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## Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in *The Lychee Road*: An Eco-Translatology Perspective

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### Abstract

Against the backdrop of China's cultural "Going Global" initiative, historical films are an important channel through which overseas audiences encounter traditional Chinese culture. Taking the official theatrical English subtitles of the 2025 film *The Lychee Road* as its corpus, this paper examines the translation of culture-loaded words (CLWs) from an eco-translatology perspective. Drawing on purposive sampling, this study selects eleven representative CLW instances and conducts textual analysis through the lens of eco-translatology's three-dimensional transformation. According to the textual features of the film, CLWs are grouped into four categories: ecological, material, linguistic and social culture-loaded words, while the religious category is excluded due to the absence of typical religious terms in the film. Three patterns emerge. First, the retention of cultural connotations depends less on their cultural weight than on their narrative function: meanings that drive the story are kept clear, while background imagery is reduced to a rough equivalent. Second, the degree of cultural loss is largely determined by the cognitive gap of the target audience: CLWs resting on shared physical experience survive in rough form, whereas those presupposing Tang bureaucratic, documentary or courtly practice leave only the referent. Third, with poems, idioms and proverbs the translator can have either the source wording or readability, but seldom both within the brief window a line is legible. These choices reflect the dual constraints of a time-bound medium and a target language lacking ready equivalents for Tang-specific items, rather than translational inadequacy. This study demonstrates the descriptive utility of eco-translatology for historical-film subtitling, and offers an analytical reference for the cross-cultural communication of Chinese historical audiovisual works.

Keywords: Eco-translatology; culture-loaded words (CLWs); subtitling; The Lychee Road; three-dimensional transformation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese historical cinema has become one of the country's most visible cultural exports, and subtitled release is the main route by which it reaches viewers abroad. Within global cross-cultural communication, translation goes beyond linguistic conversion to facilitate cultural circulation, construct cultural identities and spread indigenous narratives (Cronin, 2003). As a major means of reaching overseas audiences, audiovisual subtitle translation poses high demands on translators. Culture-loaded words (CLWs), which embody era-specific institutions, values and customs, rarely have direct target-language equivalents and constitute a major bottleneck for historical-film subtitle translation. Set in the Tang Dynasty and adapted from Ma Boyong's historical novel, *The Lychee Road* features abundant institution-specific cultural elements representative of ancient China.

The film contains abundant Tang-specific CLWs covering official titles, material artifacts and regional ecological produce. Eco-translatology, centered on "adaptation and selection" and three-dimensional transformation, offers a useful analytical lens for exploring translational trade-offs beyond semantic-equivalence frameworks.

Overseas subtitle-translation research dates back to the mid-20th century. Early research investigated translator-related factors behind translation errors (Dollerup, 1974, pp. 197-202) and proposed "constrained translation", laying the discipline's theoretical foundation (Titford, 1982, pp. 113-116). In the 1990s, scholars shifted their research focus to audience reception and language analysis: Gottlieb (1992, pp. 161-170) summarized ten subtitle translation strategies, and subsequently examined the subtitle issues from a multi-

semiotic perspective (Gottlieb, 2004, pp. 219-230). However, most Western studies still relied on European and American film corpora and were limited in their research on words rich in ancient Chinese cultural connotations. Consequently, they can hardly account for translation dilemmas arising from ancient Chinese institutional terms embedded within subtitling's temporal-spatial constraints.

Domestic subtitle-translation research emerged later but has developed diverse perspectives. Focusing on subtitling's medium constraints, Lu (2012, pp.163-164), Lü and Wu (2012, pp. 36-38), Chen (2013, pp. 68-71) and Gao (2015, pp. 28-33) explored translation principles, multimodal discourse, cultural adaptation and stylistic norms. However, these works mainly examine contemporary domestic films and overlook unique tensions in ancient-history productions. This leaves underexplored how translators negotiate between dense historical cultural information and the reading limits of on-screen subtitles.

Since it was first proposed, eco-translatology's three-dimensional framework has been widely applied to subtitle research. Zhu (2017, pp. 78-80) and Jiang (2018, pp. 55-57) developed translation strategies using modern-film cases. Bibliometric analysis shows that domestic research mostly relies on illustrative examples from contemporary realistic films (Wang et al., 2019, pp. 33-38). Media constraints are often separated from cultural analysis, and empirical studies on historical films remain scarce. For the subtitling of CLWs, Wang and Dai (2023, pp. 148-155) moved beyond the literal-free translation dichotomy and proposed cognition-oriented translation approaches. Still, existing cases concentrate on local products and proverbs, whereas ancient Chinese culture-loaded words such as ancient official titles and documentary regulations remain under-

studied. Few studies treat medium constraints and cultural connotation loss as interacting forces within a unified translational eco-environment.

Existing theories fall short in two respects: Western audiovisual scholarship addresses subtitling constraints yet cannot analyze ancient Chinese culture-loaded words, while domestic eco-translatology-informed research concentrates largely on contemporary works. Prior eco-translatology-informed subtitling studies tend to either apply three-dimensional transformation without systematic CLW categorization, or treat cultural loss in isolation from subtitling spatio-temporal constraints. Hence, few analyses integrate these three analytical components to unpack ancient-Chinese CLWs in historical-film subtitles. To fill this gap, this paper assembles a corpus of eleven CLW instances from the English subtitles of *The Lychee Road* (2025). Based on the film's own thematic and textual characteristics, culture-loaded words are classified into ecological, material, linguistic and social dimensions. Drawing on eco-translatology's three-dimensional transformation, it investigates multi-dimensional translational trade-offs under multiple ecological constraints. It aims to offer analytical references for subtitle translation of ancient-Chinese historical audiovisual productions. All examples are excerpted from the film's official theatrical English subtitles.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

At the heart of Hu Gengshen's eco-translatology (ETS) lies the principle of "adaptation and selection", a theoretical construct inspired by Darwinian natural selection. ETS conceptualizes translation not merely as linguistic transfer between two texts, but as a cyclic, dynamic process of "survival of the fittest". In this paradigm, the translator occupies the central position of translation activities rather than being a passive mediator between source text and target readers. Before

generating a translation, the translator must first make multi-dimensional adaptations to the translational eco-environment—the composite system encompassing source-text context, target-language conventions, cultural norms, medium requirements, and the target-audience cognitive backgrounds. Following such adaptations, the translator carries out selective transformations on the source text at different levels. A translation's viability depends on the overall degree of the translator's adaptation and selection within this ecosystem (Hu, 2020).

The core operational mechanism of ETS is multi-dimensional transformation, which primarily manifests along linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions. For this study, such an ecosystem integrates three interacting forces: Tang Dynasty source-text historical context, subtitling medium restrictions, and the target-language norms and target-audience cognitive backgrounds. Subtitle outputs accordingly generate three-dimensional transformation effects across linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions.

The linguistic dimension requires lexical, syntactic and textual adjustments to satisfy subtitle readability, conciseness and on-screen reading requirements. The cultural dimension mediates source-cultural connotations and target-audience acceptability for historical institutions and folk customs. The communicative dimension prioritizes narrative coherence, emotional undertones and pragmatic implications to guarantee plot progression (Liu, 2023). These three dimensions are interdependent; individual translation choices usually entail multi-dimensional trade-offs. Specifically for *The Lychee Road*, this eco-environment is characterized by three intersecting pressures: the historical weight of Tang Dynasty institutions, the spatio-temporal constraints of commercial film subtitles, and the target audience's cognitive vacancy regarding ancient Chinese bureaucratic systems.

Against this theoretical backdrop, culture-loaded words (CLWs) extracted from the film corpus are grouped into four categories tailored to the thematic content of *The Lychee Road*: ecological, material, linguistic and social culture-loaded words. These categories correspond to the recurring historical, institutional and folk elements in the film's dialogue. Religious culture-loaded words refer to items tied to doctrines, rituals and mythological imagery of institutionalized religions such as Buddhism and Daoism. Although the film contains political notions such as the "Mandate of Heaven", these operate as secular political rhetoric. Given the complete absence of typical religious terms in the corpus, the religious category is excluded from subsequent analysis. In this analytical design, eco-translatology functions both as the guiding theoretical lens and interpretive framework. It accounts for the translator's adaptive-selection process under the combined pressures of Tang Dynasty historical context, subtitling constraints, and target audience cognition when handling culture-loaded words in subtitles.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

Drawing on the textual characteristics of *The Lychee Road*, this section separately examines the ecological, material, linguistic and social culture-loaded words that appear in the subtitles. Representative subtitle examples are selected and interpreted in combination with the three dimensions of eco-translatology to reveal how each translation method adapts to the ecological environment of the subtitles, as well as which contents are retained, adjusted or undergo other changes during cross-cultural communication.

#### 3.1 Ecological Culture-Loaded Words

Ecological culture-loaded words reflect a region's ecological knowledge and local produce, and often lack semantically-equivalent counterparts in English. In *The Lychee Road*, such items mainly concern Lingnan lychee preservation and transportation, concepts

unfamiliar to English-speaking audiences who may lack relevant background knowledge of post-harvest lychee deterioration. This section analyses representative examples from the linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions.

#### Example 1

ST: 荔枝一日色变, 两日香变, 三日味。

TT: Lychees change color in one day, lose their fragrance in two, and go bad in three.

A linguistic examination of the translation reveals that the fourteen-character source text employs a parallel structure of "numeral + day + noun + *bian* (change)", where the character *bian* recurs three times to create a rhythmic pattern that builds progressively. The English version preserves the temporal progression marked by "one day...two...three" to align with English subject-predicate syntax, yet it restructures the original sensory chain: the loss of fragrance is rendered literally, while the deterioration of taste is generalized as "go bad". As a result, the complete sensory sequence of gradual decline across sight, smell and taste is diluted, and the distinctive circular rhythm intrinsic to Chinese expression is lost in cross-linguistic transfer.

Turning to the cultural dimension, this line is far more than isolated botanical information – it forms an intertextuality rooted in the historical allusion from Bai Juyi's *Preface to the Painting of Lychees*. Notably, even native Chinese audiences require a certain grounding in literature and history to recognize its literary origin. The translation merely delivers the surface-level timeline of lychee spoilage, failing to reproduce the solemn, maxim-like tone inherent in classical Chinese syntax, which results in the erosion of literary intertextuality and historical allusions.

From a communicative standpoint, this line functions as the core narrative premise of the film, with the "three-day spoilage" rule

setting a rigid time constraint on the protagonist's mission. The translation clearly conveys the sense of urgency, ensuring that overseas audiences can grasp the central plot conflict. That said, the plain declarative tone of the English version weakens the fatalism and despair evoked by the progressive structure of the original text, which may reduce its potential emotional resonance for target-language audiences.

#### Example 2

ST: 听说岭南盛产木棉花, 火红火红的, 特别适合酿酒。

TT: I hear Lingnan is rich in kapok flowers, bright red, perfect for brewing wine.

Lexically and syntactically, *mu mian hua* is rendered as kapok flowers and *niang jiu* as brew wine, producing grammatically coherent English. As a formal botanical term in English, however, kapok rarely evokes for ordinary overseas viewers the vivid visual imagery of southern Chinese landscapes embedded in the original Chinese expression.

Culturally, kapok carries distinct Lingnan ecological connotations, embodying southern China's climate and native produce. Although "kapok" refers to the same plant, it lacks corresponding cultural associations in the target culture. Moreover, the Chinese verb "*niang*" implies time-honored fermentation and maturation processes. In English, "brew" typically collocates with tea or coffee; pairing it with wine creates an unconventional collocation that may hinder audiences' understanding of this regional flower-wine-making custom.

From a communicative standpoint, the mention of kapok-flower wine does not constitute key plot-driving information. Instead, it supplies supporting narrative detail that builds the regional atmosphere of Lingnan. Even with partial erosion of cultural imagery, it will not disrupt audiences' comprehension of

the main plot, so the communicative purpose of the line is largely fulfilled.

#### Example 3

ST: 封在双层瓮里, 泡在水中, 可以多保鲜几天。

TT: Seal them in a double-layer urn and soak in water; you can keep them fresh longer.

In word-formation terms, the attributive-head phrase "*shuang ceng weng*" is translated as "double-layer urn", achieving formal structural correspondence. Yet the two terms trigger divergent semantic associations: the Chinese "*weng*" denotes a folk earthen storage jar with a narrow mouth and a bulging belly, while English "urn" more readily evokes funeral vessels or decorative vases, distorting the perception of this everyday artifact. In addition, "double-layer" merely describes physical structure without conveying the underlying thermal-insulation function implied by the Chinese original.

As a culturally-embedded daily object, the double-layer urn embodies Lingnan folk wisdom for food preservation in hot-humid climates. Chinese audiences can draw on general life experience of earthenware, but target-culture readers lack comparable material reference frames. The translation therefore has to settle for a functional description: the associations of traditional pottery craftsmanship and local adaptive wisdom cannot be evoked, and the artifact's practical folk character is correspondingly weakened.

From a narrative perspective, this vessel underpins a key plot conflict: the protagonist tries to break the three-day lychee-spoilage limit using this local preservation tool. Audiences understand it as a special freshness-keeping container, yet the translation cannot explain its double-layer thermal-insulation mechanism. This creates causal comprehension gaps and somewhat weakens the narrative tension of human ingenuity against natural constraints.

To sum up, translations of ecological culture-loaded words follow a clear adaptive hierarchy: the magnitude of cultural loss correlates with each term's narrative weight. Core plot-relevant content prioritizes communicative clarity over rhetorical form and literary intertextuality; secondary descriptive items retain basic denotation with mild erosion of local imagery; technical folk artifacts may produce causal comprehension gaps arising from cross-cultural material-experience disparities. This hierarchy results jointly from on-screen subtitle constraints and asymmetries in cross-cultural ecological knowledge.

### 3.2 Material Culture-Loaded Words

Material culture-loaded words refer to tangible Tang Dynasty cultural objects including cuisine, costumes, tools, architecture, documents and ritual implements, which materialize High-Tang civilization. Within film-subtitling's translational eco-environment, renderings of these items frequently generate multi-dimensional trade-offs shaped by screen constraints and target-cultural conceptual vacancies. Translation choices rarely operate along a single dimension.

#### Example 4

ST:深宅大院, 尊荣尽显。

TT: A grand mansion. A symbol of status and glory.

The target text exhibits conciseness in rendering the four-character Chinese expression *shen zhai da yuan*, compressing it into the compact noun phrase a grand mansion. The original complete Chinese sentence is split into two independent short English clauses.

In its Tang Dynasty social context, "*shen zhai da yuan*" encapsulates multiple cultural layers: aristocratic seclusion, spatial hierarchy and Confucian family ethics. "Grand mansion" evokes elite social status for target-language audiences, yet no single English noun can capture the multi-courtyard spatial features of traditional Chinese residences. This constitutes

a translatability limit stemming from target-language material-culture conceptual vacancy, whereby the progressive spatial connotations of Chinese courtyard architecture are lost.

Functionally, this line serves as an immediate marker of the character's social class. The translation opts for communicative efficiency over exhaustive delivery of all cultural semantic details, allowing overseas viewers to quickly grasp the character's identity through familiar vocabulary.

#### Example 5

ST:刚签了房契就夜不归宿

TT: Just signed the deed and stayed out all night.

Lexically, the translation pairs the Chinese term *fangqi* with deed and *ye bu gui su* with stayed out all night. Syntactically, it restructures the original serial verb construction to follow English temporal logic patterns, achieving smooth and natural textual cohesion.

Culturally, "*fangqi*" means more than a property-transfer document. Rooted in Chinese social values, it connotes aspirations for settled life and the ritual binding force of ancient contracts. As a modern legal term, "deed" accurately transmits the core property-transfer meaning yet imposes a contemporary semantic frame that weakens the historical specificity of Tang contractual institutions. Similarly, "*ye bu gui su*" carries implicit ethical judgements concerning family norms. By contrast, the English "stayed out all night" is largely semantically neutral. Although this neutral rendering strips away the original ethical critique, it satisfies the communicative dimension by clearly conveying the character's physical absence, thereby pushing the narrative forward without cognitive overload.

Example 6

ST: 这敕令上的贴黄掉了。这里原本错写了一个鲜字，后来用贴黄改成了煎。现在贴黄掉了，得重新贴上去。

TT: The sticker on it is missing. It originally said 'fresh' by mistake. A sticker was added to fix it as 'preserved'. Now it's fallen off. We need to stick it back on.

The original line exposes a flaw in the official document through the Tang-specific term *tiehuang*. The target text renders *tiehuang* as "sticker" and replaces the static technical expression with the dynamic phrasing "fix it as...". Syntactically, the lengthy explanatory complex sentence in Chinese is broken down into five short clauses.

As a formal bureaucratic procedure, *tiehuang* was a legally-required error-correction practice for Tang imperial edicts: mistaken characters were covered and rewritten using yellow paper identical to the original decree material. Reducing this institution to "sticker" strips away its bureaucratic-historical specificity, equating formal administrative revision with trivial physical patching. Although the semantic opposition between "fresh" and "preserved" (derived from the original "xian" and "jian") is retained, the institutional-evidential dimension of this character correction disappears. Notably, *tiehuang* constitutes specialized Tang archival knowledge; even many Chinese audiences with limited historical background cannot fully grasp its institutional meaning.

From a narrative communicative standpoint, this scene serves primarily to alert the audience to the tampered imperial edict and foreshadow later plot crises, rather than to impart knowledge of Tang administrative protocols. By forgoing the full transmission of specialized institutional terms, the translation centers on the sequential narrative thread of "error - correction - detachment -

reattachment", ensuring overseas audiences grasp the key plot point that the edict contains a deliberate flaw.

Across the three examples above, a recurring pattern is clear: whenever a Tang-specific material object has no ready-made English equivalent, the subtitle replaces it with the closest everyday word – "mansion" for *shen zhai da yuan*, "deed" for *fangqi*, "sticker" for *tiehuang*. Each substitution lets a general English-speaking viewer follow the plot without pausing, but each also leaves behind a layer of cultural detail that the original carried – spatial hierarchy, contractual ritual, bureaucratic procedure. This trade-off is less a matter of the translator's competence than of practical necessity: English offers no ready term for these Tang-specific objects, and a subtitle that cannot be read in a single pass must be shortened.

### 3.3 Linguistic Culture-Loaded Words

Linguistic culture-loaded words cover poems, verses, proverbs, idioms and history-tinged sayings. Beyond literal meaning, they embed rhetorical conventions and historically-conditioned thought patterns. Because a subtitle must be both brief and fleeting, what the receiving audience can accept strongly conditions the wording that is finally settled on.

Example 7

ST: 明人不说暗话。

TT: Let's cut to the chase.

This proverb articulates the traditional Chinese communicative-ethical link between frankness and social status. The original four-character declarative idiom is replaced by the colloquial English imperative "Let's cut to the chase", which fits film-dialogue pragmatics yet eliminates the source's distinctive four-character formal features.

The expression "*ming ren bu shuo an hua*" means more than speaking plainly. It encapsulates core Chinese communicative

norms: “*ming ren*” denotes a person of integrity and social standing, while “*an hua*” refers to euphemistic face-saving rhetoric that avoids direct conflict. The whole saying grows from relational-society communicative logic; even native Chinese audiences may only grasp its superficial “get-straight-to-point” meaning without cultural background. The Hollywood-originated idiom “cut to the chase” preserves only the surface pragmatic function, stripping away intertwined connotations of status, face and relational ethics.

Occurring in a key negotiation scene, this utterance signals sincerity and pushes the characters toward cooperation. Using a highly familiar target-language set phrase instantly delivers the communicative intent without slowing plot progression. This choice sacrifices cultural-dimension ethical connotations for linguistic naturalness and communicative narrative efficiency, representing a typical multi-dimensional translational trade-off.

#### Example 8

ST: 三杯吐然诺, 五岳倒为轻

TT: “Three cups of the promise, five mountains for light.”

Centered on wine-associated oath-taking, this verse highlights traditional Chinese values of faithfulness and moral integrity. The word-for-word translation imitates the source’s antithetical parallelism and preserves iconic numerical imagery (“three cups”, “five mountains”). However, collocations such as “Three cups of the promise” and “five mountains for light” violate standard English poetic and prose syntax, creating semantic fragmentation and comprehension obstacles for target-language readers. Regardless of the translator intention, this case demonstrates the inherent subtitle-translation tension between formal source-text fidelity and target-text readability; the original compact rhythm and antithetical rhetoric cannot be effectively reproduced.

This line adapts Li Bai’s *Song of the Knight-Errant*, merging wine-ritual and chivalric values where promises outweigh material possessions and forming part of Tang poetry’s broad intertextual network. Even some Chinese viewers with exposure to Tang poetry may fail to recognize this verse’s literary origin, though they can still perceive its chivalric connotation from the cinematic context. While the translation keeps surface poetic imagery, it severs the verse from its literary intertextual context. Wine’s ritual oath-making function is marginalized, and the morally-charged “*ran nuo*” (solemn moral promise) is flattened into the neutral English noun “promise”.

Narratively, this verse supplements characterization by constructing the protagonist’s bold, trustworthy persona, rather than operating as indispensable plot-advancing information. Its fragmented English phrasing raises interpretive difficulty, yet contextual clues still allow audiences to roughly understand that the oath carries immense weight; communicative aims are therefore only partially fulfilled. An alternative rendering – “After three cups of wine, his oath outweighs five great mountains.” – would comply with English syntactic norms and convey chivalric meaning, but would abandon the original concise antithetical poetic form.

#### Example 9

ST: “和光同尘, 好处均沾, 花花轿子众人抬。”

TT: “Going with the flow, sharing the benefits, and lifting each other up.”

This folk maxim expresses co-existence ethics shared by traditional official and civilian spheres. Syntactically, it blends three heterogeneous components: a Taoist philosophical phrase, a four-character idiom and a folk metaphor, mixing literary and colloquial registers. The translation reorganizes it into three parallel gerund phrases, producing

rhythmic parallelism but erasing the source's stylistic hybridity.

Culturally, the saying carries rich indigenous philosophical and folk connotations. Derived from the *Tao Te Ching*, “*he guang tong chen*” advocates concealing sharpness and adapting to worldly realities, a notion far more nuanced than “going with the flow”. The folk metaphor “*hua hua jiao zi zhong ren tai*” (“all hands lift the ornate sedan chair”) embodies face-saving and mutual-benefit norms within relational society, rooted in patriarchal-clan co-existence logic. Without sufficient cultural knowledge, even Chinese audiences may reduce it to a superficial “unite for profit” reading. By reframing this sophisticated local survival strategy as a universal statement on cooperation, the translation blurs both Taoist dialectical thought and the sedan-chair folk metaphor.

Communicatively, this utterance unpacks officialdom's unspoken rules and helps audiences interpret character motives. The heavily domesticated version reduces target-audience cognitive friction and transmits the core idea of reciprocal interests. This translation sacrifices cultural specificity for linguistic fluency and narrative clarity, constituting another multi-dimensional trade-off.

Taken together, linguistic CLWs set formal fidelity and target-text comprehensibility directly against each other. Colloquial proverbs tend toward heavy domestication for immediate pragmatic effect, at the cost of native ethical-philosophical connotations. Classical verses face starker dilemmas: literal formal preservation damages syntactic naturalness and readability, while fluent domestication sacrifices poetic heritage and rhetorical texture. Under medium constraints, no single rendering can satisfy both demands completely.

### 3.4 Social Culture-Loaded Words

Social culture-loaded words denote Tang Dynasty social phenomena including official titles, institutions, customs and social strata, crystallizing High-Tang social structures and operational logics. Translations of dialogues containing such items aim to convey Tang institutional norms, hierarchy and folk etiquette, revealing the social logic of that historical era.

#### Example 10

ST: “现在，你就是荔枝使了。”

TT: “Now you are the Lychee Envoy.”

*Lizhi shi* was a temporary imperial dispatch post in the Tang Dynasty, appointed ad hoc by the emperor and revoked once its assigned mission concluded. The translation renders the term as *Lychee Envoy* via a literal “specific referent + generic title” strategy, producing a concise, formally correspondent phrasing. The word *envoy*, however, typically denotes a permanent diplomatic representative in English usage, creating a conceptual misalignment with the provisional, task-specific nature of Tang imperial commissions.

Far more than a straightforward official title, *lizhi shi* is a culturally loaded institutional symbol, bridging imperial extravagance and local civilian burdens and carrying implicit undertones of wasted public resources and unaccountable imperial power. While the target text retains the material reference to lychees, it fails to convey the critical edge embedded in the Tang dispatch system. Target-language audiences might interpret it merely as an exotic official title and may fail to recognize the structural tension embedded within Tang political ecology — a low-ranking ad-hoc post deployed to satisfy private imperial indulgences at the expense of public welfare.

Narratively, this line marks a defining turning point in the protagonist's destiny, lending the title translation critical communicative weight. The literal rendering,

chosen over an explanatory paraphrase such as “imperial commissioner for lychees”, preserves terminological distinctiveness. Despite the erosion of institutional connotations, sufficient contextual foreshadowing of the post’s unusual mandate and inherent risks allows viewers to grasp its narrative importance. For this reason, the adaptive selection achieves a high degree of adequacy on the communicative dimension.

#### Example 11

ST: 圣人啊, 口含天宪

TT: The Emperor, his word is law.

In Tang usage, “*sheng ren*” (“sage ruler”) was an exclusive honorific for emperors, while “*kou han tian xian*” figuratively expressed absolute imperial authority. The target text transforms this metaphor into the plain declarative “his word is law” for straightforward semantic delivery. However, “*sheng ren*” integrates Confucian virtue-based kingship ideals and sacred monarchical authority, meanings far richer than the neutral noun “The Emperor”. Likewise, “*tian xian*” (“heavenly law”) refers to a cosmic-moral order legitimizing imperial rule, whereas English “law” generally signifies man-made written regulations, discarding the transcendent “heaven-sanctioned” ethical justification. The source’s vivid bodily metaphor of holding law in one’s mouth – signifying instant, unmediated imperial legal power – is lost in plain paraphrase.

Culturally, “*kou han tian xian*” encapsulates the tripartite “Mandate of Heaven-sovereign-law” structure of traditional Chinese governance and belongs to imperial ritual discourse. The translation reduces this complex socio-political authority construct to a Western legal notion of “a monarch’s words carry legal force”. Although improving accessibility, this simplification may hinder target-language audiences’ understanding of the cultural logic behind Chinese emperors’ claim to “govern on behalf of Heaven”.

Communicatively, this line underscores the overwhelming force of unchallengeable imperial edicts and creates discursive pressure compelling the protagonist to accept his impossible mission. “His word is law” is a highly conventionalized English expression for supreme authority, immediately activating audiences’ cognitive schema of absolute command and delivering the communicative intent efficiently. Even with substantial loss of philosophical and religious connotations, this adaptive choice remains fully adequate for narrative momentum-building.

In summary, within this group instant readability consistently outweighs institutional accuracy. A temporary, mission-specific imperial post is carried by a familiar English title that suggests a permanent envoy, and an emperor’s heaven-sanctioned authority is reduced to the plain claim that his word is law. Both choices let an overseas viewer follow the story without explanation, but both quietly set aside what made these terms distinctly Tang – the ad-hoc, revocable nature of the office, and the sacred basis of imperial power. Within the few moments a line is legible, little more than this could have been carried across.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study investigates the translational handling of Tang-dynasty culture-loaded words in the official English subtitles of *The Lychee Road* under the analytical framework of eco-translatology. Centered on the translator’s “adaptation-selection” behavior within the composite translational eco-environment – consisting of Tang historical context, subtitling spatio-temporal constraints and target-audience cognitive backgrounds – this paper analyses eleven representative CLW cases across four categories: ecological, material, linguistic and social culture-loaded words, observing multi-dimensional trade-offs among linguistic, cultural and communicative transformation.

For ecological culture-loaded words, the translator makes adaptive selections according

to narrative priority. Core ecological information that underpins plot logic is preserved on the communicative dimension, while peripheral regional imagery and folk experiential knowledge are partially sacrificed. Faced with target-audience's lack of ecological life-experience, the translator prioritizes plot comprehensibility over complete reproduction of local cultural imagery. For material culture-loaded words including architecture, legal documents and imperial archival artifacts, the absence of pre-existing target-language conceptual equivalents forces compensatory adaptation: the translator adopts general-purpose hypernyms to secure instant readability. This strategy guarantees smooth narrative progression yet inevitably erases institution-specific historical attributes embedded in tangible objects. As for linguistic culture-loaded words such as proverbs, folk maxims and classical verses, the translational eco-environment creates an inherent contradiction between formal-rhetorical fidelity and subtitle on-screen readability. Colloquial idioms are mostly domesticated to target-language conventional expressions to satisfy communicative demands, which results in the loss of indigenous ethical and philosophical connotations; poetic lines, by contrast, fall into a dilemma: literal retention of source-text form produces syntactically fragmented English, whereas fluent domestication abandons the original rhetorical parallelism and literary intertextuality. Finally, social culture-loaded words represented by official titles and imperial political rhetoric pose the most intractable adaptation challenge. Tang bureaucratic institutions and heaven-endowed monarchical logic are alien to overseas audiences. The translator selects simplified, widely-recognizable target-language concepts to convey basic referential meaning, yet the deep-seated institutional logic and political-cultural connotations of Tang society are largely filtered out in the subtitling process.

Across all four categories, three general translational patterns can be summarized. First, the survival of cultural connotations hinges on narrative function rather than the intrinsic cultural weight of CLWs. Plot-driving information receives priority in adaptive selection to safeguard the communicative dimension, while decorative background cultural elements are reduced to basic referential equivalents. Second, the magnitude of cultural loss is conditioned by target-audience cognitive vacancy. Where cross-cultural shared experiential foundations exist, partial cultural flavor can be preserved; when terms are rooted in exclusive Tang bureaucratic, archival and courtly practices, only superficial referential meaning can be delivered. Third, linguistic culture-loaded words embody the sharpest conflict within the translational eco-environment: subtitle medium constraints make it nearly impossible to simultaneously retain source-text rhetorical form and guarantee target-language readability.

From the perspective of eco-translatology, these compromises should not be interpreted as translational failure. Rather, they are inevitable outcomes of the translator's holistic adaptation to the multi-layered translational eco-environment of historical-film subtitling. The translator stands at the center of translation activity and must constantly negotiate competing requirements from source-text historical context, subtitle medium restrictions and target-audience cognition. In such constrained audiovisual translation scenarios, perfect equivalence on all three dimensions (linguistic, cultural, communicative) can scarcely be achieved. The final subtitle product represents the translator's optimal "survival-oriented" selection: to maximize overall translational viability, sacrifices on the cultural dimension are frequently made in exchange for the fulfilment of linguistic naturalness and communicative effectiveness. This finding further validates eco-translatology's descriptive explanatory

power for constrained audiovisual translation, especially for historical films laden with dense ancient Chinese institutional culture.

This research also carries practical implications for the “Going Global” of Chinese historical audiovisual productions. When subtitling ancient Chinese CLWs, translators need to identify the narrative status of each cultural item within the translational eco-environment. For plot-critical culture-loaded words, communicative validity should be placed first; for secondary ornamental cultural elements, appropriate simplification is acceptable under subtitle time-space limits. Blind pursuit of full cultural restoration will damage readability, while over-domestication will erase unique Chinese historical-cultural features. Balanced multi-dimensional adaptation-selection is therefore the desirable strategy for historical-film subtitling.

Several limitations should be noted. The study rests on one film and eleven examples, and it contains no audience data: what overseas viewers actually understand remains an inference from the text rather than a measured result. Production documents and translator interviews were also unavailable, so the reasons behind each choice can only be read off the finished subtitles. Future research will build a parallel corpus of the original novel and its subtitles to separate the pressure of the medium from that of the source text, test viewer comprehension with eye-tracking or follow-up interviews, and extend the corpus to several historical dramas to check whether the three patterns found here appear elsewhere.

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