Journal of Language, Culture and Education; Vol.3, No.6; 2026
E-ISSN: 3006-3213 P-ISSN: 3006-3205
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70267/jlce.v3n6.4448
Published by: Zeus Press

Strategies for Translating Culture-loaded Words in Publicity Texts: A Case Study of a University Promotional Video

Sijing Xin*

School of Foreign Languages, Chengdu Jincheng University, Chengdu, China

**Corresponding author: Sijing Xin.*

Abstract

University publicity texts are densely loaded with culture-specific expressions, including four-character idioms, political formulas, institutional coinages and rhetorical figures about education, which pose persistent difficulties for Chinese-English translation. Drawing on Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory and the taxonomy of culture-specific items, this paper examines the official English subtitles of a Chinese university's promotional video. Close analysis of representative renderings identifies three recurrent strategies: retaining the source image when it remains intelligible and functional in the target culture, recasting the image when the source form becomes noise, and preserving institutionalized wording when the expression belongs to fixed political or institutional discourse. The three strategies are shown to form a hierarchical decision framework in which translators first check discursive obligations, then test intelligibility, and finally evaluate rhetorical function. The findings suggest that effective publicity translation depends not on uniform loyalty to form but on calibrated choices made under institutional constraint.

Keywords

culture-loaded words, university publicity texts, Chinese-English translation, Functional Equivalence Theory, translation strategies

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Chinese universities have moved rapidly to build an international presence. English-language websites, brochures and promotional videos have become standard instruments through which institutions present themselves to prospective students, partner universities and the wider world. Among these genres, the promotional video is the most densely packed: within a few minutes of voiceover and subtitles, a university is expected to condense its history, philosophy and achievements into a short, emotionally engaging narrative.

The translation of such texts is anything but mechanical. Chinese university publicity scripts are saturated with culture-loaded words—four-character idioms, political formulas, institutional coinages and distinctly Chinese rhetorical figures about education. Rendered word for word, these expressions either baffle international readers or read as awkward Chinglish; rendered too freely, they risk losing the institution's voice

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

and, in the case of political formulas, violating authorized wording. How translators strike this balance is therefore a question of both linguistic competence and institutional responsibility.

This paper reports a case study of the official English subtitles of a promotional video of a University. The source script is organized into a prologue and five thematic chapters, and its authorized English version was produced for international voiceover and on-screen subtitles. Three questions guide the analysis: (1) What strategies are used to translate the culture-loaded words in the script? (2) How does the type of expression condition the choice of strategy? (3) What decision logic underlies successful publicity translation of this kind?

The remainder of the paper reviews relevant scholarship on culture-loaded words and translation strategies, analyzes representative examples under three strategy types, and concludes with a three-way decision framework together with its practical and pedagogical implications.

2. Literature Review

Culture-loaded words, also called culture-specific items, are expressions whose meaning and use are grounded in a particular culture and therefore lack ready equivalents in another [1, 2]. Nida [1] classifies culture into five categories—ecological, material, social, religious and linguistic—each generating its own translation problems. Newmark [3] likewise treats cultural words as a central challenge, listing procedures from transference to componential analysis. In the context of Chinese university publicity, an additional layer must be recognized: political and institutional discourse, such as fixed formulas about the mission of education, behaves differently from ordinary cultural expressions.

At the strategic level, Nida's principle of Functional Equivalence requires a translation to produce "the closest natural equivalent" of the source message, privileging the response of target readers over formal correspondence [4]. Venuti [5] frames the same tension as a choice between domestication, which moves the text toward the reader, and foreignization, which moves the reader toward the text. Baker [6] offers operational procedures for non-equivalence at word level, including translation by a more general word, by paraphrase, by cultural substitution and by omission, while Aixelá [2] arranges strategies along a continuum from conservation to substitution.

Publicity translation, however, is institutional translation: it is commissioned by organizations, reviewed through official procedures and constrained by authorized terminology. Huang [7], in formulating the widely cited "three closenesses" for international publicity translation—close to China's realities, close to foreign audiences' information needs, and close to foreign audiences' ways of thinking—notes that certain political formulas carry fixed renderings that translators are not free to alter. Strategy choice in this genre must therefore account for institutional obligations as well as linguistic ones.

3. Case Analysis

The analysis below groups representative renderings from the official English subtitles into three strategy types: retaining the source image, recasting the image, and preserving institutionalized wording. Chinese originals are given with pinyin glosses; all English versions are the authorized translations used in the released video.

3.1 Retaining the Image: When Form Carries Function

Literal rendering is often dismissed as inadequate, yet the data show that images which remain intelligible—and rhetorically active—in English are consistently kept.

ST1: 何谓大学之大？
TT1: What makes a university truly great?

The rhetorical question opens the film and is preserved intact. The Chinese character 大 carries a deliberate ambiguity between size and greatness; English great reproduces this double reading, and the sentence that follows—"Its students, who go on to great futures"—extends the wordplay into an echo. Here formal retention and functional equivalence coincide.

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

ST2: 你可以长成自己的森林。
TT2: you can grow into a forest of your own

The seed-and-forest metaphor draws on universally shared natural imagery; nothing in it resists direct transfer, and the retained image keeps the script's lyrical register.

ST3: 春华秋实廿余载。
TT3: After more than twenty years of spring blossoms and autumn harvest

The agrarian image of spring flowers and autumn fruit—an archetype of educational achievement in Chinese—is transparent to English readers, so the image survives translation with its poetic force largely intact.

ST4: 课堂大于天。
TT4: The classroom is greater than heaven itself

Hyperbole is a shared rhetorical resource. Keeping heaven preserves both the exaggeration and the force of the institutional creed, while quotation marks signal its slogan status. In all four cases, the source form is not a barrier but an asset: retention succeeds because the images are cross-culturally readable and carry the text's persuasive work.

3.2 Recasting the Image: When Form Becomes Noise

Where the source form would produce noise—unintelligible imagery, untranslatable diction, or rhythm that cannot survive—the translators abandon it and rebuild the effect by other means.

ST5: 筚路蓝缕，砥砺前行。
TT5: starting from scratch, forging ahead through hardship, and pressing forward with resolve

Literally "riding in a rickety cart and wearing tattered clothes to clear the wilderness," the idiom's imagery would be pure noise in English, and glossing it would overload a subtitle constrained by reading time. The translation discards the picture entirely and rebuilds the two four-character units as three parallel participial phrases, recovering the source's rhythm and its function of narrating entrepreneurial hardship. Functional equivalence is achieved precisely by sacrificing formal equivalence.

ST6: 有情怀的人，办有情怀的教育。
TT6: People with heart build education with heart

情怀 has no compact English equivalent; candidates such as sentiment, passion or vision each capture only a facet. The translators choose heart, which in its educational usage (a school with heart) approximates the source's warmth and—crucially—restores the source's ring-like A-B-B-A repetition, so that the slogan survives as a slogan.

ST7: 激活"内外双动力"。
TT7: ignite the "twin engines" of inner drive and outer support

An abstract rendering such as dual motivation would flatten the sentence; recasting 动力 as twin engines borrows a live English metaphor, while ignite keeps the kinetic energy of the original verb.

ST8: 坚持做人教育与做事教育并举。
TT8: We place equal emphasis on "learning to be" and "learning to do"

The rendering deliberately echoes the UNESCO formula of learning to be and learning to do, plugging the university's philosophy into a discourse that international educators already recognize. Cultural substitution here works as an interface with the target discourse system. In these cases the source image is treated as expendable, but the source effect is not: parallelism, slogan force and metaphorical energy are systematically rebuilt.

3.3 Preserving Institutionalized Wording: When the Wording Is the Message

A third group of expressions permits neither creative retention nor free recasting, because their value lies precisely in their fixed wording.

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

ST9: 坚持为党育人、为国育才。
TT9: We remain committed to educating students for the Party and the nation

This is an authorized political formula of Chinese higher education; domesticating paraphrases would break discursive discipline. The translation stays close to the authorized wording, and the slight foreignness of the phrase is accepted as the price of fidelity to an institutional obligation.

ST10: 四个相长；五个课堂。
TT10: The Four "Mutual Growth" Approaches; The Five-Classroom Learning Model

Institution-coined terms are rendered with a numeral, a capitalized head noun and quotation marks—a convention that marks them as proper terms and keeps them consistent across the university's English materials.

ST11: 双师型教师。
TT11:"double-qualified" teachers (formal documents); practitioner-teachers (promotional narration)

Where no authorized equivalent exists, the university differentiates by genre: a descriptive, credential-like form for documents, and a compact, idiomatic form for voiceover. Consistency is maintained not by one fixed wording but by documented genre rules.

ST12: 软科榜单。
TT12: ShanghaiRanking

The domestic brand name is replaced by the international name of the same ranking. Pure substitution serves the audience's existing knowledge—readers of an English promotional video may not know 软科, but many know ShanghaiRanking. In this whole group, fidelity to institutional wording outranks naturalness or elegance: the translator's freedom yields to the commissioning institution's discursive norms.

4. Discussion

Read together, the three strategies suggest a hierarchical decision sequence. The translator first asks whether the expression carries institutional or political obligations; if so, the authorized wording prevails. If not, the second question is whether the source image remains intelligible to target readers; unintelligible or rhythm-breaking images are recast. The third question is whether the surviving form still performs rhetorical work; images that do are retained, with the original's figures—questions, hyperbole and parallelism—reproduced as far as English allows.

The case thus refines a simplistic application of functional equivalence. In university publicity translation, "function" is defined not only by readers' responses but also by the commissioning institution's norms: a subtitle must persuade international audiences while remaining accountable to authorized discourse. The translator's latitude is real but bounded, and strategy choice is best understood as calibration under institutional constraint. For translator training, the framework offers a teachable routine: classify the expression as image-driven, rhetoric-driven or institution-driven, apply the corresponding strategy, and then justify the choice in terms of both audience and accountability.

5. Conclusion

This case study of a university's anniversary promotional video has identified three recurrent strategies for translating culture-loaded words—retaining the image, recasting the image and preserving institutionalized wording—and has organized them into a decision hierarchy running from institutional obligations through intelligibility to rhetorical function. The findings indicate that effective publicity translation is neither uniformly literal nor uniformly free; it is a series of calibrated choices in which the same translator may keep one image, discard another, and treat a third expression as untouchable. The study is limited by its single-case scope and by the absence of empirical audience testing; future research could compare promotional videos across institutions or test target readers' actual responses to retained versus recast images.

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.

References

[1] Nida, E. A. (1964). Toward a science of translating: With special reference to principles and procedures involved in Bible translating. E. J. Brill.

[2] Aixelá, J. F. (1996). Culture-specific items in translation. In R. Álvarez & M. C.-Á. Vidal (Eds.), Translation, power, subversion (pp. 52–78). Multilingual Matters.

[3] Newmark, P. (1988). A textbook of translation. Prentice Hall.

[4] Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (1969). The theory and practice of translation. E. J. Brill.

[5] Venuti, L. (1995). The translator's invisibility: A history of translation. Routledge.

[6] Baker, M. (2018). In other words: A coursebook on translation (3rd ed.). Routledge.

[7] Huang, Y. (2004). Adhering to the "three closenesses" principle: Handling difficult problems in international publicity translation. Chinese Translators Journal, 25(6), 27–28.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author (s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

© 2026 The Author(s). Authors retain copyright in their articles.