

Original Paper

Domestication and Foreignization of Culture-Loaded Words in
the Subtitle Translation of the Documentary *The Magical
Craftsmanship of Suzhou*

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Received: January 22, 2026
doi:10.22158/eltls.v8n2p159

Accepted: March 25, 2026

Online Published: April 13, 2026

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v8n2p159>

Abstract

*Documentaries are an important medium for recording Chinese culture, and subtitle translation plays a key role in their cross-cultural dissemination. Chinese cultural documentaries often contain culture-loaded words with distinctive national characteristics, for which the target language lacks equivalents, creating translation challenges. Taking the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) documentary *The Magical Craftsmanship of Suzhou* as a case, and from the perspective of domestication and foreignization, this paper analyzes the subtitle translation of four categories of culture-loaded words and finds that ecological and material culture-loaded words predominantly adopt foreignization strategies, preserving traditional cultural imagery and regional characteristics through transliteration or literal translation; by contrast, social and linguistic culture-loaded words more often employ domestication strategies, using free translation or generalization to reduce comprehension difficulty and to accommodate the spatiotemporal constraints of subtitles. The two translation strategies exhibit a complementary relationship in practice. This paper argues that subtitle translation for documentaries should flexibly apply domestication and foreignization according to context, achieving a dynamic balance between preserving cultural information and facilitating audience comprehension, so as to enhance the international communication of Chinese culture.*

Keywords

*Culture-loaded Words, Domestication and Foreignization, Subtitle Translation, *The Magical Craftsmanship of Suzhou**

1. Introduction

With the deepening of globalization, film and television productions have increasingly become

important vehicles for cross-cultural communication. As a key link in audiovisual dissemination, subtitle translation serves as a bridge connecting different cultural contexts and, to a large extent, shapes overseas audiences' understanding of a film's connotations and its cultural implications (Ma & Xie, 2018). Among various audiovisual genres, documentaries—by virtue of their authenticity and factuality—not only fulfill the function of recording reality, but also play an irreplaceable role in constructing a country's image and in the external communication of national culture (Gao & Zhao, 2009).

China's long history and profound cultural heritage mean that documentaries showcasing traditional craftsmanship, local customs, and historical evolution often contain a large number of culture-loaded words with distinctive national characteristics. Such terms not only embody the historical accretions and collective memories of the source culture, but, owing to their high degree of cultural specificity, frequently increase the cognitive burden on overseas audiences. They therefore possess significant theoretical and practical value in translation studies (Zhu, 2021).

The documentary *The Magical Craftsmanship of Suzhou*, co-produced by the Suzhou Broadcasting System and the Suzhou Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection and Management Office, presents Suzhou's traditional intangible cultural heritage and artisanal craftsmanship. It contains numerous culture-loaded words closely related to the local ecological environment, traditional craft systems, and historical folk customs, offering rich cultural connotations and research value. On this basis, taking domestication and foreignization as the theoretical framework, this paper classifies and analyzes the culture-loaded words found in the documentary's subtitles, explores specific translation methods and strategic choices, and summarizes the findings, with a view to informing subtitle translation practice for audiovisual works in the context of Chinese culture "going global."

2. Culture-Loaded Words

Language and culture are inextricably linked: language is both the carrier of culture and a concentrated reflection of a people's modes of activity (Xie, 1999). As an important topic in translation studies, culture-loaded words are "words, phrases, and idioms that denote items unique to a given culture. These lexical items reflect the distinctive modes of activity that a particular people have gradually accumulated over a long historical process, setting them apart from other peoples" (Liao, 2000). Culture-loaded words carry unique cultural information from the source language and often encounter semantic gaps in the target language, creating challenges for cross-cultural translation (Zheng, 2016).

According to Nida's (Nida, 1964) classification, culture can be divided into social culture, material culture, linguistic culture, religious culture, and ecological culture. Based on this, culture-loaded words may be grouped into five categories:

- Eco-cultural loaded words: items involving specific geography and natural climatic conditions, such as toponyms and phenological terms.
- Material-cultural loaded words: material and technological artifacts created in the course of social

development, such as traditional architecture and clothing.

- Socio-cultural loaded words: terms reflecting specific historical customs, social structures, and interpersonal relations, such as proverbs and slang.
- Linguistic-cultural loaded words: expressions rooted in particular language systems and grammatical structures, such as chengyu (four-character idioms) and colloquialisms.
- Religious-cultural loaded words: terms related to specific religious beliefs or philosophical schools, such as myths, legends, and doctrinal concepts.

This study, using *The Magical Craftsmanship of Suzhou* as a case, examines the translation of ecological, material, social, and linguistic culture-loaded words. Given the documentary's focus on the transmission of crafts and artisans' lives, these categories are more representative; religious culture appears less frequently and is therefore not a primary focus.

3. Domestication and Foreignization as Translation Strategies

The concepts of domestication and foreignization can be traced back to Schleiermacher (1992) in *On the Different Methods of Translating*. He proposed that the translator must either “leave the writer in peace as much as possible and move the reader toward him,” or “leave the reader in peace as much as possible and move the writer toward him.” This distinction transcends the traditional literal-versus-free dichotomy focused solely on form and meaning, elevating the discussion to the cultural, poetic, and even political dimensions of translation (Wang, 2002).

Regarding domestication, Venuti (2008) argues that it entails an ethnocentric reduction and assimilation of the foreign text to conform to target-language norms. Accordingly, domestication seeks a clear and straightforward style that minimizes readers' sense of strangeness toward the foreign text and its culture, yielding a smooth and accessible reading experience. More broadly, domestication reduces foreign texts to target-culture values; from the selection of texts and strategies to aesthetic preferences, it consistently emphasizes harmony with target-language conventions. Under the banners of readability and fluency, domestication in effect reinforces target-culture norms (Venuti, 2008).

In contrast, foreignization reflects a different value orientation. Venuti views foreignization as a strategy that foregrounds differences between source and target cultures, exerting an anti-ethnocentric pressure on target-culture values and thereby creating a heterogeneous reading experience. At the technical-linguistic level, by retaining certain exotic elements of the original, it deliberately disrupts habitual target-language linguistic and cultural norms. This approach aids cultural development by absorbing foreign expressive forms to enrich the native language.

Domestication and foreignization are not binary opposites but rather ethical choices made by translators in the process of extending cultural horizons (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022). Generally speaking, the two strategies affect readers differently and can complement each other in practice. Because this study concerns cross-cultural translation, managing differences between the source and target cultures is a key issue. As two fundamental strategies, domestication and foreignization are

widely applied in cross-cultural translation research (Xu & Zhang, 2002). Therefore, this paper adopts this theoretical framework as its analytical basis.

4. Analysis of Subtitle Translation of Culture-Loaded Words

4.1 Eco-cultural Loaded Words

Eco-cultural loaded words are rooted in specific natural environments and reflect a region's distinctive landforms, climate, and biota. Because natural endowments vary from place to place, such terms often have semantic gaps in the target language.

Example 1

Source text: 白露

Translation: White Dew

White Dew is the fifteenth of the Twenty-Four Solar Terms. A Collected Explanation of the *Seventy-two Hou in the Monthly Ordinances* records: "At the festival of the eighth month, autumn corresponds to metal, the color of metal is white; as yin qi (阴气) grows heavier, the dew congeals and appears white." This both indicates the climatic features of early autumn and cooling temperatures, and reveals the natural law by which nighttime vapor condenses into dew as temperatures drop (Wu, 1985). As a significant product of ancient China's agrarian civilization, the Twenty-Four Solar Terms have exerted a profound influence on agricultural production, health concepts, and dietary customs; White Dew is a typical representative. Here, the translator adopts a foreignization strategy, rendering the term literally as "White Dew." Although this may feel unfamiliar to Western viewers unfamiliar with China's solar-term system, it effectively preserves the source text's eco-cultural features and poetic imagery. For a documentary aimed at disseminating Chinese culture, literal translation not only leaves the visual aesthetics intact, but also helps convey China's distinctive temporal cognition and agrarian wisdom into the target cultural context, achieving a sound outcome in cultural transmission.

Example 2

Source text: 水八仙

Translation: the "eight water immortals"

Shui baxian (水八仙) refers to eight aquatic vegetables in Suzhou's traditional food culture—wild rice stem (*Zizania latifolia*), lotus root, water celery (*Oenanthe javanica*), gorgon nut (*Euryale ferox*), arrowhead (*Sagittaria sagittifolia*), water chestnut (*Eleocharis dulcis*), watershield (*Brasenia schreberi*), and water caltrop (*Trapa natans*)—seasonal fare commonly found on Jiangnan tables in autumn (Ye, 2012). The ecological landscape and customs of Jiangnan's watery towns have shaped local eating habits, embodying the traditional Chinese notion of "eating in step with the seasons." In translating this term, the translator likewise employs a foreignization strategy, rendering it literally as "the 'eight water immortals'." This draws on the established English rendering "the Eight Immortals" from the well-known legend "The Eight Immortals Cross the Sea." While showcasing Suzhou's distinctive aquatic food ecology, the literal translation retains the mythic rhetorical coloring and restores the local

attitude of reverence and gratitude toward nature's gifts. At the same time, by leveraging the Eight Immortals—a cultural symbol with a certain degree of recognition among overseas audiences—the translation lowers the threshold for cross-cultural understanding while maintaining cultural difference, aiding comprehension among English viewers and facilitating the transmission of Jiangnan's unique ecological food culture in the target context.

4.2 Material-cultural Loaded Words

Because modes of material production differ between China and the West, material-cultural loaded words often lack corresponding objects and expressions in the target language; such gaps also pose challenges for subtitle translation.

Example 3

Source text: 御窑金砖

Translation: Suzhou Golden brick by royal kiln

Imperial-kiln golden bricks (御窑金砖) were high-quality, fine clay square bricks used exclusively to pave floors in imperial palaces and important buildings in ancient China. In the Yongle reign of the Ming dynasty, Yao Village in Lumu Town of Suzhou Prefecture was granted the title “Imperial Kiln Village (御窑村)” for the superior quality of its bricks and tiles; the square bricks fired there came to be called “imperial-kiln golden bricks.” Owing to their extremely complex manufacturing process, the finished bricks had a lustrous jet-black sheen, a dense and delicate texture, rang with a metallic sound when struck, and were prohibitively expensive—hence the name (Ji, 2012).

The translator primarily employs a foreignization strategy, rendering “Yu Yao (御窑)” literally as “royal kiln” and “Jin Zhuan (金砖)” as “Golden brick.” While faithfully conveying the cultural information, the keywords “royal” and “Golden” accurately communicate the object's status as an imperial material and its craftsmanship, highlighting its special place in China's traditional building system. In addition, the translator adds “Suzhou” at the beginning to specify the place of origin. Because Western audiences generally lack knowledge of the geographic background of traditional Chinese building materials, this addition effectively fills an informational gap in cross-cultural communication and clarifies the close connection between imperial-kiln golden bricks and Suzhou's craft traditions. Overall, the translation preserves the essence of Chinese culture while accommodating target-audience cognition, foregrounding the item's regional attributes and artisanal value and laying a clear cognitive foundation for the cross-cultural transmission of traditional Chinese building techniques.

Example 4

Source text: 花楼织机

Translation: the Hualou loom

The Hualou loom is an important ancient Chinese drawloom and the core machine for weaving silk fabrics such as cloud brocade. It is named for the raised, tower-like middle section of the machine; the “pattern tower” (hualou) serves as the operating platform that supports the pattern-harness system. The pattern operator controls the raising and lowering of warp threads by pulling the lark's-head lines listed

in the pattern book, enabling the weaving of complex motifs (Li & Liu, 2013).

In audiovisual translation, the visuals already present the loom's raised structure, providing an intuitive point of reference for viewers. Given this context, the translator adopts a foreignization strategy combining transliteration and literal translation, rendering "Hualou Zhiji (花楼织机)" as "the Hualou loom." "Hualou" is transliterated to preserve the structure name that embodies China's distinctive drawloom technique, while "loom" is a literal translation that specifies the object's basic category, allowing the subtitle to mutually corroborate the visuals. Transliteration conveys cultural connotations, and literal translation ensures intelligibility. If one were simply to translate it as the more familiar "drawloom," the cognitive threshold might be lowered to some extent, but the Chinese technical paradigm represented by the "Hualou (花楼)" would be lost at the linguistic level. In subtitle translation, the image provides the contextual support necessary for transliteration, enabling foreignization to convey cultural information effectively while also meeting audience comprehension needs.

Example 5

Source text: 《长物志》

Translation: Changwuzhi (Treatise on Superfluous Things)

Changwuzhi, authored by late-Ming scholar Wen Zhenheng, is a classic work on China's traditional garden aesthetics and design. Its core concept "changwu (长物)" derives from *A New Account of Tales of the World*, and literally means "superfluous things," i.e., items not essential for subsistence such as clothing or grain. Scholars generally agree that the term deeply encodes the aesthetic tastes, spiritual pursuits, and class identity of late-Ming literati (Wang, 2015).

In this case, the translator combines domestication and foreignization. First, the book title "Changwuzhi (《长物志》)" is transliterated, a foreignizing move that preserves the original's phonetic form and cultural signifier, signaling to target readers that the work originates in a Chinese cultural context and maintaining the uniqueness and historical reference of the proper name. Retaining the original title in subtitle translation helps avoid conceptual drift that may result from a free translation and facilitates accurate retrieval of the source text. Second, the translator uses an appended note, supplying Clunas's (1991) rendering "Treatise on Superfluous Things" in parentheses, reflecting domestication. Translating "Zhi (志)" as "Treatise" accurately conveys the work's academic nature as a systematic treatise on garden and interior design; rendering "Chang Wu" as "Superfluous Things" remains faithful to the surface meaning of "excess, nonessential," while effectively transmitting, in English, the inner tension of the traditional literati's object aesthetics—namely, that although the items discussed are labeled "superfluous," they serve as vehicles for expressing moral character and a way of life (Li, 2009).

Because film and television subtitles are constrained by time and space, a single-minded application of domestication or foreignization has limitations: pure transliteration can be hard to understand, while full free translation can weaken cultural features. Using transliteration with a brief parenthetical gloss

combines the strengths of both, preserving the cultural proper name while providing a concise explanation that improves comprehension efficiency.

4.3 Socio-cultural Loaded Words

Because forms of social organization, value systems, and ethical orders differ markedly across cultural contexts, socio-cultural loaded words are highly prone to loss or misunderstanding of cultural imagery in cross-cultural transfer, which increases the difficulty of subtitling for film and television.

Example 6

Source text: 文玩市场

Translation: antique & collectable market

The “Wenwan Shichang (文玩市场)” is the main venue for trading “Wenwan (文玩)”, and it is not limited to the narrow sense of antique trading. Rather, it is a market form centered on items such as walnuts and jade that combines functions of collecting, tactile appreciation, and investment. “Wenwan” encompasses not only antique objects but also a culture of handling and appreciating objects, historical accretion, and literati taste—concepts for which the Western context lacks a fully corresponding term (Deng, 2017).

In this case, the translator adopts a domestication strategy, rendering “Wenwan Shichang” as “antique & collectable market.” “Antique” corresponds to “Wenwan” highlighting collection value and historical depth; “collectable” corresponds to “worth collecting,” covering non-antique items such as modern bracelets and walnuts. Used together, the two terms present both the traditional attributes of the Wenwan Shichang and its contemporary consumer orientation. Compared with a literal translation, this solution helps the target audience quickly grasp the core information within the spatiotemporal constraints of subtitles, lowering the threshold for comprehension. “Antique market” is a well-established concept in English-speaking countries. Therefore, translating “Wenwan Shichang (文玩市场)” as “antique & collectable market” leverages a familiar market concept in the target language to help viewers quickly understand its basic attributes, while “collectable” supplements the collecting value of non-antique “Wenwan” items. It makes it easy for overseas audiences to build an initial understanding; “collectable” also compensates for the potential semantic bias of “antique,” which may overemphasize “old,” accurately reflecting the coexistence of antiquities and newly crafted items in the Wenwan Shichang (文玩市场). Through domestication, this rendering constructs an easily intelligible conceptual counterpart in the target language, reduces cultural distance, balances the effectiveness and efficiency of information transmission, and helps provide a broader cognitive foundation for the overseas dissemination of China’s wenwan culture.

Example 7

Source text: 把作大哥

Translation: leader

The appellation “Bazuo Dage (把作大哥)” crystallizes the unique technical authority and interpersonal ethics within traditional Chinese building and craft trades. “Bazuo (把作)” originated as a specific title

for the head of carpenters in traditional major timber construction, referring to the foreman-master who oversees the whole process and holds key techniques—the central figure in traditional timber architecture [22]. The words “Dage (大哥)” are deeply rooted in guild culture and the interpersonal fabric of local communities, embodying not only technical authority but also trust and ethical order, blending jianghu camaraderie with parent-child-like bonds between master and apprentice.

Here, rendering it as “leader” reflects a domestication strategy. The translation dispenses with the Chinese title’s complex interpersonal and social stratum nuances, directly extracting its core leadership function. This enables target-language viewers to quickly grasp the character’s central status within the craft team, avoiding narrative impediments caused by lengthy explanations. More importantly, although concise, “leader” accurately conveys the traditional master craftsman’s irreplaceable technical authority and organizational capacity in the team, allowing overseas audiences to establish a basic understanding of this core role without needing in-depth knowledge of Chinese guild systems and interpersonal ethics. This treatment aligns with target-language usage while reserving a foundation for deeper cultural presentation later on, helping to maintain narrative pace and, in promoting the “going out” of Chinese artisan culture, achieving both effective transmission of the cultural core and communicative efficiency.

4.4 Linguistic-cultural Loaded Words

Linguistic-cultural loaded words are deeply embedded in particular language systems and grammatical structures, typically appearing as idioms, proverbs, and allusions with strong national characteristics. Because Chinese and Western languages differ in structure, rhetoric, and historical roots, such expressions often lack target-language equivalents that match both in form and spirit.

Example 8

Source text: 不时不食

Translation: prefer the seasonal foods

“Bu shi bu shi (不时不食)” is an important dietary concept upheld in ancient Chinese society, aiming to oppose the consumption of foods grown out of season. Historically, this notion not only stems from a reverence-for-heaven worldview of resonance between heaven and humanity, but also reflects considerations of social fairness, economic costs, while embodying a regimen that seeks longevity by conforming to the natural order [23]. It condenses the ancients’ profound understanding of the relationship between natural rhythms and human survival.

In handling this four-character expression that carries ancient philosophy and health culture, the translator adopts a domestication strategy. The phrase employs double negation; if rendered literally, it would make the subtitle verbose and increase the target audience’s cognitive load. The translation therefore breaks free of the source’s literal structure, focuses on its core meaning—choosing foods by season—and uses a free translation, converting the negative expression into a positive one more acceptable to the target audience, “prefer,” thus accurately conveying the pragmatic intent of eating in season. This meaning-focused domestication is notably effective in cross-cultural communication. Although target viewers may not, in a short time, apprehend complex Han-dynasty philosophical

connotations such as resonance between heaven and humanity behind the source term, the translation is idiomatic and satisfies the spatiotemporal constraints of subtitle translation. It successfully bridges gaps between Chinese and Western languages and historical contexts, conveying in a more accessible way the core wisdom of traditional Chinese dietary culture—respect for nature and the pursuit of health—effectively reducing cultural discount and providing strong support for the international dissemination and cross-cultural recognition of China’s exemplary dietary concepts.

Example 9

Source text: 洛阳纸贵

Translation: in great demand

The phrase “Luoyang zhi gui (洛阳纸贵)” comes from the *Book of Jin*. According to the record, Zuo Si spent ten years writing *Rhapsody on the Three Capitals*. After it was completed, people scrambled to read it, and noble households in the capital Luoyang vied to copy it, causing paper to fall short of demand and prices to soar (Fang , 1974). The phrase’s original meaning is to depict a social phenomenon in which a certain text or cultural product spreads widely in a short time and demand rises sharply.

In this case, the source text does not elaborate on the historical allusion but adapts it to express that something is extremely popular and in high demand, describing the heyday of Song brocade. This use of allusion both enhances concision and elegance and accords with the Chinese habit of using simplicity to master complexity. The translator therefore chooses a domestication strategy, rendering it directly as “in great demand.” This translation discards the place-name imagery and historical background of the original and instead focuses on the core metaphorical meaning carried in the source context—extremely high demand and popularity. Functionally, “in great demand” is a fixed collocation in English used to describe something highly sought-after and in short supply, closely matching the pragmatic function of “Luoyang zhi gui (洛阳纸贵)” in contemporary contexts. In subtitling, this solution is highly efficient: on the one hand, it avoids taking up screen time and subtitle space with background explanations of the allusion, keeping the subtitle’s pace synchronized with the shot changes; on the other, it realizes fast and accurate information transfer, enabling target-language audiences to receive the core message without additional cognitive burden.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of domestication and foreignization, this paper analyzes the subtitle translation of four categories of culture-loaded words in the documentary *The Magical Craftsmanship of Suzhou*. The results show that, in translating terms related to ecological culture and material culture, the translator predominantly adopts foreignization strategies, preserving China-specific expressions through literal translation or transliteration to present the culture in its original form and enhance the documentary’s role in showcasing culture. By contrast, for culture-loaded words pertaining to social culture and language culture, domestication strategies are used more frequently, employing free translation or

generalized paraphrase to lower comprehension difficulty and ensure efficient information transfer within the limited spatiotemporal constraints of subtitles. The differentiated use of these two strategies reflects the translator's dynamic trade-off between cultural preservation and audience reception.

The translation of culture-loaded words is not merely a linguistic conversion but a process of cultural interpretation. In documentary subtitle translation, translators need to consider the spatiotemporal constraints of subtitles alongside the characteristics of multimodal information transmission, flexibly deploying domestication and foreignization strategies and making choices based on context, cultural salience, and audience cognition, so as to achieve a balance between cultural expression and comprehension efficiency.

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