

Original Paper

The Translation of Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) in Yellow
River Cultural Corpus: A Case Study of *History of the Yellow
River*

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Received: June 18, 2023

Accepted: August 21, 2023

Online Published: August 30, 2023

doi:10.22158/eltls.v5n3p381

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v5n3p381>

Abstract

By constructing a bilingual parallel corpus from scratch and taking History of the Yellow River as an illustrative bilingual text, this study delves into the translation techniques applied to Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) within the framework of the Yellow River Basin civilization. The findings reveal a diverse range of approaches employed by translators, including literal translation, free translation, intracultural adaptation, omission, retention and annotation, especially in handling CSIs related to ecology, material culture, social life, religion, and language within the context of Yellow River culture. These techniques effectively preserve the intrinsic traits of the source language, thereby facilitating the propagation of Yellow River culture. The utilization of corpus-based research methodologies to analyze the English translation of CSIs in the Yellow River culture not only aligns with the essential imperatives of promoting Chinese culture on the global stage but also addresses the intricate nuances demanded by international communication.

Keywords

bilingual parallel corpus, History of the Yellow River, Culture-specific Items

1. Introduction

As the cradle of Chinese civilization and the nurturer of Chinese culture, the Yellow River Basin has stood as an unwavering witness to the ebbs and flows of Chinese history spanning five millennia. Safeguarding and fostering the essence of Yellow River culture takes on paramount significance, as it entails not only the preservation of historical legacies but also its relevance in today's world. In this contemporary era, the advancement of ecological civilization and the propagation of Yellow River culture within the realm of the "Yellow River Basin" have emerged as vital subjects of scholarly

exploration.

The Yellow River culture holds a pivotal role in shaping the growth of the Chinese populace and fostering the evolution of human civilization. It carries a wealth of cultural connotations and a profound heritage, standing as a bedrock of cultural self-assurance for the Chinese nation and as a cultural driving force propelling global civilization forward. The translation and dissemination of Yellow River culture to the international stage, while seamlessly intertwining with neighboring nations, can forge a robust historical groundwork for the establishment of a shared human destiny.

In recent years, a multitude of experts and scholars have been instrumental in presenting the captivating narratives of the Yellow River, while also disseminating its cultural essence through a diverse range of media and methodologies. For instance, some delves into the velocity, comprehensiveness, and profundity of Yellow River culture dissemination from four distinct vantage points: the establishment of the Yellow River cultural heritage database and the multifaceted exploration of its underlying significances (Zhu, 2020). Hou (2020) offers insights into the international propagation of Yellow River culture, specifically through the lens of new media. Similarly, Zhu (2019) investigates the viability of harnessing contemporary digital technologies such as mobile internet, big data, and virtual reality to proliferate the hydroculture of the Yellow River in the present era. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the primary recipients of Yellow River culture dissemination currently comprise the Chinese populace, exposing certain insufficiencies in external outreach.

Furthermore, as the foundation of Yellow River culture rests deeply within the tapestry of Chinese heritage, it encompasses an array of culture-specific terms. An noteworthy aspect of Chinese literature, particularly significant for communicative intentions, is the usage of culture-specific lexis. Scholars even go to the extent of characterizing these elements as “highlighting the boundaries of translatability” (Cronin, 2000, p. 40; see also e.g., Petillo, 2012, p. 248). However, this attribute has surprisingly garnered insufficient attention from researchers in the field of translation studies, especially those focusing on culture overseas promotion that involve culturally distant source and target language communities, like Chinese and English. A significant portion of the existing literature concerning the translation of culture-specific Items (CSIs) within the context of Chinese texts is authored by scholars operating within linguistically and culturally proximate environments (e.g., Agorni, 2012; Kelly, 1997; Petillo, 2012).

These terms, in the context of international communication, can inadvertently lead to misconceptions. Recognizing this challenge, this article contributes to exploring outward translation strategies for Yellow River culture, particularly from the translation techniques of CSIs based on corpus. The aim of this study is to ascertain whether the selection of translation procedures at the micro level is impacted by the category of Culture-Specific Items (CSIs). Furthermore, it aims to shed light on the broader implications of the identified procedures on the portrayal of Yellow River culture as a promotion text at a macro level, which has the potential to significantly enhance its effective dissemination.

2. Culture-Specific Lexis in the Translated Texts

2.1 Culture-Specific Items

Renowned British translation scholar Mona Baker (1992) highlights that culture-specific words pertain to concepts existing in the source language but absent in the target language. These words encompass linguistic units such as words, phrases, and idioms that encapsulate information about a nation's culture. Franco Aixelá (1996) offers a definition of CSIs as “textual elements that, when brought into textual actualization, present a challenge in terms of their functional significance and connotations in the Source Text (ST), during their transferal to a Target Text (TT)”. Leppihalme (2011, p. 126) observes that “culture-specific expressions pertain to concepts within a particular source culture that lack precise corresponding expressions within a distinct target culture”. All these terms aim to somewhat indicate a concept that can be understood to varying degrees of intuitiveness, particularly by translators and scholars specializing in translation. Nonetheless, the concept itself faces two challenges that warrant brief consideration. The primary challenge lies in the definition itself, particularly in determining whether the concept should inherently encompass an element of variation. Many scholars (Aixelá 1996; Davies, 2003) deem this variation as essential. In the context of this present study, the inclusion of variation within the definition of CSIs will be considered obligatory. Thus, only those components of items within the data that refer to aspects not existing in the target culture or denote significant cultural disparities will be classified as culture-specific items. The secondary challenge, as highlighted by Marco (2019), revolves around the extent of the scope of CSIs. He observes that due to the comprehensive definitions of culture advocated by diverse disciplines (sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, etc.), it becomes intricate to establish an all-encompassing categorization of cultural domains (Espindola, 2005). This complexity arises from the fact that the accumulation of all classifications must cover everything essential for individuals to thrive within a particular society.

Among scholars both domestically and internationally, discrepancies arise in the categorization of culture-specific words, and a unified conclusion remains elusive. However, given the intimate nexus between culture and language, most classifications rest upon cultural delineations. To illustrate, the pioneer of modern anthropology, Malinowski (1944, pp. 6-15), in his opus *A Scientific Theory of Culture*, dissects culture into four dimensions: material culture, spiritual culture, language, and social organization. Drawing on diverse facets of human existence, Wang Rongpei (2002, pp. 67-69) proposes eight categories for culture-specific words: terms associated with politics, society, allusions, legends, flora and fauna, colors, the human physique, sustenance, and more. Eugene Nida's (2004, p. 55) taxonomy of cultural factors within language has garnered widespread acceptance. Within his publication *Toward a Science of Translating*, he classified culture into five varieties: ecological culture, material culture, linguistic culture, social culture, and religious culture. This research, regarding *History of the Yellow River* as a bilingual corpus, aims to delve into English translation strategies tailored for distinct categories of culture-specific words.

2.2 Translation Strategies for Culture-Specific Items

The majority of studies focused on translating CSIs employ a form of typology for techniques or procedures. These typologies are used to elucidate the specific nature of the connection existing between cultural items in the Source Text (ST) and the corresponding segments in the Target Text (TT). Newmark (1988) introduced an extensive classification, which could potentially be criticized for its redundancy and the lack of any organizational principle in its discrete categories, as noted by Marco (2004, 2007). In a comprehensive study, Franco Aixelá (1996) organized translation procedures based on the extent of their intercultural manipulation. Some procedures lean towards preserving the cultural item from the Source Text (ST), while others incline towards substituting it with an item from the target culture. While acknowledging the merits of Franco Aixelá's work, Davies (2003) expressed skepticism regarding the feasibility of ranking procedures along an adaptation spectrum. Consequently, she provided a list of strategies devoid of an underlying framework. When scrutinizing the translation of CSIs of Yellow river culture in Chinese into English, this article is directed by the foreignization and domestication criteria established by Venuti (1995), in conjunction with the translator's interventions. The categorization of procedures is rooted in the translation solutions employed within our corpus. This approach aligns with a longstanding tradition of typologies for translation procedures, ranging from comprehensive taxonomies (Leppihalme, 2001; Molina & Hurtado Albir, 2002; Newmark, 1988; Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995) to classifications addressing cultural referent translation challenges (Leppihalme, 2001; Marco, 2019; Newmark, 1988; Pedersen, 2011). Consequently, the translation procedures are positioned on a continuum, extending from the minimum departure from the target readers at one end to the maximum divergence at the other end. The translation strategies that have been recognized are as follows:

(a) Literal Translation: A literal translation method that encompasses adopting the structure of the lexical item rather than its phonetic form, as exemplified by retention (Newmark, 1988, p. 84).

(b) Free Translation;

(c) Intracultural Adaptation (IA): The Culture-Specific Item (CSI) in the source text is exchanged with an alternate term from the source language, one that is better recognized and endorsed in the Target Culture (TC). This approach is akin to Aixelá's (1996) "limited universalization" procedure, wherein translators search for an alternative source culture reference that is more aligned with the understanding of their target readers:

(d) Omission: This technique is classified among domesticating strategies, as it entails eliminating indications of source culture specificity from the Target Text (TT) (Marco, 2019).

(e) Retention: In essence, this involves preserving the phonetic/graphic characteristics of Culturally Specific Items (CSIs) in the Source Language (SL), either by adjusting them to match the phonetic structure, spelling, and morphology of the Target Language (TL). Alternative terms employed by various scholars for this strategy include retention (Jiang, 2014; Stoyanova, 2013), transference (Newmark, 1988), and borrowing (Al-Rushaidi & Ali, 2017; Marco, 2019).

(f) Annotation.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

This study explores the following three research questions:

- (1) What are the linguistic characteristics of Culture-Specific Items (CSIs)?
- (2) Does the selection of translation approach depend on the type of CSI, and if so, how?
- (3) What broader effect do the identified micro-level translation techniques have on promoting the perception of China's Yellow River Culture at a macro level?

3.2 Corpus Composition and Compilation

This research employs a blended design encompassing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The corpus utilized in this paper is a self-constructed bilingual parallel corpus, containing a typical book related to China's Yellow River culture, namely *History of the Yellow River*. This study is grounded in a self-constructed bilingual parallel corpus derived from the bilingual version of *History of the Yellow River*. The central focus lies on culturally significant terms found within both the source and target texts, subjected to a dual approach involving quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation. The objective pertains to scrutinizing the strategies employed by translators when handling CSIs. The primary research procedures are outlined as follows: Initially, manual preprocessing is undertaken for the Chinese and English documents, encompassing activities like word segmentation and sentence division. Subsequently, aided by the ParaConc software and guided adjustments, sentence-level parallel alignment is established for the Chinese and English corpora extracted from the work. Following this, index lines housing CSIs and their English translations are singled out from the corpus. These terms are subsequently grouped according to diverse translation methods. And then, the categorized outcomes are subjected to quantitative analysis, accompanied by explanations anchored in the findings of the analysis. Subsequently, WordSmith Tools 8.0 was employed to analyze the translations of both culture-specific expressions and literary terms.

3. Results and Discussion

4.1 Mean Word Length

Mean word length is calculated by dividing the total number of letters in all words by the total number of words. Word length standard deviation indicates the degree to which word length deviates from the average length (Frank et al., 2016). Broadly speaking, social science texts, particularly scholarly contributions within the field of social sciences, adopt a formal writing style that should ideally be rendered into the target language with a corresponding formal style. However, CISs within these formal texts often lean towards informal language. Deciding whether to translate these terms into formal or informal language necessitates a deeper examination of their characteristics, especially their lexical attributes.

To maintain a clear focus on lexical analysis, two hypotheses were formulated: Firstly, CSIs are expected to have shorter character lengths compared to other words found in formal texts like social science texts. Secondly, culture-specific expressions are anticipated to have longer word lengths than literary expressions, as the former often incorporates formal terms like political-related words, place names, organizations, and food. Using WordSmith Tools 8.0, the mean word length and word length standard deviation values for both culture-specific expressions and literary expressions within the target texts of the parallel corpus were calculated. The resulting statistics are presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Mean Word Length and Word Length Standard Deviation for Two Kinds of CSIs

	Culture-specific Expressions	Literary Expressions
Mean word length (in characters)	4.51	4.24
Word length standard deviation	2.68	2.18

The data presented in Table 1 indicates that the mean word length (measured in characters) for both culture-specific expressions and literary expressions is slightly greater than that of novels, which stands at 4.51, and lower than that of news texts, which is 4.24. Furthermore, both the mean word length (in characters) and the standard deviation of word length for culture-specific expressions surpass those of literary expressions.

4.2 Type/Token Ratio

Type signifies the count of distinct word forms within the text. If all 100 words differ from each other, the type count is 100. Token, on the other hand, represents the total number of words in the text. Type/Token Ratio (TTR), the proportion of types to tokens within a specific corpus, captures a fundamental aspect of the text, namely, the word variation (Yang & Wei, 2002). The type-token ratio is computed by dividing the type count by the token count, always yielding a value ≤ 1 .

Given the prevalence of functional words such as “the,” “a”, and prepositions like “of” in the target text, these words tend to repeat frequently as the text length increases. While they contribute a substantial number of tokens, the actual variety of these words, or types, might be limited, leading to a situation where the longer the text, the lower the TTR. Consequently, the TTR might not offer a sound measure in such cases.

To mitigate the influence of text length on TTR, Scott introduced the notion of STTR (Standard Type-Token Ratio), which signifies the TTR within a specific word count (Koizumi & In’nami, 2012). In this thesis, the TTR is computed for every 1,000 words, and the resultant TTR values are then averaged. This averaged measure is referred to as the Standardized Type-Token Ratio (STTR), established within the context of 1,000 words. Theoretically, a higher STTR value suggests greater vocabulary diversity within the analyzed text.

In the English version of the book *History of the Yellow River*, the STTR values for culture-specific

expressions and literary expressions are presented in Table 2.

It is evident that the STTR for literary expressions (49.6%) surpasses that of culture-specific expressions (39.12%), signifying a higher lexical density in literary expressions. This discrepancy illustrates that literary expressions exhibit a greater lexical density. Moreover, it suggests that the translation of literary expressions is more intricate than that of culture-specific expressions, particularly at the lexical level.

Table 2. STTR of Culture-Specific Expressions and Literary Expressions

Statistics List						
	File size	Tokens used for word list	Types(distinct words)	Type/token ratio (TTR)	Standardized TTR	
Culture-specific expressions	19989	3940	763	32.21%	39.12%	
literary expressions	9781	2166	714	44.95%	49.60%	

4.3 Translation Techniques in Different Types of CSIs

Using the bilingual version of *A History of the Yellow River* as a case study, the research undertakes the selection and extraction of CSIs from the Chinese-English parallel corpus. For each category of CSIs, an analysis and tally of translation methods are conducted. The specific findings are showcased in Table 3. Based on the tabulated statistical data, it becomes evident that within this work, six distinct translation methods are employed for them. These methods encompass literal translation, free translation, Intracultural Adaptation, omission, Retention, and annotation.

Table 3. Statistics of Translation Strategies for 5 Types of CSIs

Translation Strategy	Ecology	Material	Society	Religion	Language	Total
Literal translation	30	30	120	55	60	295
Free translation	30	15	60	30	24	159
Intracultural Adaptation	0	35	10	25	0	70
Omission	0	10	0	0	10	20
Retention	0	15	0	10	0	25
Annotations	0	0	15	0	0	15
Total	60	105	205	120	94	584

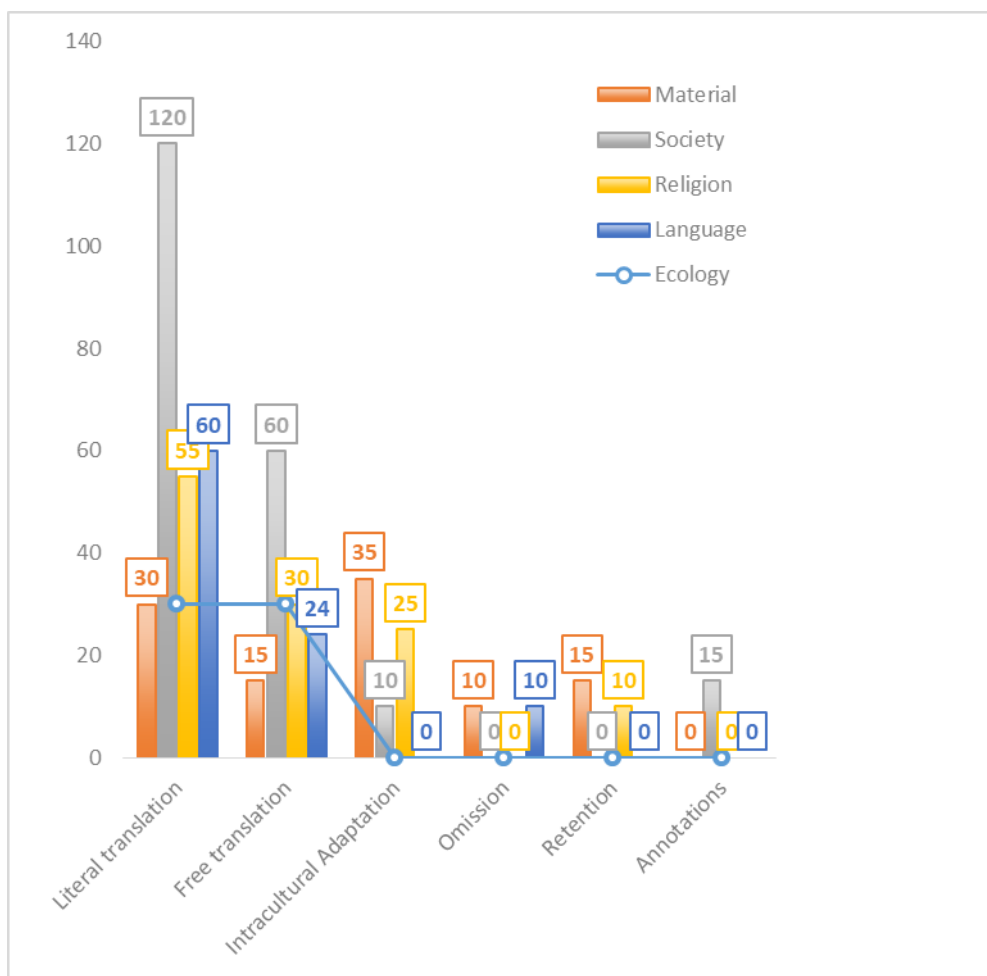


Figure 1. Statistics of Translation Strategies for 5 Categories of CSIs

Furthermore, the search results indicate that in the translation of the five categories of CSIs, translators employed literal translation 295 times, free translation 159 times, intracultural adaptation 70 times, omission translation 20 times, retention 25 times, and retention accompanied by annotation 15 times. From In the translation of CSIs within *History of the Yellow River*, translators extensively utilized the strategy of literal translation, accounting for 50.51% of the total occurrences. Free translation constituted 27.23% of the total, followed by cultural substitution, omission translation, and retention.

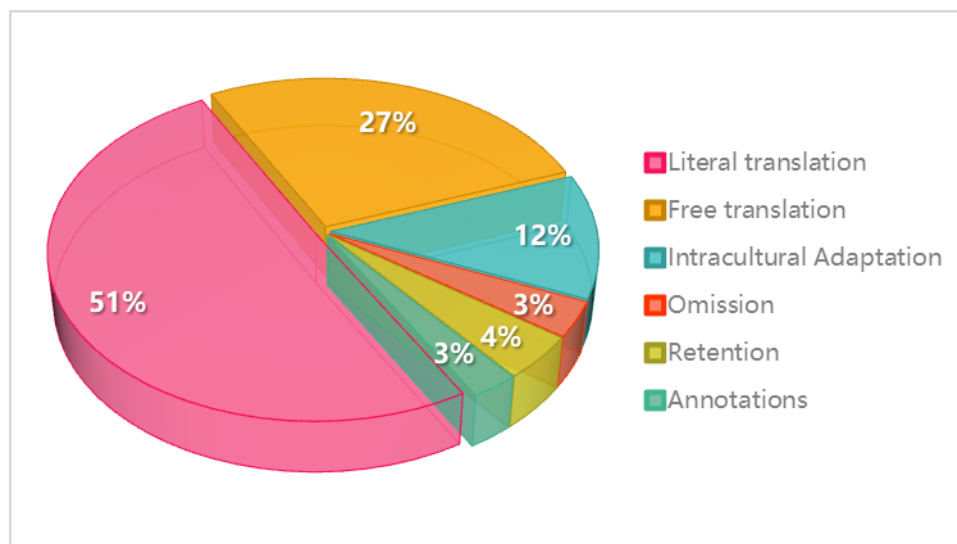


Figure 2. Distribution of Translation Techniques Frequency

4.3.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation is an approach that maintains both the original form and the intended imagery of the source text. For instance, in the material category, “供销社” is rendered as “supply and marketing cooperative”; in the social category, “炎黄子孙” is translated as “descendants of Yandi and Huangdi”; “领主经济” is translated as “landlord economy”; “贵族统治” is rendered as “aristocratic rule”; and in the linguistic category, the culturally laden term “鲤鱼跳龙门” is translated as “carps jump over the Dragon Gate”. Culture-specific Items have, to varying degrees, adopted a strategy of literal translation, extensively preserving the original cultural attributes.

4.3.2 Free Translation

Secondly, in cases where literal translation could lead to difficulties for the intended readers, translators employed the strategy of paraphrasing, totaling 159 instances and spanning ecological, material, social, religious, and linguistic categories, constituting 27% of the total occurrences. Free translation aims to convey the general meaning of the source text without excessive focus on details, while ensuring the translated text flows naturally. For example, in the ecological category, the culturally specific term “山盟海誓” is translated as “solemn pledge of love”; in the material category, “五子祝寿图” is rendered as “longevity scroll”; in the social category, “骑木驴” is translated as “on a criminal’s rack”; in the religious category, “四大金刚” is translated as “his four warrior protectors”; and in the linguistic category, “破罐子破摔” is translated as “act recklessly if you think your own situation is hopeless”.

4.3.3 Intracultural Adaptation

Intracultural adaptation is not very prominently used in my data – 70 cases, around 12% of the total. For culturally specific concepts in the source language that lack direct counterparts in the target language, if a concise alternative expression in the target language can effectively convey the same meaning, the author utilizes imagery from the target language to communicate the intended message.

This technique is known as Intracultural Adaptation. For instance, within the realm of material culture, the CSIs “中国水仙” is translated as “Narcissus tazetta,” In the religious domain, “阴曹地府” is transformed into “bowels of hell,” while “关帝庙” finds its equivalence as “the God of war temple”.

4.3.4 Retention

One plausible interpretation from the translator’s perspective for the connection between “retention” and the “false relationship” factor could be that the translator recognizes the presence of a comparable element in the target culture. Consequently, opting for a “retention” translation approach tends to highlight the divergent aspect between the source and target culture’s items, effectively safeguarding the source culture’s essence. For instance, in the category of ecological CSIs, “塞上江南” is translated as “Saishang-Jiangnan”; “壶口瀑布” is rendered as “Hukou Waterfall”, and in social CSIs, “风水” is translated as “fengshui”.

4.3.5 Omission and Annotations

Overall, omission and annotations are employed with rather restraint in my dataset (about 23 instances, constituting 20% of the overall occurrences respectively). Furthermore, omission encompasses diverse factors, ranging from non-existent terms to culture-specific items imported from other languages. At the same time, annotations is frequently followed by retention. In this study, numerous instances of CSIs from Chinese lack direct equivalents in the corresponding text. Typically, these cases are addressed by utilizing retentions along with annotations, such as “龙门” is translated as longmen (the Dragon Gate).

5. Conclusions

To sum up, amidst China’s cultural “going global” endeavor, the application of a corpus-based research methodology to delve into *History of the Yellow River* specific translation techniques for CSIs can yield illuminating perspectives regarding the translation and propagation of literary creations within China.

Embrace Literal Translation: In light of readers’ heightened interaction with foreign cultures, contemporary audiences not only possess the aptitude to comprehend varied foreign cultural nuances but also exhibit a thirst for deeper insights into foreign cultural symbolism. To preserve the distinctive qualities of the original text and cater to readers acquainted with or swiftly grasping ethnic customs, translators could contemplate the use of literal translation techniques.

Enhance Retention Frequency: When addressing CSIs related to material culture, translators might initially lean towards retention, thereby curtailing the application of intracultural adaptation. This strategy could pique readers’ interest in the source language and gratify their cultural curiosity.

Mitigate Free Translation and Abridgment: Although free Translation and abridgment accommodate target readers, they may not optimally foster the propagation of the authentic culture. By thoughtfully reducing the reliance on these methods, the singular cultural imagery inherent in the original text can be reinstated for readers, gradually facilitating the dissemination of the genuine cultural essence.

On the whole, the exploration of translation strategies in *History of the Yellow River* for CSIs through a corpus-based approach holds potential for unveiling valuable insights pertinent to the translation and diffusion of Chinese literary compositions. This bears particular significance within the broader context of China's initiatives to share its culture with the world.

Funding

This work was supported by the 2023 Annual General Project of Humanities and Social Sciences Research in Henan Province, Project ID: 2023-ZDJH-728.

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