Subtitle Translation of Chinese Elements in View of Cultural Translation: A Case Study of *Ne Zha: I Am the Destiny*

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Abstract: Guided by Bassnett's cultural translation theory, this paper probes the strategies and methods used in subtitle translation of film and television productions containing Chinese elements. Taking the translation of lines from *Ne Zha: I Am the Destiny*, it analyzes the language expressions of Chinese tradition and categorizes the methods of dealing with cultural elements in the translation process. The aim is to elevate the translation quality of film subtitles from a cultural perspective, facilitating better communication between the original-language films and target-language audiences, and promoting cross-cultural exchanges.

Keywords: Cultural translation theory; Subtitle translation; Chinese elements; *Ne Zha: I Am the Destiny*

1. Introduction

With the global promotion of Chinese film and television and the fast-paced growth of the global industry, films serve as a vital tool for cultural dissemination and promoting Chinese traditions abroad. To enhance global understanding of China, modern communication methods should be utilized to promote our culture effectively. Prioritizing subtitle translation is crucial for maximizing the cultural dissemination impact of films and television. Unlike other forms of literary translation, subtitle translation requires instantaneity, colloquialism, and conciseness [1]. Film plots often contain unique cultural connotations of different ethnicities and nations. Additionally, in different social environments and cultural backgrounds, each language produced will entail different meanings and artistic effects. At the same time, subtitle translation is extremely important for presenting excellent Chinese aesthetics to overseas markets, which is not only a linguistic conversion but also a cultural transplantation based on the cultural translation theory. Therefore, for Chinese culture to "go global" through the dissemination of domestic films, conducting research on subtitle translation is imperative.

Differences in thinking logic and language between Chinese people and those of other countries have led to cultural barriers, which hinder mutual understanding. *Ne Zha* is a 110-minute film based on a traditional

Chinese mythological story. It contains various Chinese dialects, extremely catchy adages, names of famous ancient Chinese characters, and other words with Chinese characteristics, all of which show Chinese aesthetics and spirits. From a superficial perspective, film subtitles possess characteristics of brevity, colloquialism, and dissemination; moreover, from a profound perspective, they need to portray character personalities while considering contextual contrasts.

2. Theoretical framework

Considering that this thesis is designed for the subtitle translation of the animated film *Ne Zha* through Susan Bassnett's cultural translation theory, the theoretical research areas involved in this paper will include studies on subtitle translation, Chinese elements, and cultural translation theory.

2.1. Subtitle translation

Subtitle translation, serving as a medium for film dissemination, bridges the communication gap between different cultures. Typically, subtitle translation refers to interlingual translation, wherein dialogue and necessary visual information from the film are translated into the target language and overlaid at the bottom of the screen while preserving the original audio. The characteristics of film and television language include its audibility, comprehensiveness, immediacy, accessibility, and lack of annotation [2].

In the West, European scholars pioneered film and television translation research. Istvan Fodor, a key figure, conducted groundbreaking work in 1976, exploring dubbing and translation from semiotic, linguistic, and aesthetic perspectives. He emphasized achieving synchronization in sound, characters, and content, laying the theoretical groundwork for this field [3].

In the 20th century, supported by the European Union, film and television research flourished alongside advancements in science, technology, and language awareness in Europe. Ivarsson's 1992 work marked Europe's first comprehensive study on subtitle translation, offering theoretical insights and practical strategies, especially under new technologies [4]. Henrik Gottlieb, a prominent figure in film and television translation, introduced ten subtitle translation methods, integrating linguistics into the field [5].

In the 21st century, with the development of mass media, the study of film and television translation is flourishing in the West. The number of papers related to film and television translation published in well-known international translation journals is increasing, the research field is broader, and the content is more in-depth. In addition, international seminars on film and television translation have become increasingly frequent.

Compared with the West, the research on subtitle translation in China started relatively late but has made a breakthrough in the past decade. Many scholars have summarized the linguistic characteristics of film and television translation from their own practice and explored the principles and skills of subtitle translation.

2.2. Chinese elements

Chinese elements are a broad concept, with the five-thousand-year civilization of the Chinese nation being one of its important components. Generally, Chinese elements are more present in various aspects of Chinese philosophy, ideology, politics, economy, culture, education, and institutions. However, the most subtle influence lies in the cultural-loaded words. In the practice of Chinese-to-English translation, culture-loaded words have always been a long-standing translation challenge.

In the 1960s, following the "cultural turn" in translation studies, vocabulary containing cultural elements became the focus of scholars' attention. Various scholars have given different names to such vocabularies, such as culturally loaded words [6], cultural words [7], culture-specific items [8], and culture-specific concepts [9]. This

concept was first proposed domestically by Xu, who also discussed the relationship between culture-loaded words and English teaching. Therefore, this thesis adopts the term "cultural-loaded words" proposed by Xu to refer to " 文化负载词 " (*wenhuafuzaici*).

Regarding the classification of culture-loaded words, the most classic classifications abroad were proposed by Nida and Newmark. Newmark categorized culture-loaded words into five major types: body language and customs, ecological culture, social culture, institutional customs, and material culture [7]. Nida, based on cultural factors, divided culture into five major categories: linguistic culture, ecological culture, material culture, religious culture, and social culture [10]. Domestic scholars often further refine the classification of culture-loaded words, mainly due to the profound and extensive history of Chinese culture. Chinese culture-loaded words, or Chinese elements, often possess extremely rich cultural connotations or functions.

In Chinese-to-English translation, Chinese elements are often reflected in culture-loaded words, and the translation and classification of culture-loaded words highly depend on the content of the text itself.

2.3. Cultural translation theory

From the 1920s to the 1960s, linguists analyzed translation issues from the perspectives of semiotics, semantics, descriptive linguistics, and pragmatic linguistics but struggled to tackle literary translation challenges. By the mid-20th century, scholars acknowledged the significance of cultural factors, paving the way for cultural translation theory. Early researchers like Eugene Nida and Rostislav Apod initiated discussions on the language-culture relationship.

During the 1970s, the polysystem theory was introduced by Israeli academic Itamar Even-Zohar, emphasizing the interaction between different cultures and the constraints imposed by systemic relationships [11]. Translation, as a form of cultural exchange, should be placed within the cultural context to consider cultural differences. This provides a new perspective for translation theory, driving research in Western translation theory beyond the textual level to encompass cultural, historical, social, and political dimensions. In 1976, the Literary Translation Conference was held in Leuven, marking the establishment of Translation Studies as an independent discipline. In the 1980s, Mary Snell-Hornby first proposed the concept of "cultural turn," which linked "external literary factors" with "translation choices and their role in literary systems" [12]. In her view, the focus of translation should be on cultural transfer rather than linguistic transfer. Her translation perspective challenged the traditional notion based on linguistic transfer. During this period, scholars of the cultural school were not seeking linguistic equivalence, but rather placing translation within the broader context of social history and complex power structures, exploring the process of cultural transmission [13]. This "cultural turn" had a profound impact on scholars, particularly on pioneers like Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere who deepened the concept of "cultural turn."

The 1980s witnessed a cultural turn in translation studies. Susan Bassnett, a leading advocate of the cultural translation school and a British scholar, believes that translation is not merely a linguistic act but also involves the cultural system in which the language operates [14]. Bassnett, building on Snell-Hornby's theory, emphasized the shift in translation studies toward cultural focus rather than textual analysis. Translation, she argued, transcends linguistic transfer and should prioritize cultural understanding. In *Translation, History, and Culture*, co-edited by Bassnett and Lefevere, they advocated for considering cultural functional equivalence in translation [15]. Based on these findings, they established the cultural translation theory, which directs translation studies toward historical and cultural perspectives.

Up to this day, the cultural translation theory is aimed at explaining and understanding the impact of cultural differences during translation, as well as proposing solutions to mitigate their effects. According to Qiyi

Liao, culture-loaded words are words, phrases, and idioms that are only found in a certain culture, and refer to the unique ways of activities that a certain nation gradually accumulates over the long course of history, which are different from other nations [16]. Cultural translation theory is pivotal for understanding and bridging cultural gaps in the translation process, aiding in more scientific cultural transmission and exchange. The essence of it mainly encompasses the following four points:

(1) Translation should not remain solely at the linguistic level; instead, it should consider culture as the translation unit.

(2) The purpose of translation is to overcome barriers caused by language differences and facilitate cultural exchange.

(3) The nature of translation lies in the cross-cultural transmission of the original message, rather than merely decoding and encoding.

(4) The essence of translation lies in cultural transplantation and integration. Translators should not be content with describing the original text but should strive to achieve cultural equivalence in the target language culture. Additionally, Bassnett emphasizes that the principles and norms of translation are constantly changing and vary in their requirements across different historical periods [14].

3. A case study on *Ne Zha*

The Chinese elements portrayed in *Ne Zha* serve as a window into the study and dissemination of traditional Chinese culture through cultural translation theory. Among the various classifications of cultural elements, the classification criteria proposed by Nida are the most widely applied and can comprehensively cover various cultural factors, making them suitable for categorizing Chinese elements in *Ne Zha*.

Moreover, *Ne Zha*, adapted from *The Investiture of the Gods*, portrays the legendary defiance of fate by its protagonist, Nezha. The film encompasses rich Eastern cultural elements like Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism with cultural values. These culturally loaded words, specific to the source culture, typically lack direct equivalents in the target culture, rendering their translation notably difficult [17]. Hence, analyzing *Ne Zha*'s subtitle translation sheds light on translation strategies in original domestic animated films.

Therefore, based on Nida's classification and Bassnett's cultural translation theory, this chapter divides Chinese elements into five major categories: ecological culture, material culture, social culture, religious culture, and linguistic culture. Taking the English translation of *Ne Zha* as an example, translation analysis is conducted based on different types of culturally loaded words and textual contexts.

3.1. Ecological cultural elements

Ecological cultural elements, also known as ecological cultural-loaded words, reflect the natural and geographical environment, climatic conditions, and characteristics of certain linguistic communities. They represent the relationship between humans and nature and the ecological environment, including plants, animals, mountains, rivers, cities, towns, and the associated connotations [18]. The ecological cultural elements in *Ne Zha* are often translated concisely by transliteration.

(1) ST: 那就是你拯救陈塘关，名正言顺成为灵珠之时。

TT: Then you will rescue *Chen Tang Pass* and claim your birthright as the Spirit Pearl.

In the novel *The Investiture of the Gods,* "陈塘关" (*chentangguan*) is depicted as a significant pass, where a treasure has been passed down since the time of the Yellow Emperor, and it is also the birthplace of Nezha and the place where Nezha's family resides. However, due to geographical and historical differences,

some audiences have little knowledge of *The Investiture of the Gods,* and there are no corresponding place names in Western geography. According to Bassnett, for readers from different language backgrounds to have a similar experience with both texts, the cultural function of the translated text should match that of the original. Furthermore, he also points out the inherent untranslatability between languages, and the appropriateness of transliteration and literal translation to preserve the original language and culture is highlighted. Additionally, although " 陈塘关 " (*chentangguan*) holds unique historical and cultural significance for Chinese audiences, it does not significantly impact the plot or historical background of the movie. Therefore, in such circumstances, transliterating and literally translating it as "Chen Tang Pass" ensures readability and meets the requirements of intralingual coherence most effectively.

(2) ST: 乾元山金光洞
TT: The Cave of Golden Light
" 乾元山金光洞 " (*qianyuanshanjinguangdong*) is a secluded place hidden in the mountains, traditionally believed to be the awakening place of Taiyi Zhenren. Sichuan province in southwest China is where " 乾元山 " (*qianyuanshan*) is situated at present. The name of this place originates from the shining golden light it emits, so retaining the original meaning of the name and directly translating it as "the Cave of Golden Light" preserves the cultural characteristics of the original text. However, it is worth noting that there is a case of omission in this translation, as the information about " 乾元山 " (*qianyuanshan*) was overlooked by the translator. This may be due to space limitations in the subtitle display, leading to only the central meaning of the word being translated, while retaining the cultural characteristic with the most significance.

3.2. Material cultural elements

Material culture elements are material cultural-loaded words created by people in specific time and language communities, including tools, transportation, daily necessities, musical instruments, food, medicine, clothing, and measurements. They reflect a tangible culture that exists in concrete forms. In the film *Ne Zha,* there are numerous unique virtual material terms related to mythology. These material culture elements are difficult to find corresponding words in Western culture, and the same objects are inclined to stimulate varied connotations among individuals hailing from diverse cultural heritages.

(3) ST: 我们来踢毽子如何？
TT: How does playing *jianzi* sound to you?
Originating from the Han Dynasty's " 蹴鞠 " (*cuju*) in China, " 毽子 " (*jianzi*), typically made of feathers and metal coins, is a game tool unique to Chinese culture. It is a traditional game and sport played by kicking with hands or feet with over 2000 years of history. Additionally, the film itself provides a sufficient visual depiction of it, offering ample contextual information for overseas audiences. Therefore, transliterating it as "*jianzi*" directly preserves the cultural information of the source language, enabling overseas audiences to understand this Chinese sport, transplanting this characteristic culture of China into English culture, and promoting cultural output.

(4) (a) ST: 风火轮
TT: A flaming chariot
(b) ST: 火尖枪
TT: A fire-tipped spear

(c) ST: 混天绫

TT: The Chaotic Silk

"风火轮"(*fenghuolun*), "火尖枪"(*huojianqiang*), and "混天绫"(*huntianling*) are all Taoist treasures bestowed upon Nezha by Taiyi Zhenren. Taoism serves as both the origin and core of the entire story in the movie. Therefore, employing a literal translation method preserves its cultural essence without hindering audience comprehension. For instance, "火尖枪"(*huojianqiang*) is translated directly as "A fire-tipped spear" since it resembles a spear. "混天绫"(*huntianling*), representing a fabric with extraordinary power, is translated into "The Chaotic Silk" to convey its magnificence. However, the translation of "风火轮"(*fenghuolun*) neither reflects Chinese elements nor conforms to English culture. The term "风火轮"(*fenghuolun*) comes from the fact that when Nezha rides on them, the left wheel creates wind while the right wheel produces fire, similar to wearing a pair of roller skates that accelerate forward. This analogy is more recognizable to Western audiences. Hence, according to the cultural translation theory, "A flaming chariot" encompasses the Chinese cultural essence of this term and effectively conveys its literal and cultural meanings to English-speaking audiences.

3.3. Social cultural elements

Distinct societies possess their own historical backgrounds, social systems, political traits, and cultural ambiances. Influenced by these factors, indigenous social-cultural terms arise, encapsulating customs, lifestyles, education systems, and more. In contrast to material cultural elements, these terms denote intangible cultural elements. The social culture-loaded word acts as the catalyst for societal cultural dynamics, which encompasses the intricacies of individuals' daily routines and interpersonal interactions [19].

(5)(a) ST: 多谢师尊栽培。

TT: You can count on me, *master*. Thank you so much.

(b) ST: 我是你的师叔。

TT: I'm your *master's peer*!

China's rich cultural heritage emphasizes respect for teachers, with terms like "师尊"(*shizun*) and "师叔"(*shishu*) carrying nuanced meanings. While "师尊"(*shizun*) denotes the Supreme Lord and "师叔"(*shishu*) refers to disciples, their English equivalents, "master," lack such distinction. In Western culture, "uncle" is typically reserved for blood relatives. Chinese cultural norms emphasize refined forms of appellation more than Western norms, potentially confusing audiences regarding character relationships. To ensure accuracy, translators should consider characters' identities and relationships, opting for suitable English equivalents such as "grandmaster" to refer to "师尊"(*shizun*) so as to convey hierarchical differences.

(6)(a) ST: 李大人，仙长还不施法吗？

TT: Your *highness*, the immortal's spell must be cast soon!

(b) ST: 大人啊，你救得了哪吒一时救不了一世。

TT: *Milord*, ultimately, your sacrifice would just go to waste.

In ancient China, "大人"(*daren*) typically referred to adults with power or status in society, often used to show respect or address elders and authoritative figures, including members of the imperial family, nobility, and officials. "Highness" in English-speaking countries is apt to refer to royal members, especially princes or princesses, and other direct relatives of queens or kings. However, Jing Li is only the deputy commander of Chen Tang Pass, w ho has no familial relationship with the emperor. Therefore, in (a), the translation of "大人"(*daren*) is incorrect; but in (b), "Milord" is a respectful term in English for noblemen or individuals with status,

encompassing both nobility and officials. Through this term, cultural equivalency is maintained, facilitating overseas audiences to better understand the relationships between characters.

3.4. Religious cultural elements

Religious cultural elements comprise words associated with a nation's religious beliefs and ideologies, which reflect the unique religious faith and mindset of a specific ethnic group. Chinese culture has been deeply influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism over millennia, which engage in mutual dialogue while also integrating with each other, exerting a profound and lasting impact on the Chinese nation's ideology and spirit as well as generating a plethora of culturally loaded words with distinct religious connotations. In *Ne Zha*, religious cultural elements predominating in the film's subtitles are primarily rooted in Taoist culture.

(7) ST: 师尊早已跳出三界外。

TT: The Supreme Lord entered a realm beyond *the three worlds*.

Taoism has three different interpretations of "三界" (*sanjie*): the heavens, earth, and humanity; the heavens, earth, and water; and the desire realm, form realm, and formless realm. While the concept of it can be interpreted on three levels, Taoism believes that beyond the scope of "三界" (*sanjie*), one can transcend life and death, reaching a state of carefree longevity. However, in the translation above, "三界" (*sanjie*) is translated directly as "the three realms." The cultural information inherent in "三界" (*sanjie*) is completely omitted, as the translator chooses to avoid addressing the cultural gap, leaving the target audience unfamiliar with Taoist culture confused. Peiji Zhang interprets "跳出三界" (*tiaochusanjie*) as "make a clean break with this mortal world" [20]. Due to the difficulty of translating Taoist culture, Peiji Zhang also struggles to accurately convey its religious color, but in terms of movie subtitles, his translation seems more appropriate.

(8) ST: 你就在这图中跟我学习昆仑仙术吧。

TT: You can spend every day here learning *the Immortal magic of Kunlun* with me.

Originating from Mount Kunlun in western China, "昆仑" (*kunlun*) holds significance as a prominent mountain in Chinese mythology. It serves as the backdrop for numerous mythological tales. "昆仑" (*kunlun*) transitioned into a term within Chinese Taoism over time, representing a distinct sect or branch. Within Taoist lore, "昆仑仙术" (*kunlunxianshu*) emerges as a prevalent concept, embodying the mystical practices of immortal cultivation. This notion is frequently encountered in various mythological narratives and folk legends, denoting the supernatural abilities of immortality. Jin suggested transliteration through Chinese Pinyin in traditional Chinese cultural translation preserves the essence of Chinese tradition and linguistic style [21]. In line with this recommendation, the translator opts for the transliteration of "Kunlun" and the literal translation of "the immortal magic," which explains the nature and name of the faction, thereby enriching the cultural fidelity of the translation and its reception.

(9) ST: 日月同生，千灵重元，天地无量乾坤圈。急急如律令。

TT: With the power of sun and moon, of sea and sand, Qiankun Hoop, obey my command.

The spell "急急如律令" (*jijirulvling*), originally a bureaucratic term, evolved into a Taoist talisman used by sorcerers for immediate effect. In *Ne Zha*, its cultural complexity mirrors incantations in the *Harry Potter* Series, understood only by wizards. The translator opted for a free translation to ease audience comprehension while maintaining subtitle principles. Viewers quickly understand its summoning function for the Qiankun Hoop and its potent force, aligning with the film's visuals and sound. This approach achieves cultural

equivalence, transmitting nuanced meanings to English-speaking audiences and fulfilling the subtitle's purpose effectively.

3.5. Linguistic cultural elements

Linguistic cultural elements refer to stable expressions formed during the development of a language, as well as the various differences between this language and those of other countries and ethnic groups. For example, in the Chinese language system, there are numerous four-character phrases, idioms, colloquialisms, proverbs, dialects, etc. These linguistic cultural-loaded words are often concise yet rich in connotation. Furthermore, due to constraints in the length and space of subtitles, translation presents even greater challenges.

(10) ST: 你打我撒，你打我撒。

TT: Hit me now. I dare ya!

This line is an authentic Sichuan dialect spoken by Taiyi Zhenren, which greatly enhances the comedic effect of the film. Furthermore, the line carries a strong sense of provocation, with " 撒 " (*sa*) serving as a particle in the Sichuan dialect. In the translation, "ya" serves as a colloquial expression for "you" or "your," and "dare" implies challenging or provoking someone to do something. Translating " 你打我撒 " (*nidawosa*) as "I dare ya" effectively captures the linguistic correlation in both English and Chinese. Additionally, the vowel of the dialect word " 撒 " (*sa*) is faithfully rendered in the translation as "ya," achieving phonetic conformity while preserving the original meaning and provocative tone. Therefore, when translating dialect words into English, it is beneficial to frequently employ such colloquial equivalents, using informal expressions or truncations, to both accommodate the language patterns of the target audience and retain the original dialect characteristics.

(11) ST: 我定千里来相会

TT: I will come from *wherever I am*.

Under these circumstances, " 千里 " (*qianli*) does not literally mean one thousand miles but figuratively signifies a remote distance. Classical Chinese texts and idiomatic expressions often employ figurative language, where terms like " 三 " (*san*, three), " 九 " (*jiu*, nine), " 千 " (*qian*, thousand), " 万 " (*wan*, ten thousand), mostly convey figurative rather than literal numbers. Therefore, it is inappropriate to simply translate it word-for-word as "one thousand miles"; instead, it should be interpreted based on the figurative usage of the expression. This translation does not confine itself to a literal equivalence but effectively grasps the figurative meaning of " 千里 " (*qianli*), demonstrating the semantic change. Moreover, it accurately conveys the cultural significance of the idiomatic expression in conjunction with the narrative context of the film.

(12) ST: 关在府里无事干，翻墙捣瓦摔瓶罐，来来回回千百遍，小爷也是很疲倦。

TT: These dumb walls crush my soul. Even prisoners get parole. No friends, no fun, it's just the worst. Hopefully boredom will get me first.

This is a doggerel sung by Nezha to reflect his loneliness due to his demonic nature and busy parents. In this example, the original text consists of four lines, with each line rhyming at the end. The translator also renders it into four lines, with each line ending in a rhyme. At the same time, in the translation process, the imagery is appropriately adjusted to better suit the associative meanings of English. For example, " 小爷 " (*xiaoye*) here refers to Nezha's arrogant self-reference, implying his indulgence; however, "little lord" in the Western context simply emphasizes the social status of a child or young male, without the connotation of self-reference. Therefore, the translator adeptly uses psychological imagery like "my soul" to convey Nezha's

loneliness, employing free translation to elucidate the true meaning of the four lines. This approach underscores Nezha's emotional state and ensures audiences grasp the poem's essence and context.

4. Conclusion

Drawing from Bassnett's theory on cultural translation, this paper utilized a methodological approach centered on textual analysis to explore the translation of Chinese elements in the subtitles of *Ne Zha: I Am the Destiny*. By categorizing cultural-loaded words into five categories, this paper conducted a case study to facilitate the absorption of this film around the world for those interested in traditional Chinese culture. The objective was to enhance the audience's appreciation of the distinct allure of Chinese culture and facilitate the propagation of its cultural essence.

To begin with, as a unique cultural medium, film plays a crucial role in cultural dissemination. Subtitles not only convey language but also cultural nuances. It is crucial to realize that translating Chinese elements in subtitles differs from books due to time and space constraints, and translators must avoid diverting attention or asynchronous audiovisual phenomena. Therefore, traditional methods like footnotes are impractical. Generally, ellipsis and transliteration are common for brevity. Secondly, subtitles cater to diverse audiences, requiring universally understood expressions for cultural-loaded words. Thirdly, visual information in films can complement subtitle translation. When the audience can fully grasp the meaning of a scene, linguistic and cultural-loaded words can be omitted. In subtitles, it is a favorable choice to omit one or two words if they do not affect the plot significantly. For instance, in *Ne Zha,* translating "乾元山金光洞" (*qianyuanshanjinguangdong*) as "The Cave of Golden Light" is an appropriate omission. Fourthly, translators should regard the cultural environment of the entire film as a cohesive entity. For example, the prominence of Taoist culture is evident in *Ne Zha*. However, these religious cultural terms do not have direct counterparts in English. When dealing with such translations, translators should employ various translation strategies such as domestication and explanation to translate religious cultural elements, aiming to maintain cultural equivalence. Transliteration becomes the primary method for translating material and environmental cultural-loaded words in subtitle translation so as to preserve cultural significance. Additionally, cultural equivalence can be achieved to some extent through literal translation or transliteration combined with literal translation. Overall, subtitle translation should prioritize the understanding and acceptance of the target language readers, selecting appropriate translation strategies and methods based on their cultural context.

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