, including rank, function, and power relations. Existing research has systematically summarized strategies for translating ancient Chinese official titles: Jin Hui, using the English translation of *A New Account of Tales of the World* as a sample, outlined the choice between domestication and foreignization in title translation; and Li Shuyan, taking *Science and Civilisation in China* as a case, explored how functional-equivalent translation of official titles can be achieved [6, 19]. These studies show that translating ancient official titles generally entails a tension between institutional-cultural differences and target-language acceptability. In handling the official titles in *The Lychee Road*, the translator mainly adopts a domestication-and-simplification strategy, selecting near-functional generic English words to replace the source official titles—a process that is often accompanied by the loss of cultural information.

Example 5:

ST: 李监事

TT: Inspector Li

“*Jianshi*” (监事) was a low-ranking official in the Tang system, responsible for managing routine affairs in the Shanglin Office. The translation renders it as “Inspector.” Although there is a functional resemblance, “Inspector” in English commonly refers to a police superintendent or a quality inspector, far removed from the cultural connotation and institutional background of the Tang “监事.” The translator’s choice of domesticating simplification is intended to let Western audiences quickly grasp the character’s official identity, but at the cost of losing the specific cultural information of the Tang official system.

Example 6:

ST: 鱼内侍

TT: Eunuch Yu

“*Neishi*” (内侍) was an official title in the Tang eunuch administration, referring to a eunuch serving the emperor in the palace. The translation renders it directly as “Eunuch,” reducing an official title to a description of identity. As an official title, “内侍” carries information about rank, function, and power status, whereas “Eunuch” merely denotes physical identity, erasing the institutional connotation of the position. This treatment, while making the character’s identity easy for Western audiences to grasp, produces a discount in official-system culture.

Example 7:

ST: 你就是荔枝使了

TT: you’re the Lychee Envoy.

“*Lizhishi*” (荔枝使) was an ad hoc title created in the film for a special mission. The term “使” is specific to the Tang dispatch system, referring to an official temporarily commissioned by the emperor to carry out a particular task. The translation renders “使” as “Envoy,” which approximates the sense of “temporary commission,” but in English “Envoy” usually denotes a diplomatic envoy, diverging from the institutional connotation of the Tang “使.” Nevertheless, the rendering “Lychee Envoy” retains the core artifact “lychee,” making it one of the cases in this sample where relatively more cultural information is preserved.

Example 8:

ST: 上林署办最合适

TT: is best handled by the Bureau of Imperial Gardens.

“上林署” was the Tang office managing the imperial gardens. The translation adopts an explanatory strategy, rendering it as “Bureau of Imperial Gardens,” in which “Imperial Gardens” explicitly states the office’s functional scope. Compared with the domesticating simplification in the preceding examples, this rendering conveys cultural information more fully: as an institutional name, the function of “上林署” can be stated directly through a modifier, unlike “监事” or “内侍,” which involve complex rank systems. This shows that the translator does not uniformly simplify official titles, but rather flexibly chooses strategies according to the functional weight of each title.

A comparison of the above cases shows that domesticating simplification (e.g., Inspector, Eunuch) and explanatory translation (e.g., Bureau of Imperial Gardens, Lychee Envoy) differ in their degree of adaptation. Domesticating simplification accommodates the spatiotemporal constraints of subtitles and the audience’s cognitive load, but produces a relatively large cultural discount; explanatory translation retains more cultural information but may lengthen subtitles and increase comprehension cost. The translator’s choice is essentially a balancing act between “information retention” and “acceptability” on the cultural dimension.

(2) Social Appellations

The Tang system of social appellations deeply reflects social hierarchical order and interpersonal ethics, and the translator faces a similar tension between cultural transfer and audience comprehension when handling forms of address. Chen Ziyu, analyzing the English rendering of appellations in the web novel and screen adaptations of *Joy of Life* from the perspective of cultural discount, points out that appellation systems bearing hierarchical differences in costume dramas generally suffer a flattening loss in English translation, and that the ritual-cultural information embedded in humble and honorific forms of address is difficult to transfer fully into the target language [20].

Example 9:

ST: 圣人的意思是

TT: The Emperor has made it clear.

“*Shengren*” (圣人) was a special honorific for the emperor in the Tang Dynasty, embodying the cultural idea that “the emperor is morally sublime like a sage”; it was a distinctive form of address in Tang political

culture. The translation renders it directly as “The Emperor,” reducing a culturally charged appellation to a generic identity noun and losing the political-cultural connotation and emotional coloring of “圣人.” While this treatment ensures Western audiences’ basic understanding of the speaker’s identity, the distinctive Tang cultural phenomenon of “honoring the emperor as sage” fails to emerge in the translation.

Example 10:

ST: 就是小人的一条命啊

TT: could cost me my life!

“小人” was a humble self-designation used by persons of low status in ancient China, reflecting the self-deprecation of inferiors before superiors under a strict hierarchical order. The translation omits “小人” entirely, referring only to “me,” flattening a humble self-designation into an ordinary first-person pronoun. This treatment loses both the hierarchical-cultural information carried by the appellation and the character’s lowly mentality, making it a fairly typical case of cultural discount in the translation of social appellations. From the Eco-translatology perspective, this omission is an adaptation to the target-text ecology: English lacks a humble self-designation fully equivalent to “小人,” and forcing a rendering such as “your humble servant,” while preserving the humble coloring, would sound stiff and inconsistent with the colloquial register required of subtitles.

The above cases show that cultural discount in the translation of social appellations manifests mainly as “hierarchical flattening” and “loss of ritual information.” The translator reduces the source appellation system—charged with hierarchy and ritual—to generic English identity nouns or pronouns, ensuring basic communicative fluency but failing to convey Tang social hierarchy and ritual order fully.

(3) Cultural Objects and Allusions

Cultural objects and allusions are important carriers of Tang culture, and *The Lychee Road* involves a large number of object-related terms concerning lychee transport, administrative institutions, and the examination and education system.

Example 11:

ST: 给圣人送十斤岭南的荔枝煎

TT: to deliver ten jin of preserved lychees from Lingnan for the Emperor.

This example contains three culture-loaded elements: “斤” (a traditional Chinese weight unit), “岭南” (a Tang regional name), and “荔枝煎” (a processed lychee product). The translator adopts differentiated treatment: “斤” is retained through pinyin as “jin,” “岭南” through pinyin as “Lingnan,” while “荔枝煎” is rendered as “preserved lychees.” The first two are retained in pinyin because measures of weight and place names are proper nouns, and pinyin transcription preserves cultural specificity without impeding comprehension (audiences can infer from context that they denote a unit and a place); “荔枝煎” is rendered by sense because “煎” as a processing method is unfamiliar to Western audiences, and translating it as “preserved” directly conveys its core meaning of “processed and preserved.” This differentiated treatment embodies the translator’s adaptive wisdom in flexibly selecting strategies according to the functional weight of each cultural term.

Example 12:

ST: 后来用贴黄改成了煎

TT: A sticker was added to fix it as “preserved”.

“Tiehuang” (贴黄) was a distinctive Tang institution for revising official documents, referring to the practice of pasting a yellow slip over the text to amend it; it is an important cultural artifact of Tang administration. The translation simplifies it to “A sticker was added,” completely losing the cultural

connotation of “贴黄” as a specific Tang documentary institution, and reducing a historically specific administrative term to the generic act of “sticking on a note.” While this enables Western audiences to grasp the basic plot that “the content of the decree was revised,” the cultural information of the Tang documentary system is not conveyed.

Example 13:

ST: 昼漏尽 宵禁始

TT: The day ends, the curfew begins.

“Zhoulou” (昼漏) is an ancient Chinese timekeeping term referring to the daytime clepsydra having run out, and it carries the cultural information of ancient Chinese timekeeping institutions. The translation simplifies “昼漏尽” to “The day ends,” losing the cultural imagery of the “clepsydra” as an ancient timekeeping instrument; “宵禁始” is rendered relatively accurately as “the curfew begins,” because the institution of the curfew has a corresponding concept in Western history. In this example, the cultural discount occurs mainly at the timekeeping-culture level of “昼漏.”

Example 14:

ST: 做事见贤思齐

TT: I’ve been constantly learning from those better than me.

“见贤思齐” comes from the *Analects* (Li Ren) and is a classic moral-cultivation maxim in traditional Chinese culture, meaning “when meeting a person of virtue, strive to emulate them.” The translation renders it by sense as “constantly learning from those better than me,” conveying the basic meaning but entirely losing the cultural connotation and literary coloring of “见贤思齐” as a Confucian allusion. This is a typical free rendering of an allusion, adapted to the ecological reality that Western audiences lack recognition of Confucian allusions, but the cultural value of the allusion is not preserved.

Example 15:

ST: 成为诸多飘荡在长安的浮萍之一

TT: Become one of the many adrift in Chang’an.

“浮萍” (adrift) is a common imagery in classical Chinese literature, figuratively representing a wandering and rootless state of life and carrying deep literary and cultural connotations. The translation reduces “浮萍” to the adjective “adrift,” flattening a literary imagery rich in cultural association into an ordinary adjective and losing the cultural resonance and emotional depth of the image. This treatment likewise illustrates how domesticating simplification dissolves cultural imagery.

The analysis of the three categories—official titles, social appellations, and cultural objects and allusions—shows that the core contradiction of cultural-dimensional transformation lies in this: source-language culture-loaded words carry rich institutional, ritual, and literary cultural information, whereas the target-text ecology (spatiotemporal limits of subtitles, the cognitive gap of low-context audiences) requires the translator to simplify. The translator adopts domestication and simplification as the leading strategy, which, while adapting to the target-text ecology, inevitably produces cultural discount. Notably, however, the translator does not simplify all culture-loaded words uniformly, but flexibly selects strategies according to functional weight: proper nouns (e.g., place names, measures) are retained in pinyin, institutional names receive explanatory translation, and allusions and literary imagery are mostly simplified through free translation. This differentiated treatment embodies the translator’s adaptive effort to achieve a higher degree of holistic adaptation and selection on the cultural dimension.

4.4 Adaptive Selection and Transformation on the Communicative Dimension

The communicative dimension concerns whether the translator effectively conveys the source text's communicative intention and pragmatic force. Eco-translatology holds that when linguistic form, cultural imagery, and communicative effect conflict, the translator should prioritize communicative effect. In *The Lychee Road*, adaptive selection on the communicative dimension is mainly reflected in the transmission of tone, emotional expression, and multimodal synergy.

(1) Conveying Humble and Arrogant Tones

The translator must convey the information while ensuring that the communicative tone is effectively transmitted.

Example 16:

ST: 就是小人的一条命啊

TT: could cost me my life!

As noted, the humble self-designation “小人” is omitted in the translation and rendered only as “me,” but the exclamatory sentence intensifies the urgency of a life-or-death stake, effectively conveying the character's fear and compensates for the pragmatic loss caused by the omission of the humble tone.

Example 17:

ST: 上林署这帮庸鱼碌虾

TT: This place is full of squareheads.

The source phrase “庸鱼碌虾” is full of contempt for one's colleagues; the rendering “squareheads” is English slang meaning “stupid, wooden people.” Although the cultural imagery differs, it successfully conveys the speaker's contemptuous tone and realizes the communicative intention of “belittling others.”

(2) Conveying Self-mockery and Humor

Example 18:

ST: 你这饼太大了

TT: this job is too much for me.

The source line “你这饼太大了” is Li Shande's self-mockery after being appointed Lychee Envoy, and the “cake” metaphor carries the humor that “the errand is as unrealistic as a drawn cake.” The rendering “this job is too much for me,” while losing the “cake” metaphor and its humor, accurately conveys the core communicative intention that “the task exceeds one's ability.”

(3) Conveying Tension and Motivational Effect

Example 19:

ST: 办不成是要掉脑袋的

TT: If we fail, it would cost us our heads.

The source line “办不成是要掉脑袋的” is a superior's warning to a subordinate, emphasizing the extreme importance of the task and the grave consequences of failure. Through a conditional clause and the expression “cost us our heads,” the translation effectively conveys the urgency of the task and the fatal consequence of failure; moreover, by using “we” instead of “you,” it converts the superior-to-subordinate second person into a first-person plural, softening the hierarchy and strengthening the team consciousness of shared risk.

(4) Communicative Compensation through Multimodal Synergy

The communicative effect of film subtitles is determined not by words alone but by the synergy of multimodal elements—visuals, sound, and performance. In the film, some missing cultural information can be compensated through multimodal channels, providing the translator with ecological room for simplification at the linguistic level.

Example 20:

ST: 这敕令上的文字

TT: this imperial decree

“Chiling” (敕令) was a command document issued by the Tang emperor, carrying specific institutional-cultural connotations. The rendering “imperial decree” conveys the basic meaning of “an imperial order” but loses some of the documentary-institutional cultural connotation of “敕令.” In the film’s visuals—yellow scroll, red seal, and calligraphic script—these visual elements compensate at the multimodal level for the cultural information lost in the verbal translation.

In sum, communicative-dimensional transformation centers on the goal of “realizing the intended meaning.” Through intensification of tone, slang substitution, pronoun adjustment, and multimodal synergy, the translator ensures that the communicative intention of the source text is effectively conveyed. Whenever linguistic form, cultural imagery, and communicative effect conflict, the translator consistently prioritizes communicative effect.

4.5 Ecological Motivations of Cultural Discount and Compensation Strategies

The above three-dimensional analysis shows that cultural discount is fairly evident in the English subtitles of *The Lychee Road*, particularly on the cultural dimension, where the translation of official titles, social appellations, and cultural objects and allusions entails widespread information loss. This section examines the ecological motivations of cultural discount from the Eco-translatology perspective and evaluates possible compensation strategies.

(1) Ecological Motivations of Cultural Discount

From the Eco-translatology perspective, cultural discount is not the result of the translator’s incompetence or negligence, but a concomitant result of the translator’s adaptive selection within a specific translational environment, and its emergence is ecologically inevitable. Specifically, the ecological motivations of cultural discount lie in the following three aspects:

First, the inherent contradiction between high-context culture and the subtitling medium. Tang-Dynasty historical subjects are typical of high-context culture, in which a great deal of cultural information is implicit in cultural symbols such as official titles, forms of address, and material artifacts, requiring corresponding cultural background knowledge for full comprehension. Subtitles, by contrast, are a medium under strict spatiotemporal constraint, requiring the translation to complete information transfer within a limited character count and display time, and cannot unfold cultural interpretation through annotations or footnotes as book translation can. There is a structural contradiction between the “information density” of high-context culture and the “information capacity” of the subtitle medium, and the translator can only adapt to the medium’s ecological constraints by simplifying the source cultural information—hence cultural discount arises.

Second, the domestication strategy oriented toward narrative coherence. In the ecology of film dissemination, narrative coherence is the basic precondition for audience acceptance. If the translator adopts foreignization in rendering culture-loaded words, retaining source-cultural forms (e.g., pinyin, word-for-word rendering), cultural information is preserved, but audience comprehension may be interrupted and narrative rhythm disrupted, undermining the film’s overall communicative effect. The translator therefore tends to use domestication as the leading strategy, converting source culture-loaded words into expressions familiar to the target audience in order to safeguard narrative coherence. This strategic choice, while adapting to the target-audience ecology, inevitably produces a discount of source-cultural information.

Third, the “survival of the fittest” mechanism of the translational eco-environment. Eco-translatology holds that the translational eco-environment has a selection mechanism of “survival of the fittest”: translations adapted to the environment “survive,” while those unadapted are “eliminated.” In the translational eco-environment of *The Lychee Road*, translations that are overly foreignized or overloaded with cultural information are “eliminated” because they exceed the spatiotemporal capacity of subtitles and the audience’s cognitive load; translations that domesticate, simplify, and moderately lose cultural information “survive” because they adapt to the target-text ecology. Cultural discount is precisely the product of this “survival of the fittest” mechanism—the outcome of the natural selection exerted on translations by the translational eco-environment.

(2) Evaluation of Compensation Strategies

Although cultural discount is ecologically inevitable, the translator can still compensate, to a certain extent, for the loss of cultural information and enhance the target text’s degree of holistic adaptation and selection through specific strategies. From the Eco-translatology perspective, this study evaluates the following three compensation strategies:

First, explanatory translation—that is, when translating culture-loaded words, adding modifiers or explanatory elements to clarify their cultural connotation. As noted, “上林署” is rendered as “Bureau of Imperial Gardens” by this strategy, with “Imperial Gardens” making the institutional function explicit. The advantage of explanatory translation is that it can convey core cultural information without excessively lengthening the subtitles; it is suitable for institutional names and official functions that can be explained directly through a modifier. Its limitation is that, for culture-loaded words involving complex institutional background (e.g., “贴黄,” “昼漏”), a brief modifier can hardly fully explain their cultural connotation, while over-explanation would exceed the spatiotemporal capacity of subtitles. The effectiveness of explanatory translation thus depends on the explainability of the cultural term and the capacity of the subtitle medium.

Second, differentiated translation—that is, adopting different strategies for different types of terms according to their functional weight and cultural importance. As noted, the translator retains “斤” and “岭南” in pinyin, explains “上林署”, and freely simplifies “见贤思齐” and “浮萍”; this is itself an instance of differentiated translation in practice. Its advantage is avoiding a one-size-fits-all simplification: terms of high cultural importance and strong retainability are retained or explained, while terms of relatively lower importance and poorer retainability are simplified, thereby achieving an optimal overall balance between cultural information retention and target-text acceptability. From the standpoint of the degree of holistic adaptation and selection, differentiated translation enjoys a higher degree of adaptation than uniform domestication and simplification, because it achieves finer dynamic adjustment across the three dimensions.

Third, paratextual construction—that is, supplementing cultural information through paratextual channels beyond the subtitles themselves (e.g., film synopses, cultural annotations, viewing guides). In her study of the English translation of official titles and social appellations in Tang-Dynasty films, Cao Li points out that paratextual construction is an effective means of compensating for cultural discount: keep the feature-film subtitles concise to safeguard narrative coherence, while providing cultural background annotations in the paratext to meet the cultural needs of deeper viewers [7]. The advantage of paratextual construction is that it liberates cultural interpretation from the spatiotemporal confines of subtitles, freeing the translator from subtitle-length constraints and allowing fuller cultural explanation. Its limitation is that audience coverage of paratext is limited—most ordinary viewers may not actively read it—and the compensative effect is therefore constrained. Moreover, paratextual construction requires coordination between producers and distributors, and cannot be achieved by the translator alone.

Evaluated from the standpoint of the “degree of holistic adaptation and selection,” each of the three strategies has its strengths and weaknesses: explanatory translation suits cultural terms that can be briefly explained; differentiated translation suits overall strategic optimization; and paratextual construction suits in-depth cultural compensation. An ideal compensation scheme should integrate the three organically: adopt differentiated translation in subtitle translation, use explanatory translation for terms that can be explained, and simultaneously build a paratextual system during distribution, forming a multi-layered cultural transfer mechanism of “concise subtitles + in-depth paratext.” This combined strategy can achieve a higher degree of

holistic adaptation and selection across the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, and is a viable path for enhancing the overseas communication of Tang-Dynasty historical films.

It should be emphasized that compensation strategies are essentially the translator's adaptive selection for a higher degree of holistic adaptation and selection between the cultural and communicative dimensions. Compensation does not aim to eliminate cultural discount—under the ecological constraints of the subtitle medium, fully eliminating it is neither realistic nor necessary—but rather to minimize unnecessary cultural loss while safeguarding narrative coherence and communicative effect, so that the translation achieves an optimal balance across the three dimensions.

5. Conclusion

This study takes the official English subtitles of the film *The Lychee Road* as its corpus and conducts a case analysis under the “three-dimensional transformations” framework of Eco-translatology. The study finds that the three-dimensional transformation framework has strong explanatory power for subtitle translation in Tang Dynasty-themed films: the linguistic dimension pursues fluency, the cultural dimension emphasizes simplification, and the communicative dimension safeguards intended meaning, with the three forming a dynamic relationship of adaptive selection. Cultural discount manifests mainly as the downgrading of official functions, the flattening of appellation hierarchies, and the dissolution of the connotations of cultural objects and allusions; its essence is the joint product of the contradiction between high-context culture and the subtitle medium, the domestication strategy orientation, and the “survival of the fittest” mechanism of the translational ecology, and is ecologically inevitable. Explanatory translation, differentiated translation, and paratextual construction can enhance the degree of holistic adaptation and selection from different levels; the ideal scheme combines the three into a multi-layered mechanism of “concise subtitles + in-depth paratext.” Yet compensation does not eliminate cultural discount, but rather reduces unnecessary cultural loss while safeguarding narrative coherence and communicative effect. The theoretical significance of this study lies in expanding the scope of Eco-translatology's application to Tang Dynasty-themed film subtitle research and deepening understanding of the ecological motivations behind cultural discount; its practical significance lies in providing operable strategic references for the translation of culture-loaded words in the overseas dissemination of Chinese historical films. This study has certain limitations: the generalizability of its single-case conclusions remains to be verified; the analysis is qualitative and does not incorporate corpus-based quantitative methods; and no empirical survey of overseas audience reception has been conducted. Future research may extend to more Tang-Dynasty works for cross-case comparison, combining corpus-based quantitative analysis with audience reception surveys to further test the actual communicative effects of compensation strategies.

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Conflicts of Interest

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