

English Subtitling of Culture-Loaded Words in Chinese Yu Opera: Strategies and Quality Assessment

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Abstract

Subtitling culture-loaded words poses significant challenges for subtitlers to maintain cultural nuances and conveying intended meaning in audio-visual context. This qualitative study aimed to investigate a professional translator's subtitling strategies for culture-loaded words in the Chinese Yu Opera *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* and assess the quality of the translation of these words. The current study is underpinned by Pedersen's (2011) typology of subtitling strategies and his (2017) quality assessment model. Key findings revealed that most of strategies proposed by Pedersen were employed. The study also found that the strategy of translating formal language into informal was used by the subtitler. The quality evaluation revealed that most subtitles were of high quality, with only a few minor errors. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in opera translation, enriching our understanding of professional translator's subtitling strategies and the translation quality to enhance cross-cultural communication through the medium of traditional Chinese opera.

Keywords: subtitling strategies, culture-loaded words, quality assessment, Chinese Yu Opera

1. Introduction

In a world with cultural diversity and increasing interdependence among different societies, subtitling has become an important aspect in people's everyday lives, which strongly warrants academic research into the subject (Pedersen, 2011).

1.1 Studies Related To Subtitling

According to Pedersen (2010), subtitling is distinct from the other two methods of audiovisual translation (AVT) which are dubbing and voiceover. Dubbing involves replacing the original language soundtrack with a new soundtrack in the target language. In voiceover, the original soundtrack is retained, but the volume is lowered, and a translation in the target language is narrated by a single person, as opposed to dubbing, which employs a completely new cast of actors. Subtitling, on the other hand, retains the original soundtrack and adds a translation directly onto the visual content of the film or TV programme. As highlighted by Pedersen (2011), subtitling is the most cost-effective choice for AVT when compared to dubbing and voiceover.

The definition of subtitling varies depending on the perspective. According to Gottlieb (2004), subtitling involves the translation of spoken content in a film into one or more lines of text in a different language, displayed on the screen alongside the original speech. On the other hand, Cronin (2009) views subtitling as a form of extra-diegetic translation, meaning it exists outside the narrative but is essential for viewers to comprehend the story. Therefore, it wouldn't be accurate to simply describe subtitles as translations displayed at the bottom of the screen, as they can appear elsewhere, and intralingual subtitles, in particular, do not involve translation (Pedersen, 2011). In the case of interlingual subtitling, the content is transferred from one language to another and from spoken to written form. Gottlieb terms this process "semiotic jaywalking" (2001, p.16), as interlingual subtitling essentially crosses over from the spoken source language to the target language in written form. This transition necessitates editing to remove or condense redundant oral elements when moving from speech to text (Gottlieb, 2001).

In fact, Gottlieb (2001) summarises some characteristics of subtitling that make it distinctive from other forms of translation. According to Gottlieb, subtitling is prepared communication, using written language, acting as an additive and synchronous semiotic channel, and as part of a transient and polysemiotic text (2001, p. 15, emphasis in the original). Bold text serves to distinguish subtitling from other translation methods. By prepared, it compares subtitling to simultaneous interpretation. By written, it differentiates subtitling from dubbing and voice-over. By additive, it separates subtitling from dubbing and conventional translation methods, highlighting the addition of a semiotic information channel. By synchronous, it pertains to the idea that subtitles should appear precisely when speech begins and ideally conclude at the end of the speech. By transient, it distinguishes subtitling from traditional translation methods, emphasizing that subtitles align with the visuals and vanish after being read. In a similar vein, being molysemiotic compares subtitling to traditional

translation approaches, but it places greater emphasis on the specific medium in which subtitling is employed. The ongoing debate revolves around whether subtitling can be categorised solely as translation. From Gottlieb's perspective, it could be said that subtitling is more than translation.

The process of subtitling necessitates a certain level of editing of the original material. In some circumstances, a subtitler may find it necessary to purposefully exclude certain segments of the source text (ST). According to Abdelaal (2019), the omission of cohesive devices is justified on the basis that they are seen to lack semantic significance. Nevertheless, Zojer (2011, p.401) contends that the removal of these devices may have an impact on the intended message. We agree with Zojer in that cohesive devices in Chinese are covert and need to be overtly added to help the TT readers grasp the meaning when translating from Chinese into English (Wu, 2014). Apart from omission, condensation is also common in subtitling. Due to the limitations of subtitling, it's not always possible to include all the spoken content from the source text (ST) in the subtitles. Typically, some content must be omitted, and the resulting target text (TT) is carefully edited to convey the same message as the ST but in fewer words, a process known as condensation (Pedersen, 2011). It's important to clarify that condensation is not a haphazard process; it follows a systematic approach (de Linde, 1995). Specifically, elements like repetitions and false starts in spoken language, referred to as "intrasemiotic redundancy" (Gottlieb, 1997, p. 101), are condensed. Fortunately, viewers can often infer much of what is omitted in the dialogue condensation through other means, primarily visual information. This is known as "intersemiotic redundancy" (Gottlieb, 1997, p. 101), which compensates for the condensed content for the viewers. Considering translation strategies as omission and condensation, subtitling is viewed less than translation.

Subtitling faces several constraints, which were characterised as "infamous" by Gottlieb (2004, p. 219). Titford, on the other hand, refers to subtitling as "constrained translation" (1982). These limitations can be condensed into several aspects, including the transition from spoken to written language with semiotic implications, as well as spatial and temporal constraints. Transforming spoken text into written format necessitates adjustments in terms of stylistic and structural elements. Additionally, written texts exhibit a greater lexical density when compared to their spoken counterparts, as noted by Zojer (2011). Furthermore, these written texts must retain the essence of spoken language.

Subtitling has spatial limitations, primarily due to character constraints per line and a typical limit of two lines per subtitle. It is important to highlight that subtitling considers characters, not words, as the fundamental unit, as words vary in character count (Pedersen, 2011). In academic subtitling texts, character limits per line vary: Schrøter (2003) suggests 30–40, Tveit mentions 38 as a Scandinavian maximum (2004), and Luyken et al. (1991) indicate 28–38 as the most common range. However, it is worth noting that most lines do not fully reach this character limit.

Temporal constraints are closely linked to spatial ones, ensuring viewers have adequate time to read subtitles. Typically, one-liners should be displayed for three seconds (de Linde & Kay, 2016), while two-liners should not exceed six seconds to prevent duplicate reading (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998). Short subtitles, to avoid flashing, should be exposed for at least 1.5 seconds (Zojer, 2011). Additionally, Gottlieb suggests a "12 cps rule," allowing a maximum of 12 characters per second. These factors interact with text complexity, viewer cognition, and the medium's polysemiotic nature. For instance, action-packed scenes like those in the Peking opera film "Havoc in Heaven" can slow viewer reading due to visual distractions, highlighting the impact of these factors on reading speed.

Apart from the temporal and spacial constraints and other technical limitations related to subtitling itself, translating culture-loaded words in subtitles remains one of the challenges for subtitlers and these challenges are induced by "cultural constraints" (Ranzato, 2015).

1.2 Studies Related to Translation of Culture-Loaded Words

Regarding the definition of culture-loaded words, both Western and Chinese scholars offer various explanations. Newmark (1998) defines culture-loaded words as individual words, phrases, or expressions closely tied to a specific way of life within a language group. Mona Baker (2018) suggests that source language terms can convey unfamiliar ideas in the target culture, whether abstract or concrete, related to religion, customs, or food, often referred to as "culture-specific". Pedersen (2011) uses the term "Extralinguistic Cultural References (ECRs)" for culture-loaded words, referring to people, places, customs, institutions, and food unique to a culture, which may be unfamiliar even if you know the language. Pedersen's definition aligns with Baker's.

According to Chinese scholar Hu Wenzhong (1999), culture-loaded words are defined as terms specific to a particular cultural context. These phenomena may be seen as either direct or indirect manifestations of cultural practises and beliefs associated with certain ethnic groups. Similarly, Zhou Zhipai (1987) describes culture-loaded words as the word or phrase that encapsulates the essence of a specific socio-cultural community, representing a distinct entity or concept within the language under consideration, and consequently lacking a direct equivalent in other languages. Furthermore, as stated by Professor Wang Dechun (1998), culture-loaded words are lexical items that encompass the historical, cultural, and traditional aspects of a certain country where a specific language is spoken, and they prominently exhibit the distinctive attributes of the national culture. Despite various definitions of culture-loaded words, they could be said to present a symptomatic translation problem.

Translating words rich in cultural connotations poses difficulties at various levels, but the task becomes particularly complex in the realm of subtitling. Unlike other written translation methods, subtitling lacks convenient solutions for rendering untranslatable terms. In traditional translation approaches, footnotes, glosses, and various strategies can be employed to elucidate culture-bound concepts. However, in subtitling, these methods are not viable options (Zojer, 2011). Consequently, it becomes imperative to delve into translation strategies tailored to culture-loaded words.

In this regard, some Chinese scholars have shown a keen interest in the translation of culture-loaded worlds in different fields. For instance, Ji Chaofeng and Chen Yifan (2022) broadly proposed domestication and foreignisation for translating culture-loaded words in literary works and suggested the translator should strike a balance between the two methods. In similar vein, Qiang Li, Ruixue Wu, and Young Ng (2021) recommended literal translation, transliteration and free translation, and addition as strategies for cultural elements in geotourism texts. Other studies include translation of culture-loaded words in publicity material (Liu, 2019), literary works (Lin, 2023; QIAN Ya-xu, 2019; Yu, 2020), political documents (Du & Ren, 2018; PIAN Yu-wei & CHEN Wei, 2022), and in Peking opera (Li, 2022). Notably, only one study (Li, 2022) specifically addresses the translation of culture-loaded words in opera, and all these studies focus on the translation of written texts.

Western scholars, much like their Chinese counterparts, have extensively studied cultural references. For instance, Abdelaal (2019) and Alaa and Sawi (2023) explored strategies and quality assessment for culture-bound terms, while Abdelaal and Sarhani (2021) focused on the translation of swear words and taboo expressions. Zojer (2011) also investigated cultural references. Earlier works in subtitling, like Gottlieb (1997) and Ivarsson and Carroll (1998), examined the nature of subtitling. Nedergaard-Larsen (1993) introduced strategies like verbatim transfer, culturally neutral explicitation, paraphrase, and target language adaptation. Tomaszekiewicz (1993) proposed strategies, including omission, direct transfer, adaptation, and substitution. Similarly, Pedersen (2017) recommended strategies like official equivalent, retention, specification, explicitation, addition, direct translation, generalisation, substitution, and omission. These strategies, while differing in focus, all address challenges faced by subtitlers when dealing with culture-specific elements in the transition from oral to written text.

Although research on subtitling as a primary mode of Audiovisual Translation (AVT) has surged in recent decades, many aspects of subtitling remain unexplored. In particular, there has been no comprehensive investigation into the subtitling strategies for culture-loaded words in Chinese Yu opera. This study, therefore, seeks to shed light on the complexities of subtitling culture-loaded terms and to assess the translation quality of these terms in *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan*, a poignant narrative filled with themes of heartbreak, self-sacrifice, and revenge.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study comprises two phases. The initial phase examines the translation strategies for culture-loaded words, applying Pedersen's (2011) subtitling strategy taxonomy. The second phase focuses on evaluating the translation quality of these words, employing Pedersen's (2017) FAR model.

2.1 Pedersen's Taxonomy of Subtitling Strategies

Pedersen's model of subtitling strategies for culture-specific elements is considered the most comprehensive (Horbačauskienė, Jolita, Ramunė Kasperavičienė, and Saulė Petronienė, 2016). Instead of forcing the world to conform to the model, it aligns with the world (Pedersen, 2011, p. 74). These strategies are divided into two categories: those oriented towards the source language and those focused on the target language.

Source language-oriented strategies include:

- A. *Retention*: This entails preserving cultural references in ST subtitle, with minor adaptations to suit the TL requirements.
- B. *Specification*: Adding more information to make the TT culture reference more specific than the ST ECR. This can involve completing names or acronyms (Completion) or introducing additional semantic content, such as someone's occupation or an evaluative adjective (Addition).
- C. *Direct Translation*: This strategy involves changing only the language while maintaining the semantic content.

On the other hand, target language-oriented strategies include:

- D. *Generalization*: This method makes the TT rendering less specific than the ST, achieved through the use of superordinate terms or paraphrasing.
- E. *Substitution*: The cultural reference in source text is replaced by another cultural reference, either from the ST culture or the TT culture, or even something entirely different.
- F. *Omission*: The ST cultural reference is completely omitted in the TT. Toury (1995, p.82) has demonstrated that Omission is a legitimate translation strategy, particularly in subtitling, where space constraints play a significant role.

2.2 Pedersen's FAR Model

Quality assessment in translation (TQA) has long been a central concern in Translation Studies (TS) (House, 2015). Several prominent assessment models have been widely discussed, including those developed by Katherine Reiss (1971), Julianne House (1997, 2015), and Colina (2008).

Reiss (1971), drawing upon Bühler's language function classification, views translation as a process of generating a target text (TT) that is functionally equivalent to the source text (ST). However, Reiss does not provide a detailed explanation of how language functions operate (House, 2001).

Julianne House, following Reiss, introduced her quality assessment model in 1981 and subsequently revised it in 1997 and 2015. House's

model is grounded in the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Theory and involves the analysis of specific elements in both the source text (ST) and the target text (TT), focusing on aspects such as register and genre.

Similarly, Colina (2008) presents an approach to translation quality evaluation. Termed "componential," this method assesses various quality components individually and adopts a functionalist perspective, evaluating the translated text in relation to its intended function.

It is worth noting that these assessment models have not been widely applied to the evaluation of subtitling, despite their relevance in the broader field of translation studies.

Regarding this matter, Gottlieb (2001) contends that evaluating the quality of a specific set of subtitles necessitates a comprehensive analysis of the translation of every spoken portion within a film, taking into account both its stylistic and semantic attributes. For this study, however, the Pedersen Model is considered more appropriate, as it is specifically tailored for evaluating interlingual subtitles.

This study applies Pedersen's (2017) FAR model to assess subtitle translation quality. FAR, which stands for Functional Equivalence (assessing if the subtitles convey speaker meaning), Acceptability (evaluating if the subtitles sound natural in the target language), and Readability (checking if the subtitles can be fluently and unobtrusively read), is used in this context. These parameters form the basis of an error analysis framework, where errors are classified as 'minor,' 'standard,' or 'serious,' with corresponding scores of 0.25, 0.5, and 1. Minor errors may go unnoticed by most viewers, standard errors can disrupt the viewing experience, and serious errors impact not only the current subtitles but also future ones, requiring viewers to consciously recover from the disruption. The components of the FAR model are depicted in Figure 1.

Considering time and space limitations, scholars such as Gottlieb (2001), Pedersen (2005, 2017) advocate for pragmatic equivalence as the most suitable form of equivalence in subtitling. This suggests that if the meaning is effectively conveyed without a word-for-word rendition, it should not be regarded as an error. Conversely, subtitling the verbatim words without capturing the essence of the message is considered an error, according to Pedersen (2017). Pedersen further categorises equivalence errors into two types within his model: semantic errors and stylistic errors.

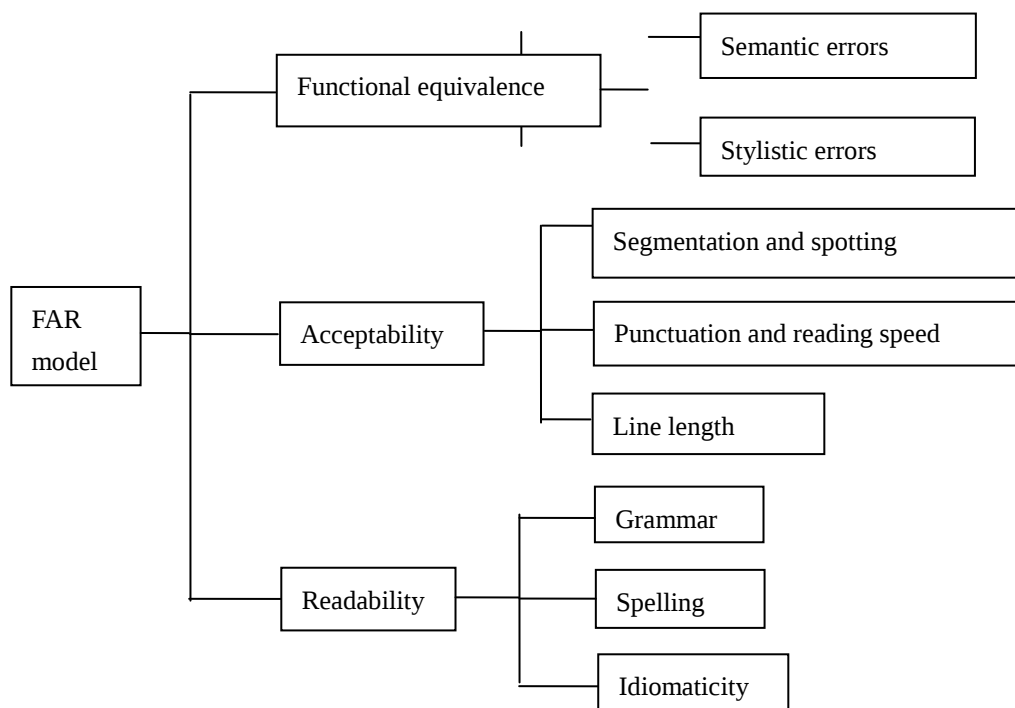


Figure 1. The FAR Model

Pedersen places significant emphasis on achieving semantic equivalence in subtitling, employing a scale of 0.5, 1, and 2 to classify minor, standard, and serious errors. In his 2017 definition, minor errors encompass lexical mistakes that have minimal impact on the film's plot and core message. Standard errors, on the other hand, affect the actual meaning but do not severely impede the viewers' understanding beyond a single subtitle. Additionally, standard semantic errors include instances where crucial plot-related dialogues remain unsubtitled (Pedersen, 2017 p. 219). As for the serious error, it is defined by Pedersen as:

a subtitle that is so erroneous that it makes the viewers' understanding of the subtitle nil and would hamper the viewers' progress beyond that subtitle, either by leading to plot misunderstandings or by being so serious as to disturb the contract of illusion for more than just one subtitle (p.219).

In terms of stylistic errors, Pedersen (2017) contends that they are less critical than semantic errors since they create inconveniences rather

than leading to misunderstandings.

The second parameter of the FAR model pertains to "acceptability," which concerns how well the target text adheres to the norms of the target language (Toury, 1995). Errors in this domain are those that make subtitles appear foreign or awkward. These errors can be classified into three types: 1) grammatical errors, 2) spelling errors, and 3) idiomatic errors (Pedersen, 2017). It's important to note that what matters here is the grammar of the target language adapted for subtitling. Given that subtitling is a hybrid of spoken and written language (Pedersen, 2011), strict adherence to grammar rules of written language can be misleading. A significant grammatical error can impair subtitle readability and comprehension, while minor errors may annoy language purists, such as the misuse of 'whom' in English. Standard errors fall somewhere in between. Spelling errors can be assessed by severity: minor errors encompass any spelling mistakes, standard errors alter word meanings, and serious errors render words unreadable. In Pedersen's grading scheme for acceptability, serious errors incur a penalty of 1, standard errors 0.5, and minor errors 0.25. In this model, "idiomaticity" signifies the natural use of language. According to Romero Fresco, "idiomaticity" is defined as the native-like selection of expressions in a given context (2015, p. 51). Errors in this category are those that sound unnatural in the target language.

Readability is the third parameter in the FAR Model. Readability errors may be categorised as problems related to spotting and segmentation, reading speed, punctuation, and line length. These are known as technical norms or subtitling concerns (Pedersen, 2011). As technical issues are not the focus of this study, they will not be fully discussed, though such errors do affect the readability of the subtitles. Suffice it to say that word length and complexity of syntax and lexis affect the line length and hence reading speed.

3. Methodology

This study aligns with the interpretive paradigm of qualitative research, specifically within the framework of descriptive translation studies. It aims to identify the translation strategies used and assess the translation quality of culture-loaded words.

The data used in this study were collected from translations by a professional translator. The translator's native language is Chinese; she has obtained a master's degree in translation and interpretation, and is currently studying for a doctorate in translation and interpretation. As a freelancer, the translator is accredited by the China Translators Association (CTA) after passing the China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI).

The translations are first checked for readability by a native English speaker who is currently employed as a foreign language teacher at a university in China. Afterwards, two translation professors are invited to evaluate the quality of the translation. It is believed that these procedures ensure the overall quality of the translations.

This Yu opera, *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan*, was selected for translation and analysis because it contains numerous words with cultural connotations. Its national and international fame also contribute to its selection. Following Pedersen's (2011) typology of subtitling strategies and Pedersen's (2017) quality assessment model, the opera is thoroughly analysed. Eighteen subtitles are selected as sample examples to investigate the issues involved. The assessment of the selected subtitles is presented after each subtitling strategy. On the first line is the Chinese ST, followed by the English TT on the second line.

For ease of analysis, when other terms such as cultural reference, culturally specific items, culturally specific terms, culturally bound references and extra-linguistic cultural reference are used in this study, they all refer to culture-loaded words.

4. Results and Discussion

This section aims to identify and discuss the translation strategies utilised in subtitling the opera, drawing upon the model presented by Pedersen (2011). Subsequently, an assessment of the translation quality will be conducted, employing the assessment model proposed by Pedersen (2017).

4.1 Retention

According to Pedersen (2011), retention is the most prevalent method for rendering ECRs. It is a strategy that, in Schleiermacher's words, "leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him" (2021, p.51). However, contrary to what Pedersen regarded to be "the most common strategy", the percentage of the retention strategy used here is only 11.63. This may be due to the translator's commitment to the target text (TT) readers. By avoiding retention, the translator is able to employ other strategies that may help domesticate the source text (ST) cultural reference, which can be explained by the frequent use of direct translation with no alteration of meaning in subtitles. It is also possible that there are few character names, so the retention of proper nouns is unnecessary.

The examples provided in Table 1 illustrate the use of the retention strategy in preserving the names of ST characters in TT. This approach shares similarities with transliteration or exoticism. While this approach maintains cultural authenticity, it also poses challenges in terms of clarity. For instance, Ritva Leppihalme (1997) warns that reliance on transliteration may lead to a lack of comprehension, as cultural references may not provide the necessary context for understanding character roles or the narrative's socio-political backdrop.

In the specific case of "cǎi fèng" and "wèi jiàng," while these names are retained in their original form, the retention strategy leaves the audience without sufficient information to grasp their cultural significance. For example, "cǎi fèng" refers to a phoenix, a symbol deeply embedded in Chinese culture, associated with royalty and virtue (Hung, 2005). Without this context, TT viewers may miss the connotations linked to status and character, which retention alone cannot convey. In this case, a strategy like specification or explication, which adds cultural context, might have been more effective (Pedersen, 2011).

Table 1. Retention

Chinese subtitle	English subtitle	Back translation
cǎi fēng áng shǒu dào táng qián	Caifeng gets to the hall raising the head high.	Cǎi fēng gāozhāo tóu lái dào dàtīng
qiáo shǒu xī wàng bā wèi jiàng pàn	Raise my head to look the west, I'm looking forward to the return of Wei Jiang.	Táitóu xī wàng, pàn wèi jiāng guīlái

In terms of quality assessment, subtitles using retention typically exhibit minimal semantic or stylistic errors since they directly transfer the source text elements throughout the opera. Nevertheless, from a functionalist perspective, there is one notable exception in the translation of "cǎi fēng" and "wèi jiàng," as it fails to provide any guidance to the target audience. In the words of Pedersen, while retention is "the most commonly employed strategy" for handling Extralinguistic Cultural References (ECRs), it is not the most optimal solution for addressing a translation challenge related to a Monocultural ECR (2011, p.78). Table 2 provides a summary of the quality assessment.

Table 2. Quality assessment of the subtitles under retention

Chinese	English	Functional equivalence	Acceptability	Readability
cǎi fēng áng shǒu dào táng qián	Caifeng gets to the hall raising the head high.	0.5 (semantic)	0	0
qiáo shǒu xī wàng bā wèi jiàng pàn	Raise my head to look the west, I'm looking forward to the return of Wei Jiang.	0.5 (semantic)	0	0

4.2 Specification

Specification, also known as explicitation, involves retaining the cultural reference in its original form while introducing extra details not found in the source text (ST) to enhance the specificity of the target text (TT). This strategy is particularly valuable when cultural references in the ST may not be fully understood by the TT audience due to differences in cultural knowledge or assumptions (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). By using specification, the translator provides supplementary details to compensate for potential cultural unfamiliarity, thereby making the narrative more accessible (Chesterman, 1997).

Table 3 displays sample instances of how specification is applied to preserve the names of characters from the ST in the TT. In these examples, the translator doesn't merely translate the character's name into Chinese pinyin. Instead, she produces the TT rendition by including the character's role or nature to help the audience grasp the opera's storyline. In the first subtitle, "traitor" is appended to clarify the character "Tu Angu," providing viewers with essential context. In the second subtitle, "my poor son" is supplied as additional information to establish the character's relationship. These additions serve to reinforce functional equivalence in the TT (Hourse, 1997; Pedersen, 2005).

Table 3. Specification

Chinese subtitle	English subtitle	Back translation
tú àn zā bà cháo láng jìn guó mén	Traitor Tu Angu dominates imperial court and drags Jin State into risk.	Jiānchén tú àn gǔ chēngbà cháotíng, jiāng jìn guó tuō rù wéixiǎn zhī zhōng.
jīng gē ér, kě lián nǐ shí jǐ tiān qǐn cǎi luò dì	Jingge, my poor son, you were just born days ago.	Jīng gē, wǒ kělián de érzi, nǐ cái chūshēng jǐ tiān ne

Table 4 provides a summary of the quality assessment for subtitles employing specification. In general, these subtitles are effectively presented and clearly convey the intended meaning. The language used is natural and flows smoothly.

Table 4. Quality assessment of the subtitles under retention

Chinese	English	Functional equivalence	Acceptability	Readability
tú àn zā bà cháo láng jìn guó mén	Traitor Tu Angu dominates imperial court and drags Jin State into risk.	0	0	0
jīng gē ér, kě lián nǐ shí jǐ tiān qǐn cǎi luò dì	Jingge, my poor son, you were just born days ago.	0	0	0

4.3 Direct Translation

Pedersen's concept of "direct translation" aligns with terms like "calque" and "literal translation" (Vinay and Darbelnet, 2000; Chesterman, 1997, p. 94). In direct translation, language is the sole element altered; there is no modification of meaning. "Literal translation" is synonymous with word-for-word translation, contrasting with "free translation," and it has a broader usage (Shuttleworth, 2017). As Pedersen (2011) further explains, unlike specification and generalisation, the semantic content of the source text (ST) remains intact, with nothing added or omitted. As this approach does not attempt to convey connotations or guide the target text (TT) audience, challenges arise when dealing with culturally specific terms. This is especially true when cultural references embedded in the source text (ST) carry meanings unfamiliar to the target text (TT) audience, as direct translation can lead to a loss of cultural resonance (Baker, 2018). Schäffner (2003) also highlights that literal translations can sometimes obscure meaning, particularly when the idiomatic or cultural context differs significantly between languages.

Table 5. Direct translation

Chinese subtitle	English subtitle	Back translation
xiǎo wǔ rú láng shēng shēng hǎn	Military officers are <u>roaring as wolves</u> .	Jūnguānmén xiàng láng yīyàng páoxiāo
rén cháng shuō hǔ dú bù shí zǐ	People often say, even <u>a vicious tiger will not eat its cubs</u> .	Rénmen cháng shuō, měnghǔ bù chī yòu zǎi

As illustrated in Table 5, following this strategy, the translator directly transfers the ST to the TT. For instance, the reference to "rú láng shēng shēng hǎn" (roaring as wolves) signifies the mercilessness of imperial military officers. In another example, the allusion "hǔ dú bù shí zǐ" is rendered literally as "a vicious tiger will not eat its cubs." The implied meaning of the ST is that Cheng Ying sacrificed his only son for the orphan's life, conveying the difficulty of this choice. In both cases, the language is the primary change, but both form and meaning are faithfully preserved.

Table 6 provides an overview of the quality assessment of subtitles employing direct translation. As indicated in the table, these subtitles successfully achieve functional equivalence with no concerns regarding acceptability or readability. It's not surprising that Peter Newmark (1981) advocates for a literal translation approach as the most suitable method to achieve semantic equivalence.

Table 6. Quality assessment of the subtitles under direct translation

Chinese	English	Functional equivalence	Acceptability	Readability
xiǎo wǔ rú láng shēng shēng hǎn	Military officers are roaring as wolves.	0	0	0
rén cháng shuō hǔ dú bù shí zǐ	People often say, even a vicious tiger will not eat its cubs.	0	0	0

4.4 Generalisation

The generalisation strategy involves substituting specific cultural references with more general terms, achieved through superordinate terms or paraphrasing. Generalisation was employed to convey the meanings of cultural terms. Table 7 demonstrates how expressions containing "qīng fēng jiàn" (sword) and "yú dì" (me/my) are translated with less culture-specific references to enhance naturalness for the target audience. This same approach is used for self-deprecating expressions and terms of respect in the Chinese source text of the opera. In Chinese, the term "yú dì", which literally means "stupid younger brother," carries a culturally embedded form of modesty and respect (Gu, 1990). The hierarchical implications of terms such as "gē gē" (elder brother) and "dì dì" (younger brother) are deeply rooted in Confucian ideals of familial respect and deference (Yuling Pan & Kádár, 2012). In translating these terms, the challenge lies in conveying their pragmatic and cultural functions without overwhelming the TT audience with unfamiliar social concepts. Therefore, the translator opts for generalisation, transforming these hierarchical expressions into more accessible language. Furthermore, it is worth noting that in Chinese culture, terms like "rén xiōng" (dear bro) and "yú dì" (me/my) in certain contexts are formal expressions. In this study, such formality is translated into colloquial or informal language.

Table 7. Generalization

Chinese subtitle	English subtitle	Back translation
nǎo shàng lái bá chū le qīng fēng jiàn	I draw my <u>sword</u> in exasperation	Wǒ fěnnù de bá chū jiàn
dōu guài yú dì tài lǚ mǎng	I should be to blame for <u>my</u> recklessness	Wǒ yīnggāi wèi wǒ de lǚmǎng fùzé
rén xiōng nǐ huáng quán lù shàng nài xīn děng	My <u>dear bro</u> , please wait for me on the way to heaven	Qīn'ài de xiōngdì, qīng zài qù tiāntáng de lùshàng děng wǒ
nà shí jiàn zán gē liǎ quán xià xiāng huì	When <u>we</u> meet on the heaven	Dāng wǒmen zài tiāntáng xiāngyù

Table 8 provides a summary of the quality assessment for subtitles incorporating generalisation. In numerous cases, a slight alteration in language style is observed, where self-deprecating expressions and terms of respect like "yú dì" (me/my) are substituted with more general and formal language, which is deemed more suitable for the target text (TT) reader, albeit at the cost of some expressiveness. As previously mentioned, this shift in style, transitioning from formal in the source text (ST) to informal in the TT, appears to be a consistent strategy employed by the translator across multiple instances in the data. Consequently, it can be concluded that minor style-related errors exist, but these do not affect the viewer's comprehension of the TT.

Table 8. Quality assessment of the subtitles under generalization

Chinese	English	Functional equivalence	Acceptability	Readability
nǎo shàng lái bá chū le qīng fēng jiàn	I draw my sword in exasperation	0	0	0
dōu guài yú dì tài lǚ mǎng	I should be to blame for my recklessness	0.25 (stylistic)	0	0
rén xiōng nǐ huáng quán lù shàng nài xīn děng	My dear bro, please wait for me on the way to heaven	0.25 (stylistic)	0	0
nà shí jiàn zán gē liǎ quán xià xiāng huì	When we meet on the heaven	0.25 (stylistic)	0	0

4.5 Substitution

A translator may opt to substitute a cultural term from the source text (ST) with an alternative term that has relevance to the target text (TT) culture or is universally applicable (Pedersen, 2011). This approach typically demands significant effort from the translator, as it entails the task of harmonising two cultures rather than a literal word-for-word translation. The data includes 17 instances of this approach, indicating the translator's focus on catering to the target audience.

Table 9. Substitution

Chinese subtitle	English subtitle	Back translation
bēi chéng xiàng yǔ fù mǎ yīn dāo xián yuān zhì jīn hán hèn zài jiǔ quán rén xiōng nǐ huáng quán lù shàng nài xīn děng yǎn kàn zhe zhòng yīng hái yào chéng guǐ hún	Sorrowfully, <u>prime minister</u> and the <u>King's-son-in-law</u> were killed without justice and they brought the humiliation to <u>the grave</u> My dear bro, please wait for me <u>on the way to heaven</u> <u>not sparing the lives</u> of other new born babies	Lǐng rén bēitóng de shì, shǒuxiàng hé guówáng nǚxù bèi wúlǐ shāhài Tāmen bǎ xiūrù dài rù fénmù Qīn'ài de xiōngdì, qǐng zài qù tiāntáng de lùshàng děng wǒ Bùgù jí qítā xīnshēng yīng'ér de shēngmìng

Cultural substitution is predominantly employed when translating official titles that are deeply ingrained in a particular culture and society. Terms like "ch éng xiàng" (prime minister) and "fù mǎ" (King's-son-in-law) might pose comprehension challenges for the target audience. Consequently, the translator must choose between replacing these terms with target text (TT) references, which is one of the two strategies outlined by Pedersen (2011). The alternative strategy has involved using a more universally recognised (i.e., transcultural) equivalent cultural reference (ECR) from the source culture or another culture. It is worth noting that this study did not identify any instances of borrowing terms from a third culture.

Cultural substitution is also employed when translating euphemisms related to death in the Chinese source text (ST). Euphemistic expressions like "jiǔ quán" (the grave) and "huáng quán lù shàng" (on the way to heaven) are deeply rooted in Chinese culture, familiar to ST readers but potentially unfamiliar to TT readers. Therefore, the translator has opted to replace these ST expressions with equivalent items that already exist in the TT.

Another technique within the substitution strategy involves replacing culturally bound references in the source text (ST) with a paraphrase that imparts a distinct sense while aligning with the context. Pedersen coined this as "situational substitution," a technique akin to a "quasi-omission strategy" (2011). In this strategy, the ST term is not entirely omitted; instead, it's substituted with an expression carrying a different meaning, yet rendering the situation more understandable to the target text (TT) reader. In the third example from Table 9, the term "guǐ hún" literally translates to "ghost." It is evident that the translator has removed the connotation of "ghost" and replaced it with a term more fitting to the context. This approach aligns with Gottlieb's concept of "resignation" (1997, p. 75).

Table 10 provides an overview of the quality assessment for subtitles employing substitution. Several functional equivalence errors arise in the translation of official titles through the substitution strategy. These errors primarily involve stylistic alterations. For instance, "fù mǎ" is replaced with "King's son-in-law," and "ch éng xiàng" is substituted with "prime minister." While the target text (TT) remains clear and comprehensible, it often loses cultural connotations. In most cases, although there is a minor shift in meaning, it does not significantly impact readability or acceptability.

Table 10. Quality assessment of the subtitles under substitution

Chinese	English	Functional equivalence	Acceptability	Readability
bēi chéng xiàng yǔ fù mǎ yīn dāo xián yuān	Sorrowfully, prime minister and the King's-son-in-law were killed without justice	0.25 (stylistic)	0	0
zhì jīn hán hèn zài jiǔ quán	and they brought the humiliation to the grave	0.25 (stylistic)	0	0
rén xiōng nǐ huáng quán lù shàng nài xīn děng	My dear bro, please wait for me on the way to heaven	0.25 (stylistic)	0	0
yǎn kàn zhe zhòng yīng hái yào chéng guǐ hún	not sparing the lives of other new born babies	0.25 (stylistic)	0	0

4.6 Omission

Omission serves as a valid translation strategy, as indicated by Toury (1995) and is simply defined in this model as the replacement of the Source Text Equivalent Cultural Reference (ST ECR) with nothing, as outlined by Pedersen (2011). Nevertheless, omission should be considered a last resort, employed only after other translation strategies have been explored and found inadequate (Schäffner, 1997; Toury, 1995). In essence, a responsible translator resorts to omission only when alternative translation strategies have been tested and proven ineffective. This assertion is supported by the fact that omission accounts for merely 4.65% of occurrences, the lowest percentage among all strategies.

Table 11. Omission

Chinese subtitle	English subtitle	Back translation
xu è l ǎ àn d ǎn sh ĭ lì ù nǐ ǎn	Over the past 16 year, I often <u>weeping secretly</u> .	16 Niánlái, wǒ chángcháng tōutōu de kūqì.
shòu mì zhǐ huàn cháo lái sǎo chú yīn mái	Authorised with secret edict, I return to <u>weep out traitors</u> and assist a new regime.	Wǒ fēng mìzhǐ guīlái, tòngchì pàntú, xiězhù xīn zhèngquán.
jiān tāng áo yào tí xīn diào dǎn wǒ shǒu zài nǐ shēn biān na	serving meals and decocting medical herbs	Shànshí hé jiān yào
chéng yīng jìng rán gǎn qī tiān	Cheng Ying actually had the nerve <u>to lie</u> .	Chéng yīng jūrán hái hǎoyìsi shuōhuǎng

In the first example in Table 11, "xu è l ǎ," which literally translates to "tears with blood," may sound like an incident or syndrome, potentially causing confusion among viewers. In the second example, "yīn mái," a cultural term associated with climate, can be described as "haze." This term is used metaphorically to mean "traitor," specifically referring to Tu Angu and his followers in the imperial court. In the third example, "tí xīn diào dǎn" means "be in fear of." Alternative options include "be on tenterhooks," "be nervous," and, in a more idiomatic sense, "wait for the other shoe to drop." However, the translator has chosen not to convey this meaning in the Target Text (TT).

In the last example, "qī tiān" is simply translated as "to lie," with the cultural element "tiān," signifying "the King," omitted. Consequently, "qī tiān" could be rendered as "lie to the King," a practice considered to lead to execution in the imperial court system. In this translation, readability is enhanced at the cost of cultural richness (Baker, 2018; Venuti, 1995).

Table 12 provides a summary of the quality assessment for subtitles using omission. As previously mentioned, there are additional translation possibilities for the third and fourth examples. The errors in these cases pertain to semantics, falling within the domain of functional equivalence. A score of 0.5 is assigned to the translation of example 3 because the translator could have explored alternative approaches before resorting to omission as a strategy. However, aside from the omissions, the remaining translations are deemed acceptable and easily readable.

Table 12. Quality assessment of the subtitles under omission

Chinese	English	Functional equivalence	Acceptability	Readability
xu è l ǎ àn d ǎn sh ĭ lì ù nǐ ǎn	Over the past 16 year, I often weeping secretly.	0	0	0
shòu mì zhǐ huàn cháo lái sǎo chú yīn mái	Authorised with secret edict, I return to weep out traitors and assist a new regime.	0	0	0
jiān tāng áo yào tí xīn diào dǎn wǒ shǒu zài nǐ shēn biān na	serving meals and decocting medical herbs	0.5 (semantic)	0	0
chéng yīng jìng rán gǎn qī tiān	Cheng Ying actually had the nerve to lie.	0.25 (semantic)	0	0

In summary, Table 13 offers a comprehensive overview of different subtitling strategies employed within the data. According to the percentages, the top three strategies utilised are direct translation (30.23%), specification (25.58%), and substitution (16.28%).

Table 13. The subtitling strategies in the data

Translation strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Retention	10	11.63
Specification	22	25.58
Direct translation	26	30.23
Generalization	10	11.63
Substitution	14	16.28
Omission	4	4.65
Total	86	100

5. Conclusion

This study sought to identify subtitling strategies employed in translating culture-loaded words within the Chinese Yu Opera *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* and evaluate the quality of these translations. To achieve this, data was gathered from the opera and analysed using Pedersen's (2011) subtitling strategy typology and Pedersen's (2017) quality assessment model. The findings indicated that all of Pedersen's proposed strategies were utilised, with direct translation being the most frequently employed, in contrast to Pedersen's suggestion of retention. Instances were also observed where formal source text (ST) was transformed into informal target text (TT). This choice of strategy and associated stylistic alterations may stem from the complexity and divergence between the ST and TT. Quality assessment revealed that most subtitles were of high quality, with a few minor errors primarily related to informal rendering of formal subtitles.

Nonetheless, this study has some limitations. First, the quality assessment may carry a degree of subjectivity, which is mitigated through inter-rater evaluation to enhance data reliability. Second, the data is derived from a single opera, potentially limiting its generalisability to other text types. Lastly, the study specifically concentrates on the translation of culture-loaded words, excluding other aspects such as four-character structures and the rhythms and rhymes of librettos. Future researchers may explore these areas. Additionally, a multi-modal approach should be considered to investigate how meanings are generated, lost, and compensated for in opera translation comprehensively.

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Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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