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## TRANSLATING CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN *EMPRESSES IN THE PALACE*: A RECEPTION AESTHETICS APPROACH

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### Abstract

This paper explores the translation of culture-loaded words in Chinese film and TV productions, using the TV drama “Empresses in the Palace” as a case study. Despite their critical role in conveying Chinese culture to Western audiences, these terms have received limited scholarly attention. Applying reception aesthetics, this study analyzes the translator's strategies in handling these words, aiming to bridge the cultural gap for the audience. The analysis reveals the use of foreignization and domestication, alongside transliteration, literal translation, free translation, substitution, and omission. These methods are examined in light of their effectiveness in meeting and expanding the audience's horizon of expectations and facilitating a fusion of horizons between the translated text and the viewers. The findings highlight the translator's role in not only making the source culture comprehensible but also promoting its global dissemination. This research contributes to the understanding of subtitle translation in cross-cultural contexts and underscores the importance of strategic translation choices in cultural exchange.

**Key words:** Reception aesthetics; Culture-loaded words; *Empresses in the Palace*.

### 1. Introduction

An increasing number of outstanding Chinese film and TV programs have been disseminated abroad, serving as windows for foreign audiences to perceive and learn about Chinese culture. As a versatile art form, film and TV programs have gradually become an effective way to publicize Chinese culture. Released in 2011, the TV series *Empresses in the Palace* received rave reviews for its full-bodied characters, elaborate lines and rich

cultural connotations. Subsequently, Netflix, the American streaming platform, introduced the drama and distributed it online, making it the first Chinese TV drama to be aired on US mainstream TV stations. The American version of *Empresses in the Palace* was translated by an American team and dubbed by native Chinese Americans. As an imperial court drama in the Qing dynasty, the dialogue of *Empresses in the Palace* is laden with culturally significant terms, encapsulating profound Chinese cultural information and playing a vital role in

disseminating Chinese culture. The exact translation of these culture-loaded words into English is also a tangible manifestation of the “Chinese cultures going global” policy.

However, due to differences in cultural backgrounds, culture-loaded words pose a significant challenge for target language audiences in understanding Chinese culture, particularly in the realm of translation activities. Irrespective of the genre of film or TV program, audiences represent the primary recipients of the source culture. The key to disseminate movies and TV dramas with Chinese traditional culture overseas is to bridge the cultural gap and translate these unique terms in a manner accessible to audiences, which also puts forward a higher level of requirements for subtitle translation of movies and TV dramas.

Previous research on subtitle translation predominantly centered on 'author-focused' or 'text-focused' approaches, often overlooking reader responses. The reception aesthetics emphasizes the centrality of the readers and advocates the readers' participation and creativity in the meaning construction. This theory provides a new perspective for translating culture-loaded words. According to this theory, the translator should deal with cultural conflicts and clashes with flexible translation strategies considering the receptivity of target readers.

Therefore, grounded in reception aesthetics and taking culture-loaded words in “Empress in the Palace” as objects, this paper, in conjunction with the characteristics of film subtitles, delves into the translator's choice of translation strategies and translation methods when translating culture-loaded words to address audience expectations and achieve a fusion of horizons..

## **2. Core Principles and Applications of Reception Aesthetics in Subtitle Translation**

### **2.1 The Overview of Reception Aesthetics**

In 1960s, there was a great debate on relations between literature and society, between literature and reality and between the functions of literature and its social effect in the Federal Germany. Amid this background, reception

aesthetics was born at University of Konstanz. As an important school of reception theory, it is a literary research theory with its focus on the reception of literary works by readers. It changes the research focus of literary translation from author and works to readers (Holub, 1984). Founded by five literary theorists and professors at the University of Konstanz, it was also called the “Konstanzer Schule” and its two leading founders are Hans Robert Jaus and Wolfgang Iser. Reception aesthetics, emphasizing reader response, distinctively diverges from traditional literary criticism (Newton, 1997).

Reception aesthetics has many origins, the most important of which is phenomenology and hermeneutics. Reception aesthetics can be seen as an expansion of phenomenology and hermeneutics. There are inextricable links between reception aesthetics and hermeneutics. Reception aesthetics, seen by some as a subset of hermeneutics, shares the objective of interpreting textual meaning. For one thing, Jaus's most important concepts, "Horizon of expectation" and "Fusion of expectation," are directly inherited from hermeneutics. For another, Iser's theory is inspired by theorist of phenomenological aesthetics and Ingarden's interpretation of art. The concepts in Jaus's theory, such as "indeterminacy" and "response-inviting structure," directly derive from Ingarden.

The key of reception aesthetics is to investigate the role of readers in literary activities and literary history, making readers receive considerable critical attention. In the relationship triangle between reader, work and author, reader becomes a decisive factor in the perspective of reception aesthetics, because the meaning of work is generated in the reading activities. The embrace of reception aesthetics has effectively dismantled conventional perspectives advanced by structuralism and formalism that the meaning of a literary work lies in the text itself. This paradigm shift has, in turn, facilitated novel trajectories and possibilities within the realms of aesthetic and literary exploration. Consequently, it has paved the way for the emergence of fresh perspectives and domains in the discourse of art and literature. As time goes by, reception aesthetics also has gradually

cross-fertilized with other disciplines. And due to its openness, it is also seamlessly integrated with other research methods and consistently shapes literary theory.

## 2.2 Horizon of Expectation

Inherited by Jauss from hermeneutics by Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the crucial concept in reception aesthetics is horizon of expectation, explaining the generation of meaning in reading. Horizon of expectation refers to “the thinking orientation or a prior structure formed by readers’ pre-experience” (Jauss, 1982). As readers delve into a literary work, they draw upon their familiarity with literary genres, themes, forms, and language, immersing themselves in a specific context, so as to give rise to expectations, known as readers’ horizon of expectation. Due to individual variations in life experiences, literacy, and ability of appreciation, readers naturally possess diverse horizons of expectation. It encompasses readers’ potential aesthetic anticipations during the reading process, which affects their understanding of a work. Only works that align with readers’ horizons of expectation can captivate them and stimulate their reading interest. A successful work must meet readers’ horizons of expectation, leading them into specific context and arousing various reading expectations.

The acceptance of a work by readers occurs when their horizons of expectation harmonize with the work. Additionally, readers’ horizons of expectation are dynamic: they may grow weary of familiar content and consciously seeking novelty, which embodies innovative expectations. As a result, embracing readers’ horizon of expectation doesn't imply unquestioning accommodation. Instead, on one hand, horizons of expectation habitually prescribe readers’ aesthetic preferences and orientations. On the other hand, they continually disrupt readers’ habitual horizon, guiding them to adjust their expectation with an open-minded attitude to embrace elements that differ or even contradict their existing ones. Zhu Liyuan (2004) introduced in his book that changes in expectation horizons enable readers to grasp a work’s deeper meanings and broadening these

horizons facilitates a fuller understanding of the text.

## 2.3 Response-inviting Structure

Iser focuses on the structure of the text. Based on Ingarden’s “indeterminacy” of literature, Iser(1972) proposed his notion of “responsive-inviting structure”. The “responsive-inviting structure” refers to the indeterminacy caused by the blank and negation of the work of art. It presented as an open structure that calls the recipient to participate actively at any time and to receive it in a re-creative way through imagination.

Iser holds that there are many “blanks” and “indeterminacies” in the text. The so-called “text blank” refers to what the author implies or prompts the reader through the written part of the text, which is not written or clearly written, the implied meaning. Existing between plots, figures, and even between images, these blanks and indeterminacies become signs of differentiating one text from others. Moreover, according to Iser, the blank and indeterminacies also trigger the readers’ imagination and creation to give new meaning and explanation to these blanks so that the reading enthusiasm can be aroused. Moreover, such a process gives the readers certain rights to participate in completing and shaping the works and transform reading from a passive acceptance to an active creation. However, the reader’s imagination does not come out of thin air, and the literary text also imposes some implied restrictions on the blank, so the text or the author can guide or limit the reader’s imagination to get closer to the author’s intention. The guiding role of the text and the dynamic role of the reader are indispensable.

Iser holds that there is “negation” in the reading process. Readers are bound by particular horizons at the beginning of reading a text. However, literary works can disrupt readers’ internal expectations by challenging or attacking societal norms present in the social reality. Initially confined by old social norms, readers’ views may dissipate after engaging with literary works, giving rise to new aesthetic expectations. Throughout the reading process, readers continually “encounter” the text. During this process, they will generate a specific

understanding of the text through imaginative filling and creative connections. This dynamic interaction leads to the realization of meaning within literary works.

#### **2.4 Implication of Reception Aesthetics for Translation**

As stated in Zhu Jianping (2002), integrating hermeneutics and reception aesthetics into translation studies can lead to the establishment of translation reception aesthetics. Although reception aesthetics is a theory primarily proposed in literature research, it intimately tied to the realms of translation studies. Both reception aesthetics and translation share a common focal point—the reader. Reception aesthetics accentuates the role of reader in shaping the meaning and impact of works, offering a novel perspective for translation studies.

Reception aesthetics elevates the reader's status to an unprecedented level, emphasizing the significance of the target audience's cultural background, preferences, and expectations. When applied to the translation of culture-loaded words in subtitles, translators must be aware of cultural nuances and sensitivities of audiences to the two cultures. Generally, target language audiences seek familiarity in the translation, so as to get closer to the target text and get aesthetic experience. Therefore, when translating culture-loaded words, translators must thoroughly consider the audience's horizon of expectations, ensuring the readability and acceptability of the translation to satisfy their directional expectations. The translation should not only preserve aesthetic integrity but also cater to the novel expectations of the target audience, inspiring them to assimilate new ideas and content. Reception aesthetics highlight the fluidity of audience interpretation, influenced by distinct historical, cultural, and personal contexts. Therefore, translators must employ adaptable strategies, considering varying audience interpretations, aiming for broad acceptance of their translations.

Moreover, reception aesthetics posits that texts contain a response-inviting structure, which also expresses textual artistry. It invites the readers to fill in or concretize the blank and indeterminacy in

the text. Blank spaces and uncertainty in literary texts are prerequisites for the interaction between readers and translations. They prompt readers to explore the meaning of the text and endow readers with the power to participate in constructing meaning (Iser, 1978). Most culture-loaded words in subtitles of films and TV shows are often blank for most target audiences.

Therefore, translators can appropriately retain or even create blanks from the source text to establish a response-inviting structure, allowing target readers to use their imagination and creativity to explore the deeper meanings of the text. By doing so, the viewing experience was transformed into an interactive learning process, which helped the audience better understand the cultural content behind certain words. However, considering the profoundness of Chinese culture, some culture-loaded words may show varied interpretations. Considering the audience's limited cultural background, translators can also concretize response-inviting structure in the translation to reduce ambiguity or misinterpretation.

### **3. Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *Empresses in the Palace***

#### **3.1 Factors affecting the translation of Culture-loaded Words in *Empresses in the Palace***

The translation of culture-loaded words in Chinese TV dramas into English poses unique challenges, significantly influenced by a myriad of factors. At the forefront of these challenges are the inherent differences in language and culture between Chinese and English. These disparities often extend beyond mere linguistic translation, delving into the realm of cultural nuances and connotations. Additionally, the characteristics and constraints of subtitle translation add another layer of complexity to this task. Subtitle translation is not merely a linguistic exercise but also an art of balancing accuracy with brevity, requiring translators to convey the essence of the original dialogue within the limited space and time constraints inherent in subtitling. The following section will explore these intricate factors, examining how they impact the translation process and the strategies employed to ensure that the

cultural richness and linguistic intricacies of Chinese TV dramas are effectively communicated to English-speaking audiences.

### 3.1.1 Differences in language and culture

Language and culture are intertwined with each other. The difference in language is the most crucial and basic factor that affects the translation of culture-loaded words in subtitles. Chinese belongs to different language families with English, thus the translator may encounter challenges in linguistic and semantic aspects. In Chinese, culture-loaded words are often expressed through rhetoric and duplicated words, idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and wordplay specific to a particular culture. In contrast, in English, there is a preference for concise, clear, and logical expression.. It is very difficult, even impossible, to perfectly translate Chinese four-character idioms in *Empresses in Palace* into English without destroying their original structure, such as 借花献佛, 雕虫小技, 东施效颦, 事后诸葛 and 闭门思过。

Cultural constraints, sometimes referred to as culture-specific expression, represent the most critical issues that hinder translators in the subtitling process. Some words, idioms, and cultural references may not be translated directly and must be translated or interpreted appropriately(Horbacauskiene and Kasperè, 2016). Cultural translation presents a unique set of challenges due to the inherent complexity and subjectivity of culture. Cultural-bound expressions possess deep-seated psychological commonalities and ethnic cultural characteristics, making their translation transformation challenging. When translating cultural images, translators must navigate these complexities and make decisions that accurately convey the intended meaning while ensuring cultural sensitivity and understanding.

### 3.1.2 Characteristics and Constraints of subtitle translation

People often refer to subtitles as interlingual subtitles, which are the overlay of the translated text in the target language, while preserving the original audio of films or shows. The characteristics of subtitle translation inherently impose certain

limitations on its translation. The first limitation is the constraint of space. Subtitles have a limited time frame, typically ranging from 2 to 7 seconds, allowing the viewer very little time to process the information. This can result in compression and simplification of the content. The number of lines on one screen is another issue, and translated subtitles generally occupy "a maximum of two lines" (Gottlieb, 2012) containing no more than "forty English letters and spaces" (Luyken et al., 1991) or "thirteen Chinese characters"(Qin, 1997). Except for the limitations of time and space, Díaz Cintas and Remael(2007) also discussed the limitations in terms of translation and the conversion from spoken to written language. He pointed out that when converting spoken language to written language, there is a risk of losing the tone, intonation, and expressions present in the original language. Scholars not only focus on the textual expression of subtitles in a single symbol of language but recognize that audiovisual works are dynamic multimodal texts composed of various symbol resources such as sound, images, and text systems. In a typical multimodal discourse, the single discourse mode is insufficient to convey its meaning fully; additional ones are needed to complement each other for meaning transmission (Zhang, 2009). Different from pure text, subtitle translation achieves the holistic construction of discourse meaning combined with various symbol resources of language, visuals, and auditory elements. The modalities in films and TV series complement each other, through which the audience's understanding of one modality can be supplemented by another.

### 3.2 Application of reception aesthetics in translation of Culture-loaded Words in *Empresses in the Palace*

#### 3.2.1 Meeting and broadening audiences' horizons of expectation

Being widely accessible to the general public, film and TV productions attract target audiences to understand Chinese culture and satisfy their aesthetic preferences. The art of translating culture-loaded words in subtitles reflects a profound cultural background, significantly influencing viewers' understanding and acceptance of Chinese

culture in the film or TV series. Following the principles of reception aesthetics, readers integrate their previous aesthetics, experiences, ideals, and literacy into their reading, immersing themselves in a specific emotional state and generating reading expectations (Ren, 2002). When a work aligns with the expectations of its target audience, readers find satisfaction. The goal of translating culture-loaded words largely depends on the level of acceptance and understanding by the target language audience. Hence, translators should reinterpret the culture-loaded words with full consideration of the expression habits of the target language, conduct mode, and audiences' aesthetic preferences so as to reduce the aesthetic distance and cater to the target language audience's oriented horizon of expectations. By doing so, the audiences easily understand and accept the culture-loaded words in the subtitles.

However, the acceptance effect will not work if the aesthetic distance is reduced to zero. It implies that if the translation completely satisfies the target language audience's horizon of expectations, the audience will not accept the translation, thus failing to evoke any response. In other words, audiences are not content with familiar knowledge; they are willing to embrace new, different things stemming from the desire for innovative expectations. Therefore, translators should not unquestioningly cater to and conform to the target language audiences' existing horizon of expectations. Instead, they should break the audiences' pre-existing expectations and appropriately broaden their horizon of expectations to stimulate their reading interest. This demands that the translator retains cultural information from the source text as much as possible, fostering an innovative perspective among the audience to enable them to acquire new knowledge and gain fresh aesthetic experiences. Moreover, readers' horizons are not static. Their knowledge, historical backgrounds, and aesthetic experiences change over time.

Example 1:

ST: 为保江山万年

TT: to secure the throne

In Chinese, "江山" is a collective word which refers to the rivers and mountains. In ancient times, it often referred to territory and imperial authority. If translated literally, that is "to secure the rivers and mountains". As for the target readers, rivers and mountains occur abruptly and awkwardly. In the Western perspective, the rivers and mountains are nothing but natural landscapes. Therefore, the target reader will not have the same feeling or concept as the reader of the source text. The target reader cannot establish the relationship between royalty and rivers and mountains because there is no connection in his cognition before. And the readability and comprehensibility are reduced. However, in translating the subtitles, the translator uses the substitution. He uses the "throne" instead of "rivers and mountains". "Throne" is a more familiar image to the West and often refers to royal power or a dominant realm. In this way, the translator caters to the target readers' horizons of expectation and adapts to their cognitive level. As a result, the meaning that the emperor harbored ambitions for his reign to persist eternally and that others could not plunder it at will could be conveyed to the target readers. Additionally, "dominion" and "realm," sharing similar meanings, can substitute for "throne."

### 3.2.2 Reconstructing audiences' response-inviting structure

The response-inviting structure includes the indeterminacy created by the blanks and negations of a work of art. It manifests itself as an open structure, which requires the recipients to be able to actively participate at all times, pushing the reader to undertake the construction of the work's meaning and to receive the text in the form of imaginative re-creation.

Guided by reception aesthetics, the indeterminacy and gaps within the source text form its response-inviting structure. Due to the distinctive cultural context, the essential meanings of many culture-loaded words often appear as blanks to the target language audience, and their nuanced implications are even more challenging to comprehend. Some words carry multiple layers of meaning, making it difficult for the target language

audience to discern. This semantic gap gives rise to the response-inviting structure, prompting audiences to fill in these semantic blanks and delve into Chinese culture actively.

As a result, translators need to analyze the fundamental and underlying meanings of the source text. Sometimes, they must concretize some of the blanks in the original text, revealing the implicit meanings behind these words to readers, which helps avoid misunderstandings, eliminates reading obstacles, and enables a better grasp of the source text.

Example 2:

TT: 曲有误，周郎顾。王爷耳力，堪比周公瑾。

ST: The smallest mistake a musician made, Zhou Yu would notice. You have a good ear for music, comparable to Zhou Yu.

The sentence “曲有误，周郎顾。” is a unique Chinese allusion to a special culture which is beyond the Western audience’s horizon of expectation. “周郎” is a general in the period of Three Kingdoms. He is not only talented in using strategies but also good at music. He can also notice any slight mistake in the performance of music. It is a conversation between Zhen Huan and Emperor Yong Zheng. Zhen used this allusion to compliment Emperor Yong Zheng for his mastery of music. Such a sentence derived from historical allusion is blank for the target audience, so it can form a response-inviting structure that invites the audience to explore its meaning. There, the translator does not explain too much about who Zhou Yu is but illustrates his musical proficiency which aligns with that of Emperor Yong Zheng. Explaining too much may create troubles in understanding the text, so the translator concretized the allusion in the translation process, which is helpful for the audience to know the talent of Emperor Yong Zheng and lay the foundation for the development of their relationship. Allusion and literary quotation can create a response-inviting structure that will increase the audience’s enthusiasm to explore Chinese culture. By exploring, the audience may discover the rich meaning of these allusions or literary quotations. Sometimes, the

meaning of allusions is not determined but depends on context. And by concretizing the allusion, the audiences’ misunderstanding can be reduced.

#### **4. Translation Strategies and Methods Used in Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *Empresses in the Palace***

Domestication and foreignization, proposed by Venuti (1995), are two strategies commonly employed in subtitle translation. To accommodate the linguistic features of the source language, foreignization deliberately breaks the conventions of the target language to preserve and reflect the cultural characteristics and language style of the source text, conveying the elements of the original text to the target audience. In contrast, generally, domestication requires the natural and accurate use of vocabulary. It aims to represent foreign works with expressions familiar to the target audience to convey the source text so as to reduce their sense of unfamiliarity with the source text. In translating culture-loaded words in the subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace*, the translator employs both domestication and foreignization, utilizing various translation methods such as transliteration, literal translation, free translation, substitution, and omission. The first two methods are categorized as foreignization, whereas the latter three are considered domestication. These approaches ensure that the cultural and linguistic elements are appropriately conveyed to the English-speaking audience while maintaining fidelity to the original text.

##### **4.1 Foreignization**

###### **4.1.1 Transliteration**

Names of individuals, locations, and expressions carrying special cultural significance are often rendered through transliteration. These terms constitute exclusive vocabulary from the source culture, posing challenges in finding equivalents in the target language. Transliteration refers to translating the words according to the pronunciation of terms in the source text, which stands out as an ideal choice for preserving the exotic charm of culture-loaded terms. It is conducive to facilitating the transmission of Chinese culture and expanding

the horizons of the target audience. However, employing complete transliteration for such terms may lead to audience confusion. Considering the aesthetic preferences and experiences of the audience, the translator adopts a nuanced approach by combining transliteration with literal translation, as well as transliteration with free translation. Such methods not only retain the exotic nature of the words but also impart an understanding of the underlying cultural significance to the audience. Consequently, it bridges the aesthetic gap between the original text and the audience, achieving a harmonious fusion of perspectives.

Example 3:TT: 七夕

ST: Qixi festival

"七夕" is a traditional Chinese folk festival, but for foreign viewers, it is entirely unfamiliar. Providing a full explanation would go against the conciseness and instantaneity of subtitle translation. Therefore, considering the characteristics of subtitle translation, the translator opts for a transliteration plus to render this traditional festival. Most importantly, the translator supplements the term "七夕" with the additional information "节日" (festival). This expansion helps viewers understand that "Qixi" is the name of a festival. By doing so, it preserves the cultural information from the original text while reducing audience confusion and even broadening their perspective, facilitating cultural exchange between East and West.

#### 4.1.2 Literal translation

While Chinese and Western cultures exhibit notable disparities, there are also significant points of convergence. For instance, the symbolism of beauty attributed to flowers is a shared cultural motif in both Chinese and English culture. Therefore, in the translation of culture-loaded terms that resonate with the sensibilities and comprehension of the target audience, the translator leans towards a strategy of literal translation. This decision is guided by considering the audience's aesthetic experiences and receptivity, with the ultimate goal of aligning the translated content with the target audience's expectations, thereby elevating the overall acceptability of the translated material.

Examples include 貌美如花, meaning "as pretty as a flower", and 胆小如鼠, meaning "as timid as a mouse". Concurrently, for relatively uncomplicated material culture-loaded words, such as those about attire, implements, and architectural elements, which are readily perceptible to viewers through visual cues, the translator predominantly employs a strategy of literal translation. This approach is geared towards meeting the audience's preconceptions of Chinese culture. Notwithstanding the unique nature of certain materials exclusive to China, literal translation facilitates enhanced audience comprehension of the original text. This not only contributes to the transmission of cultural subtleties but also preserves the intrinsic authenticity of the source material.

Furthermore, Chinese culture, renowned for its depth and breadth, encompasses culture-loaded words that inherently harbor intricate response-inviting structure, inviting viewers to actively delve into their implicit meaning. In the translation of distinctive ecological and material culture-loaded words exclusive to Chinese cultural contexts, the translator tends towards literal translation. However, a judicious restraint is exercised in avoiding excessive explication of the underlying meanings, deliberately preserving a degree of ambiguity. This method cultivates a space for audience engagement, fostering an environment where viewers are encouraged to autonomously explore and comprehend the nuances of Chinese culture.

Example 4:ST: 现在内务府的人呢, 正忙着为安贵人缝制蜀锦新衣呢。

TT : The imperial Household Department is busy making dresses with Sichuan brocade for Lady An.

Si Chuan province is briefly named "蜀" and "蜀锦" is a unique colorful silk brocade produced in Si Chuan province. It has a history of two thousand years. If the target readers do not know "蜀" is a short name of Si Chuan province, understanding this sentence will be a barrier. That is to say, the term does not exist in the reader's previous horizon of expectation. Besides, "蜀" has a profound meaning, which is difficult to explain to the audience in the limited

subtitle. However, the reader may know that Si Chuan is one of the provinces of China. Therefore, by translating “蜀锦” into “Sichuan brocade”, the Western audience may conceive that Si Chuan is famous for its special colorful brocade. This will enable them to gain deeper insights into Sichuan and enhance their understanding of Chinese culture, thereby broadening their horizons.

## 4.2 Domestication

### 4.2.1 Free translation

Free translation finds its primary application in scenarios characterized by profound cultural disparities between the source and target languages. Within the subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace*, allusions, Chinese four-character idioms, and colloquial expressions are prevalent, posing considerable challenges for Chinese viewers unacquainted with their connotations, let alone foreign audiences. Adopting a direct translation approach would inevitably result in audience bewilderment, particularly when contending with cultural references that lack universal understanding. Although adding annotations to explain cultural nuances is crucial for improving audience understanding, this approach often leads to unwieldy verbosity. Such wordiness contradicts the need for concise and immediate subtitles. Consequently, in translating such kind of culture-loaded words, translators often resort to free translation or a hybrid approach involving both literal and free translation. This strategic choice serves to not only diminish the aesthetic gap but also facilitates a more profound understanding of the storyline among the audience. Furthermore, in the case of some words embodying multiple meanings, the translator, equipped with a comprehensive understanding of both the plot and the nuanced connotations, opts for free translation. This method elucidates the implied meaning of these words, thereby concretizing the “response-inviting structure” embedded in the original text, which is conducive to minimizing the risk of misinterpretation and eradicating comprehension barriers for the audience.

Example 5:ST: 天下有多少女子希望自己入选，好一家子鸡犬升天。

TT: Every girl wished to be selected, so that her whole family could rise up through her success.

“鸡犬升天” is a typical four-character idiom, originating from the legend of Liu An, the king of Huannan state during the reign of Emperor Hanwu emperor. After drinking a special elixir and becoming immortal, he spilt the elixir in his yard. His chickens and dogs had these elixirs and then flew up to heaven and became immortals. Therefore, this four-character idiom is often used to describe the phenomenon that if one gains marvelous success, people around him also gain some advantages from his success. When referring to people, chicken is a pejorative term in Western culture. If the four-character idiom is translated directly, it is easy to cause cultural conflicts and misinterpret the original text. The translator chooses to explain the implied meaning to the target audience. This scene occurred in the first episode. Zhen Huan wished she could not be selected in the imperial audition, while others desired to be selected. From his explanation, the target audience can understand that being selected is one of success, and the entire family may benefit from this, which is in accordance with the connotative meaning of the source text. Hence, the audience’s original horizon of expectation is met. And it also triggers the audience’s curiosity. They want to know why Zhen Huan is not willing to be selected if it is beneficial.

### 4.2.2 Substitution

Substitution is employed to replace the culture-loaded words in the source language with alternative expressions, particularly in instances where significant content and formal gaps exist between Chinese and Western cultural contexts. Many Chinese terms necessitate a comprehensive transformation to align with English cultural equivalents. In this regard, the translator strategically selects expressions familiar to the target audience to replace the unfamiliar words, addressing potential gaps in understanding Chinese culture and resolving any cultural conflicts that may arise with the target language. This deliberate choice

aims to fulfill the expectations of the target audience and enhance overall comprehension of the plot so as to facilitate a harmonious alignment of aesthetic experiences between the target and source language audiences and achieve fusion of expectations.

For instance, the translation of the Chinese expression "螳螂捕蝉，黄雀在后" (when the shepherds quarrel, the wolf has a winning hand) exemplifies this approach. The imagery of "螳螂" (praying mantis), "蝉" (cicada), and "黄雀" (yellow bird) resonates with Chinese audiences, thus conveying the intended meaning efficiently. Conversely, they are blanks to the English-speaking audience. The translator might employ substitution, replacing these images with more familiar English counterparts such as "sheep" and "wolf". This approach not only bridges the aesthetic distance but also facilitates a more immersive and accessible aesthetic experience for the target audience. Similar considerations are applied to expressions like "树倒猢猻散" (even rats will abandon a sinking ship), "兔子急了也会咬人" (a baited cat grows as fierce as a lion), and "良禽择佳木而栖" (to choose a better master). In each instance, substitution serves the purpose of aligning with the target audience's familiarity, thereby contributing to a seamless integration of the translated content with their cultural expectations.

Additionally, owing to the divergence in religious affiliations between Eastern and Western cultures, where Buddhism is predominant in China and Christianity in the West, terms such as "神" (deity) or "仙" (immortal) find approximate equivalents in English as "God."

To ensure audience receptivity, the translator frequently employs substitution to translate certain religious culture-loaded words. This is to elicit analogous reactions from the target audience as those experienced by the source language audience, as is shown in the following examples, 胎神 (tutelary god); 和合二仙 (the Gods of Harmony); 老天爷 (the heaven); 天子 (Son of

Heaven); 奏折 (memorandum); 王府 (the Duke's residence).

#### 4.2.3 Omission

Omission in translation means to delete words that diverge from the cognitive and expressive norms of the target language. Instances may arise where certain words carry positive connotations in the source language but convey negative implications in the target language, potentially giving rise to cultural conflicts if not tactfully managed. An illustrative example is the color red, which symbolizes joy and auspiciousness in Eastern cultures, contrasting with its Western association with bloodshed and violence. In the translation of culture-loaded words in *Empresses in the Palace*, characterized by imperatives of conciseness and temporal constraints, the omission is often employed for words deemed both inconsequential and challenging to explicate. These selected words typically fall short of meeting the aesthetic expectations of the target audience, and their omission does not compromise the overall semantic integrity of the sentence, while literal translation may lead to misinterpretations. Therefore, omitting such words will be in accord with the communicative and cognitive proclivities of the target language audience.

Example 6:ST: 照顾好梅姐姐

TT: Please take care of Mei

Example 7:ST: 实初哥哥；嬛妹妹

TT: Shichu; Huan

In Western cultural norms, the appellations "姐姐" (older sister) and "哥哥" (older brother) traditionally designate familial relationships, specifically addressing sisters and brothers with a shared blood connection. In Chinese culture, however, these terms extend beyond kinship, encompassing women and men of similar age, evoking sentiments of intimacy. Within the TV drama *Empresses in the Palace*, concubines within the imperial court often reciprocally call each other "姐妹" (sisters) despite the absence of a close kinship. It is a recurrent practice for concubines to preface their

conversations with the term “姐妹” (sisters) as an expression of address. It is crucial to recognize that the conceptualization of sisterhood or brotherhood in this context transcends biological relationships, serving instead as a marker for distinguishing age and expressing reverence. A literal translation of “姐妹” (sisters) or “兄弟” (brothers) could potentially engender misinterpretations among the target audience, blurring interpersonal relationships between characters. Consequently, translators frequently omit these terms, strategically mitigating the potential for misunderstanding and thereby reducing the aesthetic distance for the target audience. This deliberate choice contributes to a more accurate portrayal of the narrative dynamics while facilitating target audiences’ comprehension of the plot.

## 5. Conclusion

Reception aesthetics attach importance to the long-neglected position of the reader and accentuate the reader’s participation and creativity in the textual meaning construction, which introduces a novel perspective into the realm of subtitle translation. Anchored in the tenets of reception aesthetics, this paper undertakes a meticulous examination of the English translation of culture-loaded words in *Empresses in the Palace*.

As a drama set in the Qing Dynasty, the subtitles of this series encompass numerous terms that bear the essence of Chinese culture and possess inherent aesthetic value. These words are known as culture-loaded words. Unlike the translation of traditional literary texts, subtitle translation is influenced by linguistic, cultural, and specific factors such as constraints imposed by the subtitles and motivators stemming from the multimodal nature of the medium.

Reception aesthetics conceives translation as a dynamic and process horizon fusion. To attain this objective, translators can employ two strategies: firstly, aligning with or expanding the audience's expectation horizon; secondly, reshaping the response-inviting structure. Through a comprehensive analysis, it was observed that the translation strategies employed for the English translation of culture-loaded words in *Empresses in*

*the Palace* predominantly embrace foreignization and domestication. Translation methods encompass transliteration, literal translation, free translation, substitution, and omission, with the former two falling under foreignization and the latter three aligned with domestication.

Guided by reception aesthetics, this paper has ventured into the English translation of culture-loaded words in *Empresses in the Palace*. However, inherent limitations persist. Firstly, with its pronounced focus on the audience, reception aesthetics remains insufficient to comprehensively address all translation challenges. Additionally, the culture-loaded words are subjectively selected and analyzed by the author, potentially introducing oversights and a degree of subjectivity.

The fact shows that applying reception aesthetics to analyze subtitle translation is practical. It is hoped that this paper may inspire more attention and interest in analyzing subtitle translation of different TV series from reception aesthetics. Furthermore, the prevailing descriptive method of current research within this domain suggests the potential for future investigations to incorporate diverse research methodologies, including empirical studies, to analyze culture-loaded words in film and TV drama more comprehensively.

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