Literature, Language and Cultural Studies
ISSN Print: 3079-5095
ISSN Online: 3079-5109
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9220

# Research on the Translation Strategies of Culture-loaded Words in the Publicity Documentary What is *Hangzhou* from the Perspective of Translation Memetics

**Wenxuan Tang. Haoruo Zhang**
University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai 200093, China

**How to cite this paper:** Tang, W., & Zhang, H. (2026). Research on the translation strategies of culture-loaded words in the publicity documentary What is Hangzhou from the perspective of translation memetics. Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, 7(1), 72–80. ISSN Print: 3079-5095, ISSN Online: 3079-5109.
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9220
**Published: 2026-10-22**

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

## Abstract

With the advancement of China's "Culture Going Global" strategy, urban publicity documentaries have become vital carriers for regional cultural dissemination. However, translating culture-loaded words in these documentaries often poses challenges such as loss of cultural connotation and poor foreign audience reception. Guided by Translation Memetics, Heylighen's four-stage meme replication model, and Nida's cultural classification, this study analyzes eight culture-loaded words and their official English translations in the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games promotional documentary What is Hangzhou. Through case and intra-textual analysis, the paper explores adaptive translation strategies across different cultural categories. The findings indicate that the documentary effectively balances informational accuracy and audience acceptance to facilitate smooth meme replication. Specifically, ecological and material culture-loaded words predominantly employ direct translation or transliteration combined with direct translation to preserve local cultural identity. Social culture-loaded words adopt flexible, differentiated strategies based on audience familiarity, while linguistic ones rely on contextual reconstruction to convey emotional and thematic resonance. This study not only offers an integrated framework for audiovisual translation evaluation but also provides actionable insights for future urban publicity documentary translations..

## Keywords

Translation Memetics; Culture-Loaded Words; External Publicity Documentary; *What Is Hangzhou*; English Translation Strategies

## 1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, urban promotional documentaries have evolved into vital carriers for cross-cultural communication and regional identity dissemination. Combining imagery, audio, and subtitles, modern documentaries effectively break linguistic barriers and bolster global awareness of Chinese cities.

As the host city of the 19th Asian Games, Hangzhou launched the publicity

documentary What is Hangzhou in September 2023. The film presents Hangzhou's history, natural landscape, and modern urban spirit through numerous culture-loaded words. However, translating these terms presents a key challenge: literal transfer may obscure cultural meaning, whereas excessive domestication risks eroding local identity.

While Translation Memetics has been applied to literary works and cultural transmission, its application to urban publicity documentaries remains limited. To bridge this gap, this study investigates how culture-loaded words in What is Hangzhou are translated to facilitate cross-cultural meme replication. Specifically, it conducts a case analysis on eight representative words across Nida's cultural categories, evaluating each translation through Heylighen's four-stage replication mechanism and Dawkins' 3Fs criteria.

Theoretically, this study constructs an integrated analytical framework for evaluating cultural transmission in audiovisual translation. Practically, it provides actionable insights for translators to strategically balance foreignization and domestication in urban publicity documentaries.

## 2. Literature Review

The translation of culture-loaded words has long been a central topic in translation studies. Internationally, Nida (1993) established a foundational five-category framework for culture-loaded terms. Building on this, Aixela (1996) conceptualized culture-specific items, while Baker (2000) emphasized the crucial role of cultural context, highlighting the need to balance cultural specificity with target-language accessibility. In China, research has evolved from exploring cultural context in language teaching (Xu, 1980) to strategically promoting Chinese culture overseas (Zheng, 2016), emphasizing that translation choices should align with communicative purposes and audience expectations.

In recent years, Translation Memetics has offered a fresh explanatory framework. Grounded in Chesterman's (2012) concept of translation memes, researchers have examined how translation strategies function to enhance the survival and replication of cultural memes across languages, particularly in literary and folklore contexts.

Despite substantial literature on both culture-loaded words and Translation Memetics, two main gaps remain. First, their combined application to urban publicity documentaries remains underexplored. Second, existing studies often focus on isolated translation techniques rather than examining the interactive dynamics among cultural classification, meme-replication mechanisms, and translation effectiveness. To address these gaps, this study uses What is Hangzhou as a case to construct an integrated framework, systematically evaluating how translation choices facilitate the cross-cultural replication of urban cultural memes.

## 3. Theoretical Foundation

### 3.1. Core concepts of translation memetics

Memetics was proposed by Dawkins (1976) in *The Selfish Gene*. A meme is a unit of cultural transmission that spreads through imitation and adaptation. In translation, cultural expressions can function as memes because they must be recognized, reproduced, and modified when moving between linguistic communities. Translation Memetics therefore focuses not only on linguistic equivalence but also on whether a translated expression can successfully survive and spread in the target culture.

Cording to Dawkins, successful memes depend on three qualities: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity (the 3Fs). Fidelity concerns whether the core information is preserved; fecundity concerns the ability to reproduce or spread; longevity concerns whether the meme can remain in the target audience's memory.

In *What is Hangzhou*, these criteria can be used to evaluate whether a translation preserves the cultural meaning of the source expression, is understandable and shareable for target audiences, and remains memorable after viewing.

### 3.2. Four stages of meme replication

Heylighen (1998) describes meme replication through four stages: assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission. This model provides a step-by-step framework for examining how translation strategies help culture-loaded words enter and circulate in the target culture.

**Assimilation** occurs when target audiences notice and understand a cultural meme. Translation should therefore fit their existing cognitive patterns; for example, Qiantang River uses the familiar generic term "River" to make the place immediately intelligible.

**Retention** concerns whether the meme remains in the audience's memory. Concise and vivid translations are especially important for documentary subtitles because they remain on screen only briefly; Butterfly Lovers, for example, offers an easily remembered image.

**Expression** refers to transforming the meme into a communicable linguistic form. Documentary subtitles must coordinate with images and narration while meeting strict length and timing constraints.

**Transmission** refers to the meme's further circulation among target-culture users. For urban publicity documentaries, translations that are clear, shareable, and adaptable to other contexts are especially valuable.

### 3.3. Nida's cultural classification

Nida divides culture into five categories: ecological, material, social, religious/philosophical, and linguistic culture. Ecological terms relate to natural environments and geographical features; material terms concern objects and traditional products; social terms reflect institutions and lifestyles; religious/philosophical terms express beliefs and ways of thinking; linguistic terms involve language-specific devices such as allusions and puns. This study uses these categories to classify the selected culture-loaded words in What is Hangzhou.

### 3.4. Analytical framework

This thesis constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework that integrates 2ida's culture-loaded word classification, Heylighen's four-stage meme replication mechanism, and Chesterman's Translation Memetics criteria.
The components and their purposes are summarized below:

**Table 1.** Analytical framework.

| Dimension | Components | Purpose |
|---|---|---|
| Cultural Classification | Nida's five categories (ecological, material, social, religious, linguistic) | To systematically categorize the culture-loaded words in What is Hangzhou and identify their unique cultural characteristics. |
| Meme Replication Stages | Heylighen's four stages (Assimilation, Retention, Expression, Transmission) | To analyze how each translation strategy facilitates the meme's movement through the replication process. |
| Translation Meme Criteria | Dawkins' 3Fs (Fidelity, Fecundity, Longevity) | To evaluate the effectiveness of each translation strategy in achieving cross-cultural communication goals. |

## 4. Translation Strategies of Culture-loaded Words and its meme replication

This section analyzes translation strategies for different categories of culture-loaded words. The primary data are the official English subtitles of *What is Hangzhou,* released in September 2023 by the Hangzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism and Planet Research Institute. The analysis uses the official YouTube version because it is accessible to international audiences and provides a stable source text.
The selected expressions meet three criteria: representativeness, cultural specificity, and translation difficulty. Based on Nida's classification, the study covers ecological, material, social, and linguistic culture-loaded words. Religious culture-loaded words are excluded because they do not appear in the documentary's main cultural themes.

### 4.1. Analysis of ecological culture-loaded words

Ecological culture-loaded words are terms related to the natural environment, such as rivers, mountains, and climate. These words are not just geographical references, they are also integral to Hangzhou's identity, as the city's natural landscape has shaped its history and culture for millennia.

#### 4.1.1. Translation strategies of ecological culture-loaded words

***Example 1:***
ST: 断桥残雪;
TT: Lingering Snow at Broken Bridge
***Example 2:***
ST: 苏堤春晓;

TT: Su Causeway in the Morning of Spring

In example 1, the translator adopts the method of direct translation, retaining the structure and image of the original text, which is a typical foreignization strategy. It preserves the unique cultural imagery of West Lake's Ten Scenes. Moreover, it does not use excessive interpretation to weaken its local color, so that the English audience can also directly feel the poetic picture of this landscape. Through this method, the translation retains the cultural recognition of traditional landscape names and maintains the stability of cultural information in cross-cultural communication.

In example 2, the translator adopts a combined strategy of transliteration plus literal translation for this term, with foreignization as the dominant orientation. Among them Su is transliterated to preserve the historical and cultural origin of the causeway named after Su Shi, a great literati in the Song Dynasty, and the rest of the content is literally translated to clearly present the spring scenery connotation of the scenic spot.

#### 4.1.2. Meme replication and evaluation

**Table 2.** Effectiveness evaluation of Example 1.

| Dimension | Level | Detailed Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| Fidelity | High | completely retains the poetic imagery and cultural uniqueness of the scenic spot |
| Fecundity | High | vivid imagery helps English audiences quickly grasp the aesthetic connotation |
| Longevity | High | it is an officially recognized fixed translation with lasting communication vitality |

**Table 3.** Effectiveness evaluation of Example 2.

| Dimension | Level | Detailed Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| Fidelity | High | retains the historical implication of Su Causeway and the aesthetic connotation of spring scenery |
| Fecundity | High | clear and intuitive expression, reduces cognitive barriers for overseas audiences |
| Longevity | High | it is a universally accepted standard translation with stable long-term communication value |

### 4.2. Analysis of material culture-loaded words

Material culture-loaded words are terms related to tangible cultural artifacts, such as historical sites, artworks, and traditional crafts. These words are critical to Hangzhou's identity, as they represent the city's tangible connections to its past. For example, Liangzhu Ancient City is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that proves the existence of 5,000-year-old Chinese civilization, and Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains is one of China's most famous landscape paintings.

#### 4.2.1. Translation strategies of material culture-loaded words

***Example 3:***

ST: 富春山居图;

TT: Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains

***Example 4:***

ST: 西湖清趣图;

TT: Scenic Attractions of West Lake In example 3, the translator uses a combination of literal translation Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains and transliteration Fuchun. This strategy preserves both the painting's core meaning, which is a landscape of the Fuchun River area, and its cultural specificity. In example 4, the translator adopts literal translation as the core strategy, with a slight domestication for cognitive fluency. This strategy retains the core cultural connotation of the painting depicting West Lake's charm while adapting the expression to target readers' cognitive habits.

#### 4.2.2. Meme replication and evaluation

**Table 4.** Effectiveness evaluation of Example 3.

| Dimension | Level | Detailed Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| Fidelity | High | reserves the painting's subject matter and cultural specificity |
| Fecundity | High | easy to understand and remember for both general audiences and art enthusiasts |
| Longevity | High | consistent with existing translation norms, ensuring it will be used in future art-related contexts |

**Table 5.** Effectiveness evaluation of Example 4.

| Dimension | Level | Detailed Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| Fidelity | High | Completely retains the core meaning of the painting depicting West Lake's scenery |
| Fecundity | High | Simple and intuitive for English audiences to understand and remember |
| Longevity | High | Conforms to international translation norms of cultural artworks with long-term communication value. |

### 4.3. Analysis of social culture-loaded words

Traditions, customs, and various social norms almost all vary from country to country and region to region. Following Nida's classification, social culture-loaded words refer to terms that reflect customs, kinship terms, color words, historical events, lifestyles, marriage, festivals, and other related aspects. These following words reflect the dynamic, evolving nature of Hangzhou's identity, linking its historical past to its modern present.

#### 4.3.1. Translation strategies of social culture-loaded words

***Example 5:***

ST: 淘宝网;

TT: the modern-day AliExpress service

***Example 6:***

ST: 西泠印社;

TT: Xiling Seal Art Society

In example 5, the translator uses cross-cultural analogization, replacing the source culture-specific term Taobao with a target culture-familiar term AliExpress. In addition, adding the modifier modern-day can clarify its contemporary attribute. This

strategy is a form of domestication, as it prioritizes audience comprehension over strict cultural fidelity. This strategy completely preserves the unique historical connotation and cultural value of the source term, and realizes the complete preservation of the meme of the intangible cultural heritage carrier.

In example 6, the translator adopts a combined strategy of transliteration plus literal translation for this term of traditional cultural institution, with foreignization as the core orientation. Among them, Xiling is transliterated to retain the unique geographical and historical brand attributes. And Seal Art Society is literally translated to clearly clarify its professional attribute as a traditional Chinese seal art institution.

#### 4.3.2. Meme replication and evaluation

**Table 6.** Effectiveness evaluation of Example 5.

| Dimension | Level | Detailed Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| Fidelity | Medium | preserves the core meaning of e-commerce platform but replaces the source term with a target culture equivalent |
| Fecundity | High | extremely easy to understand and remember for English audiences |
| Longevity | Medium | AliExpress is a popular brand, but its relevance may decline over time. However, the core meaning "e-commerce platform" will remain clear |

**Table 7.** Effectiveness evaluation of Example 6.

| Dimension | Level | Detailed Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| Fidelity | High | completely retains the unique name, historical attribute and cultural connotation |
| Fecundity | High | professional and clear expression helps overseas audiences understand its cultural value |
| Longevity | High | authoritative official translation with permanent cultural communication significance |

### 4.4. Analysis of linguistic Culture-Loaded Words

Linguistic culture refers to the specific characteristics of the respective language and may be best treated under phonological, syn-tactic and lexical factors (Nida, 1964: 91). In this sense, linguistic culture-loaded words represent the unique characteristics of each language, including speech sound, vocabulary and syntax. Homophony, allegorical idioms, four-character idioms, reduplicated words are all linguistic features of Chinese. These words are the most challenging to translate because they carry not just meaning, but emotion and cultural resonance. For *What is Hangzhou*, linguistic culture-loaded words are critical to conveying the city's poetic, romantic identity, an identity that sets it apart from other Chinese cities.

#### 4.4.1. Translation strategies of linguistic culture-loaded words

***Example 7:***

ST: 陌上花开，可缓缓归矣;

TT: the sad love songs by Qian Liu

***Example 8:***

ST: 半城堆金积玉地，半城清风明月乡;

TT: a shimmering city of wealth and a peaceful land of culture

In example 7, the translator adopts a comprehensive translation strategy of contextual reconstruction, supplemented by cultural annotation and emotional positioning, with a clear domestication orientation. It abandons the poetic form and rhetorical structure of the original line, but retains the core emotional connotation of affectionate longing by supplementing the cultural creator Qian Liu, and the emotional tone, so as to adapt to the cognitive habits and acceptance logic of English audiences. It gives priority to the transmission of cultural emotion and narrative information over the literal form of the classical Chinese poetic line.

In example 8, the translator adopts the contextual reconstruction translation strategy for this antithetical couplet, balancing foreignization and domestication. On the one hand, it retains the parallel antithetical structure of the original text, which is the core linguistic feature of the source language; on the other hand, it replaces the culture-specific metaphors of "堆金积玉" and "清风明月" in the source text with expressions familiar to the target language audience, and reconstructs the context on the premise of retaining the core connotation.

### 4.4.2 Meme replication and evaluation

**Table 8.** Effectiveness evaluation of Example 7.

| Dimension | Level | Detailed Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| Fidelity | Medium | The translation completely retains the core emotional connotation, which is the affectionate longing and sadness, and the cultural creator (Qian Liu) of the original line, and accurately conveys the emotional theme of the classical verse. Although it gives up the poetic form and rhetorical beauty of the original Chinese line, it realizes the high-fidelity transmission of the core cultural and emotional meme |
| Fecundity | High | extremely easy to understand and remember |
| Longevity | Medium | love story is a universal term, but it may not be associated with Hangzhou specifically in the long term |

**Table 9.** Effectiveness evaluation of Example 8.

| Dimension | Level | Detailed Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| Fidelity | High | preserves the original's parallel structure and core meaning |
| Fecundity | High | easy to understand and remember |
| Longevity | High | uses timeless metaphors that will remain relevant for years to come |

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis examined the translation of culture-loaded words in What is Hangzhou from the perspective of Translation Memetics. Based on eight representative cases, it analyzed how different strategies support meme assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission.

The findings show that translation strategies vary by cultural category. Ecological and

material terms mainly use direct translation or transliteration plus direct translation to retain local identity. Social terms use differentiated strategies according to audience familiarity, while linguistic terms often require contextual reconstruction to convey emotional and thematic meaning.

Theoretically, the study extends the application of Translation Memetics to urban publicity documentaries by integrating Nida's cultural classification, Heylighen's replication stages, and Dawkins' 3Fs criteria.

Practically, the findings suggest that translators should balance cultural fidelity with target-audience accessibility. Retaining distinctive cultural features can strengthen local identity, while appropriate domestication can improve comprehension and transmission.

The study is limited by its focus on one documentary and eight cases. Future research could expand the corpus, include audience-reception data, and compare different cities or documentary types.

## References

[1] Aixela, J. F. (1996) Culture-specific items in translation. Powers (3): 52-78.

[2] Baker, M. (2000) In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

[3] Chesterman, A.(2012) Memes of Translation: The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

[4] Dawkins, R. (1976) The Selfish Gene. New York: Oxford University Press.

[5] Díaz-Cintas, J. (2007) Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.

[6] Heylighen, F. (1998) What Makes a Meme Successful? Selection Criteria for Cultural Evolution. In Ramaekers, Jean, (Eds). Pro-ceedings 15th International Congress on Cybernetics.

[7] Newmark, P. (2001) A Textbook of Translation. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

[8] Nida, E. (1993) Language Culture and Translation. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

[9] Bao, Huinan. (2001). Cultural Context and Language Translation. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation.

[10] Deng, Kaiyue, & Bao, Zhikun. (2020). A study on the English translation of Chinese folk culture-loaded words from the perspective of memetics. Chinese Character Culture, (21), 206–209.

[11] Fan, Xiangtao. (2008). Translation strategies for culture-specific items and their constraints: A case study of the English translation of The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons. Foreign Languages and Their Teaching, (06), 61–64.

[12] He, Ziran. (2005). Memes in language. Language Sciences, (06), 54–64.

[13] Wang, Yinquan. (2006). The debate over the English translation of "Fuwa" and strategies for translating culture-loaded words from Chinese into English. Chinese Translators Journal, 27(03), 74–76.

[14] Zheng, Dehu. (2016). Promoting Chinese culture globally and the translation of culture-loaded words. Shanghai Journal of Translators, (02), 53–56.