

Translating Chinese Culinary Culture: an Investigation into the Subtitle Translation in Docuseries Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan

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ABSTRACT

This study, from the perspective of cultural translation, investigates the efficacy of translating the regional food culture of Chaoshan as depicted in the food docuseries Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan. As China's cultural influence expands globally, food, serving as a significant cultural symbol, plays a crucial role in cross-cultural communication. Comprising twenty episodes, Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan offers an in-depth exploration of the region's distinctive cuisine and culinary culture, providing viewers with a rich audiovisual experience. Through its subtitling, the series conveys regional cultural elements to a global audience. This study argues that translation in this context transcends linguistic transfer, acting as a channel for cultural exchanges by interpreting ingredients and dishes, cooking techniques, and sensory experiences. This approach not only facilitates cross-cultural exchanges and comprehension but also provides access for international audiences to appreciate authentic Chinese culture. Consequently, this study examines the transmission of distinctive Chinese culinary culture through the tripartite lens of ingredients and dishes, culinary procedures, and four-character gustatory descriptions, analyzing how these elements are rendered for a global viewership.

Keywords: Cultural translation; Subtitling; Food docuseries; *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan*; Culinary culture

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's international status and influence have been on the rise, followed by a growing international interest in its multifaceted culture. With its vast territory and a history spanning nearly five thousand years, China is rich in resources and boasts a profound and diverse cultural heritage. Among the many facets of this heritage, its intricate and varied food culture holds a particularly indispensable place. Cuisine serves not merely as a source of gustatory pleasure but as a complex of cultural values, histories, and identities. In addition to the renowned

eight major culinary traditions, numerous regions across China boast unique local delicacies that reflect the lifestyles, geographical features, and historical contexts of their people.

The “cultural turn” in translation studies, emerging prominently in the early 1990s, marked a paradigm shift towards viewing translation as an act embedded within dual cultural contexts (Bassnett, 2013). Pioneered notably by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere in their seminal work *Translation, History, and Culture* (1990), this approach argues that translation is governed by cultural forces operating in the target context. Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) contend that they study texts embedded within the network of signs constitutive of both source and target cultures, thereby allowing translation studies to utilize linguistic approaches while simultaneously transcending their limitations. The field, they suggest, should expand to encompass literary signs and texts existing within source and target cultures. Language, as a reflection of societal characteristics— including history, culture, worldviews, and thought patterns— is a fundamental component and one of the most vital signifiers of any cultural system; it is the bedrock upon which culture resides. In her monograph *Translation Studies*, Bassnett (2013) delineates the scope of the discipline, advocating for research that incorporates a cultural perspective. The scholar emphasizes the cultural dimension of translation, asserting that translational acts invariably occur within specific cultural contexts. The interplay between language and culture necessitates that translators engage with texts while being acutely aware of their cultural connotations. Translation is expected to produce a target text that generates an effect on the target culture audience equivalent to that of the source text— that is, functional equivalence (Nida, 1964) at the cultural level. It is the bedrock upon which culture resides. Given this intrinsic link between language and culture, the translation of culture-bound media, such as culinary documentaries, requires an approach that is sensitive to these complexities.

Against this backdrop of cultural exchanges, Chinese culinary docuseries have flourished. Series such as *A Bite of China*, classics within the genre, are well-acclaimed domestically and abroad. The adage “food is the paramount necessity of the people” finds contemporary resonance in these documentaries, which utilize food to explore everyday life, tapping into viewers’ emotional needs and shared experiences (Wu, 2021). Through meticulous cinematography and narration, these documentaries showcase dishes that resonate deeply with audiences, while the people’s stories intertwined with the food often evoke profound emotional responses. Following the success of *A Bite of China*, the team led by Chen Xiaoqing has continued to specialize in the culinary documentary genre, producing subsequent series such as *Once Upon a Bite* and *Flavorful Origins* (Wang & Yao, 2019). These productions have been well-received in the market; for instance, *Flavorful Origins* achieved a high rating of 8.5 out of 10 on Douban (a prominent Chinese community website), reflecting audience’s strong approval of its content and production. Internationally, *Flavorful Origins* has reached a global viewership through Netflix.

In the streaming era, docuseries *Flavorful Origins* showcases local specialty foods from three distinct regions: Chaoshan (20 episodes), Gansu (10 episodes), and Yunnan (10 episodes), with each episode averaging approximately 11.6 minutes in duration. By focusing on specific delicacies and their preparation in each episode, *Flavorful Origins* highlights the unique culinary cultures and local customs of these areas. China's regional culinary culture has often been underrepresented in international discourse. Consequently, the series enables English-speaking audiences to gain deeper insights into local Chinese gastronomy, thereby enriching their understanding of China's regional cultural diversity. The documentary not only presents the final dishes but also details the preparation processes, cooking techniques, and ingredient selection. This not only promotes regional Chinese specialties by stimulating viewers' appetites but also offers them a glimpse into the cultural narratives behind these traditional foods. Furthermore, each episode delves into the cultural stories behind the dishes, exploring aspects such as geographical origins, historical roots, local traditions, and dining etiquette. These elements elevate the series beyond a mere display of food, transforming it into an access to understanding Chinese culinary culture. In this context, subtitle translation assumes critical importance, serving as the primary medium for conveying the unique charm and cultural value of China's diverse regions to a global audience, thereby enhancing cross-cultural exchanges and mutual understanding. Thus, Chinese culinary documentaries function not only as visual feasts but also as accessible channels for promoting cross-cultural communication and cultural interaction.

Therefore, translation is not merely about describing the source text but involves seeking functional equivalence for that text within another culture. This paper attempts to explore the efficacy of communicating distinctive Chinese culinary culture through the lens of cultural translation theory, specifically examining the translation of ingredients and dishes, culinary procedures, and four-character gustatory descriptions.

2. Introduction to Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan

Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan offers a display of Chaoshan's culinary symbols across its 20 episodes. The selected foods range from widely recognized items like Chaoshan beef meatballs, fish rice, and fermented tofu cake, down to specific cooking condiments (such as marinade brine) and raw materials (like Chinese motherwort), as shown in the table below (Note: The order follows the sequence presented on the Netflix platform; ST denotes source text, and TT denotes target text).

Table 1. Overview of the 20 Episodes in *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan*

Chinese (ST)	English (TT)	Chinese (ST)	English (TT)
1.橄榄	olive	11.腐乳饼	tofu cake
2.粿条	hu tieu	12.牛肉火锅	beef hot pot
3.腌蟹	marinated crab	13.牛肉丸	beef meatball
4.卤水	brine	14.鱼生	yusheng
5.普宁豆酱	Puning bean paste	15.鱼饭	meal of fish
6.菜脯	preserved radish	16.鱼露	fish sauce
7.紫菜	seaweed	17.鱼丸鱼册	fish ball, fish book
8.生蚝	ostreoid	18.薄壳	thin shell
9.潮州柑	Chaozhou mandarin orange	19.南姜	galanga
10.擂茶	lei cha	20.益母草	Chinese motherwort

Notably, Chaoshan is not a specific province or city but a cultural region formed by four geographically proximate cities: Shantou, Chaozhou, Jieyang, and Shanwei. These cities share not only geographical closeness but also cultural, folkloric, and linguistic similarities, collectively constituting the unique Chaoshan cultural and dialectal area (Wei, 2021).

The stories behind the food reveal local people's reflections on nature, life, and living, while also showcasing enduring cultural practices and identities. The emergence of high-quality culinary documentaries like *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan* has further propelled food culture into the mainstream documentary market and public consciousness through cinematic means, thereby fostering the continuous development of food-themed documentaries in China. The increasingly sophisticated production standards of Chinese documentaries are fully demonstrated in this genre, evident in the selection and arrangement of culinary content, program structure, content expression, and technical presentation.

Directed by Hu Zhitang and produced by Chen Xiaoqing's team, *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan* aims, from the perspective of food, to explore the region's abundant resources and illustrate the life philosophies of its people. The documentary premiered exclusively on Tencent Video on February 5, 2019, comprising 20 episodes, each with a duration of 11-13 minutes. It generated significant impact in the market upon release, achieving a Douban rating of 8.5. Adapting to the demands of the streaming era and the prevalence of micro-platforms like Weibo and Weishi, along with the proliferation of short-form videos, the documentary aligns with the trend towards micro-documentaries. Its single-episode length has been reduced from the conventional documentary format to an average of 11.7 minutes per episode. In addition, its innovation is also reflected in its unique selection and positioning of content. The documentary shifts its focus from a national or global scale to a specific cultural region. Through the cinematic presentation of

regional cuisine, it effectively showcases regional humanities, including culinary culture, and the image of the represented region.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the subtitle translation strategies employed in the docuseries *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan*, with a specific focus on how regional culinary culture is mediated for a global audience. Grounded in Susan Bassnett's (2013) cultural translation theory, this study treats translation as a cultural act that requires sensitivity to both source and target cultural contexts. This provides a perspective through which the translation of ingredients and dishes, culinary procedures, and four-character gustatory descriptions is analyzed.

The data consists of bilingual subtitles (Chinese and English) from all 20 episodes of *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan*, as accessed via the Netflix platform by means of Language Reactor flash. These subtitles were extracted and compiled into a structured excel-based corpus to facilitate systematic analysis. The corpus was further categorized into three thematic areas for close examination.

A combination of descriptive and critical discourse analysis was employed to identify translation strategies and assess their effectiveness in conveying cultural meaning. The analysis proceeded in three stages: first, the compiled subtitle corpus was systematically scanned to identify all culture-bound terms related to ingredients and dishes, culinary procedures, and four-character gustatory descriptions; second, these terms were categorized, and their corresponding translation was extracted as well; third, each source text (ST for short thereafter)- target text (TT for short thereafter) pair was subjected to a critical analysis based on Bassnett's ideas of cultural translation, evaluating the chosen strategy (e.g., literal translation) in terms of its potential to achieve "functional equivalence" (Nida, 1964) in the target cultural context. This evaluation specifically considered whether the translation successfully conveyed the cultural significance in the source language.

Translation techniques were classified according to common typologies in translation studies, including literal translation, transliteration, creative translation, and addition. Each example was evaluated based on its functional equivalence—that is, whether it successfully evokes a similar cultural or sensory response in the target audience as in the source audience. These techniques were especially applied in analysis of the translation of ingredients and dishes. When it comes to subtitling, Li (2001) proposed the translation strategy of deduction due to the time and space constraints, specifically referring to condensation, reductive paraphrasing, and deletion. Condensation means translating only the essence and gist of the original information. Reductive

paraphrasing refers to conveying the original meaning with relatively brief language and short sentences. Deletion, of course, means complete omission (Li 2001: 39). Adaptation refers to “a continuum of interventional strategies ranging from making minor changes to significant ones” (Tang, 2014: 441). Taylor (2015: 170) believes that “audiovisual translation (AVT) can be seen as giving all audiences access to foreign language products through adaptation for such methods as dubbing, subtitling, surtitling, voiceover, simultaneous translation, real-time subtitling and the like”. The two translation strategies were applied in analysis of the translation, especially the four-character gustatory descriptions and culture-bound culinary procedures.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, a comparative analysis was conducted between ST and TT to identify recurring patterns of deduction (condensation, reductive paraphrasing, and deletion more exactly), and adaptation. Special attention was paid to culturally specific terms with no direct equivalents in English, and the strategies used to bridge these gaps were critically examined.

This methodological approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan* serves as an access for information transfer but as a medium for cross-cultural dialogue by means of subtitling.

4. Depiction of Chaoshan-based Culinary Culture

Based on the research methods mentioned above, this chapter conduct an in-depth analysis of the typical cases in the subtitles of *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan*. Specifically, the research will be carried out from the three dimensions: ingredients and dishes, culinary procedures, and four-character gustatory descriptions, aiming to examine how the profound cultural connotations in the original text are conveyed, transformed and sometimes inevitably simplified through translation to meet the understanding and acceptance of global audiences. By examining each of these three levels one by one, this study aims to assess the effectiveness and limitations of its translation in achieving “functional equivalence” at the cultural level. In this chapter, notably, the corresponding punctuation is added by the author according to all the English subtitles, to all the original Chinese subtitles for the sake of consistency and readability.

4.1 Translation of Chaoshan-based Distinctive Ingredients and Dishes

Distinctive Chinese ingredients refer to those which hold significant and special status within traditional Chinese culinary culture. These ingredients may be renowned for their unique flavors, nutritional value, cultural symbol, or crucial role in local dishes. *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan* features 32 such distinctive Chinese ingredients across its 20 episodes. Table 2 below outlines the translation methods employed, along with their corresponding percentages.

Table 2: Quantity and Proportion of Translation Methods for Distinctive Ingredients and Dishes

Translation Method	Quantity	Proportion (%)
Literal Translation	20	62.5
Literal Translation with Explanation	1	3.125
Transliteration with Explanation	6	18.75
Creative Translation	4	12.5
Addition	1	3.125

Table 2 outlines the translation techniques employed for the 32 distinct ingredients and dishes identified in the docuseries, along with their frequency and proportion. The data reveals that literal translation is the most commonly used technique, accounting for 62.5% (20 instances) of the cases. This is followed by transliteration with explanation (18.75%, 6 instances) and creative translation (12.5%, 4 instances). The techniques of literal translation with explanation and addition were used sparingly, each comprising 3.125% (1 instance). This distribution underscores a strong preference for direct semantic transfer when feasible, while also highlighting the selective use of more interpretive or explanatory approaches to bridge significant cultural and linguistic gaps.

Literal translation is defined as translating the literal meaning of the original text according to the grammatical rules of the target language, while still retaining its style and cultural features (Ping 2002: 21). However, literal translation is not about rigid, mechanical, or awkward translation; it aims to translate as literally as possible without losing the original meaning (Wang, 2002: 26). In *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan*, literal translation is adopted when the source language and the target language share the same or similar literal meaning and implied meaning. This method is suitable for ingredients whose names are already widely known or easily understood in English. For example, “牛肉火锅” is directly translated as “beef hot pot.”

Literal Translation with Explanation builds upon literal translation by incorporating additional explanatory information. This helps the audience better understand the characteristics of the ingredient and cultural context. For instance, “鱼册” is literally translated as “fish book.” However, neither the Chinese audience (even some Chaoshan locals) encountering “鱼册” nor the English audience receiving “fish book” can readily grasp its cultural connotations. Therefore, the subtitle provides an explanation: “刮起后的鱼糜呈波浪状，颇似书册。‘The scraped-up surimi forms a wavy shape, resembling ancient scroll books.’ This supplementary information clarifies the term “鱼册.”

Transliteration with Explanation involves phonetically rendering the Chinese name into English

while adding explanatory context. This approach is typically used for ingredients without direct equivalents in English. For example, “金不换” is transliterated as “jinbuhuan,” preceded by an explanatory note in the subtitles: “九层塔，叶片层层生长成塔状，是风行东南亚的香料。在潮汕，又被称为金不换 ‘Thai basil. With leaves growing in tower-shaped layers, it is a widely used spice in Southeast Asia. In Chaoshan, it is also called jinbuhuan.’ This clarifies the identity of “金不换.”

Addition, as defined by Dong (2021), involves incorporating information not presented in the source text or making implicit meanings explicit. In translation, this means adding content to provide a more comprehensive description of the characteristics, uses, or background of an ingredient, often applied to ingredients with specific cultural or historical significance. For instance, “益母草” is translated as “Chinese motherwort,” where “Chinese” is added to provide the cultural context, identifying it as a traditional Chinese medicinal herb, which is meant to serve as an indispensable ingredient in the docuseries.

Dong (2021) notes that Creative Translation encompasses any free translation requiring the translator’s creativity. It goes beyond simple translation to reproduce the original content in the target language, conveying equivalent emotion, style, and effect. For example, translating “腐乳饼” as “tofu cake” demonstrates creative translation, while it’s noteworthy that “腐乳” is translated as fermented bean curd in the docuseries. Through adaptation between languages and cultures, the main features of the primary ingredient and food type are retained while making the term more accessible to the target language audience.

In summary, the selection of these translation methods for distinctive Chinese ingredients and dishes depends on the inherent properties, its recognition in the anglophone world, and the communicative purpose. Choosing an appropriate translation method can effectively convey the uniqueness and cultural background of ingredients and dishes, enabling the English-speaking audience to better understand and appreciate Chinese culinary culture.

4.2 Translation of Culture-bound Culinary Procedure

Chinese cuisine is characterized by intricacy, and each procedure is intricately linked. The essence of Chinese culinary art lies in its complex preparation processes and rich layers of flavor. In English translation, accurately reproducing these procedures is paramount, not only to convey the taste of the food but also to showcase the underlying culture and craftsmanship. Attention must be paid to the vividness and fluency of the language to ensure that readers can feel the intricacy and fascination of the process as if they were on the spot.

Through appropriate vocabulary and vivid depictions, translation can effectively communicate

the unique artistry and cultural charm embedded in Chinese food preparation. This part presents a detailed analysis of three typical cases. Each case is structured vertically to display the Source Text (ST), Target Text (TT), and a corresponding analysis. The ST is annotated with the corresponding episode title and the precise time code for contextual reference.

Example 1:

ST: 涮足三分钟，筋脉脆软。(Beef Hot Pot, 8:51)

TT: After three minutes in the pot, the fascia softens.

Analysis: In this example, the translation accurately conveys the temporal requirement (“three minutes”) and the following textural change (“softens”), but the core culinary action verb “涮” (shuàn) is under-translated, thereby losing a significant layer of cultural and procedural meaning. “涮” is not a generic term for cooking in liquid; it specifically denotes the dynamic technique of swishing thin slices of food back and forth in simmering broth. This quick, hands-on method is central to hot pot dining, ensuring rapid and even cooking while preserving the tenderness of the ingredient. The current rendering, “in the pot,” reduces this interactive, skillful process to a passive, static state of immersion. This shift from an active, culturally distinctive practice to a neutral description of location obscures the very essence of the hot pot experience. Furthermore, the translation simplifies the nuanced textural promise of “筋脉脆软.” This phrase suggests a transformation where the tough fascia becomes not merely “soft,” but achieves a specific combination of tenderness and a residual pleasant bite—“脆软” implies a yielding yet slightly resilient quality, quite distinct from simple softness which “softens” denotes in the TT.

Example 2:

ST: 时令蔬菜氽烫后榨汁。(Seaweed, 9:18)

TT: After fresh vegetables are boiled, blend them in a blender.

Analysis: The Chinese culinary term “氽烫” (cuān tàng) describes a specific technique of briefly scalding or blanching ingredients in boiling water. This process is designed to soften the vegetables slightly, remove any raw or bitter taste, and— most importantly— to lock in their vibrant color and crisp texture. The English word “boiled” is too broad and often implies a longer, more plain cooking process that can lead to mushy, dull, and nutrient-depleted vegetables. A more precise term like “blanched (in the boiling water)” is appropriate here. Using “After the vegetables are blanched” would accurately convey the quick, gentle, and purpose-driven nature of “氽烫,” highlighting how this technique preserves the freshness and quality of

the ingredients, thereby better communicating the intended culinary method and its role in the recipe.

Example 3:

ST: 熬煮了六个小时后，猪血汤荤香浓郁。(Chinese Motherwort, 1:39)

TT: After six hours of cooking, the pig blood soup is full of flavor.

Analysis: The translation provides a functionally adequate rendering but falls short in capturing the precise culinary technique embedded in the Chinese term “熬煮” (áo zhǔ). This term refers not merely to generic “cooking,” but to a specific, time-intensive process of stewing or simmering over a relatively low heat for quite a period. This method is culturally and culinarily significant across many Chinese soup and broth traditions, as it is believed to fully extract flavors from ingredients, break down connective tissues, and achieve a deeply integrated, rich, and complex flavor profile that quick boiling cannot replicate. By using the overly broad and technically neutral word “cooking,” the translation loses this vital semantic layer. While “full of flavor” rightly conveys the outcome (“荤香浓郁”), the cause-and-effect relationship between the specific process and the resulting quality is weakened for the target audience. The choice obscures the culinary craftsmanship and cultural intentionality behind the recipe—the fact that the essence of the soup is a direct product of patience and a controlled, gentle application of heat.

4.3 Reductive Paraphrasing of Four-character Gustatory Description

Taste, as an innate physiological sensation, serves as an essential part of people’s daily life. Since ancient times, harmony of the “five flavors” has been emphasized in Chinese culture, with “sweet, sour, bitter, pungent/spicy, and salty” identified as the basic tastes during the Qin and Han dynasties. These vocabulary items denoting physiological taste sensations have gradually transcended their original scope, diffusing into other sensory domains and even encompassing psychological and emotional aspects, infused with regional cultural information over time (Wang, 2011). When it comes to the Chinese gustatory descriptions in *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan*, quite a few four-character idioms are applied to depict the unique characteristics of Chinese food. According to Ji & Song (2007), while the proper use of numerous four-character Chinese idioms can make the dialogue sound more formal, elegant, and melodious in Chinese, English readers who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture may not fully appreciate the potential meanings and nuances. Therefore, the translation strategy of reductive paraphrasing was adopted to deal with the four-character gustatory descriptions, which however, undermines its underlying connotations.

In this part, six typical examples will be thoroughly analyzed. Each case is structured vertically

to display the Source Text (ST), Target Text (TT), and a corresponding analysis. The ST is annotated with the corresponding episode title and the precise timestamp for contextual reference.

Example 4:

ST: 入口酸涩微苦只有细细品味逐渐满口甘香。(Olive, 1:06)

TT: At first, it tastes bitter. Only by savoring it slowly can you gradually taste the sweetness.

Analysis: While the translation captures the basic contrast between the initial unpleasantness and its eventual sweetness, it significantly oversimplifies the original Chinese description of the flavor journey, particularly in its treatment of the opening sensory phrase “酸涩微苦.” The original phrase “酸涩微苦” is a tightly-woven triad of distinct yet overlapping taste sensations: “酸” (sourness) relates to a sharp, tangy quality; “涩” (astringency) refers to a dry, puckering mouthfeel often associated with unripe fruit or tea; and “微苦” (mild bitterness) completes this complex opening profile. The translation collapses all three into the single term “bitter,” which not only omits the sour and astringent dimensions but also fails to convey the moderating nuance of “微” (slight). This reduction results in a flatter sensory progression into a generic binary of “bitter” to “sweet,” losing the specific, almost textural quality of the olive’s initial impact—the bright tartness and mouth-drying tightness that dynamically precede the emergence of sweetness.

Example 5:

ST: 配菜汁水丰盈，咸淡适宜。(Hu Tieu, 6:59)

TT: The stuffings are moist and seasoned to perfection.

Analysis: The phrase “汁水丰盈” is a highly descriptive term that conveys the texture and moisture content of the dish’s ingredients, particularly the stuffing. “汁水” refers to the rich, flavorful juice that accompanies the dish, while “丰盈” (fēng yíng) suggests a state of abundance or fullness. Together, they paint a vivid picture of a dish that is full of flavorful, savory juices, enhancing the overall sensory experience. In the translation, this concept is rendered as “moist,” which effectively conveys the idea of the stuffing being rich in moisture, but it somewhat simplifies the original nuance. In the original Chinese, “咸淡适宜” refers to the precise balance of saltiness—neither too salty nor too bland. The English phrase “seasoned to perfection” is more subjective, elevating the description to an idealized level of culinary expertise, and could be seen as a slight shift from the objective description in the original. However, this shift doesn’t severely affect the overall understanding of the dish, as the balance of flavor is still captured. The

key issue lies in the loss of precision in describing the saltiness balance. A more accurate translation of “咸淡适宜” could be “with well-balanced saltiness” or “perfectly salted,” which would better preserve the objective focus of the original phrase.

Example 6:

ST:

与川式卤水的五香微辣、粤式卤水的大咸大甜不同，潮汕卤水讲究的是鲜香浓郁、回味无穷。(Marinade Brine, 3:08)

TT: Unlike Sichuan’s signature mild spiciness and the saltiness and sweetness characteristic of Guangdong, braised dishes in Chaoshan are known for their freshness and richness. They have a sweet aftertaste.

Analysis: In this example, rendering “川式卤水的五香微辣” as “Sichuan’s signature mild spiciness” presents a key simplification. While “signature” effectively conveys distinctiveness, it completely omits the core concept of “五香” (wǔ xiāng), or “five-spice.” This term does not merely indicate a generic spice blend but refers to a foundational, aromatic flavor in Chinese cuisine, typically involving spices like star anise, clove, cinnamon, fennel, and Sichuan pepper. By reducing this complex, spice-driven aroma to a simple “mild spiciness,” the translation loses the layered, aromatic depth that defines Sichuan brine, focusing only on the sensation of heat. Similarly, the rendering of “粤式卤水的大咸大甜” as “the saltiness and sweetness characteristic of Guangdong” correctly identifies the primary flavors but neutralizes the intensity implied by the character “大” (literally “strong” or “heavy”). The more neutral “saltiness and sweetness” in TT flattens this intensity, thereby weakening the intended contrast. Positively, the translation accurately identifies the core attributes of the Chaoshan style. Rendering “鲜香浓郁” as “freshness and richness” effectively demonstrates the combination of umami-rich depth and aromatic complexity. Furthermore, explicitly translating “回味无穷” as “a sweet aftertaste” is a precise and culturally astute choice, as it correctly distinguishes this lingering, mellow sweetness from a primary sugary taste, a nuance highly valued in Chinese gastronomy.

Example 7:

ST: 在潮州，还有一种卤水制作的美味就连顶级老饕都会垂涎三尺。(Brine, 8:17)

TT: In Chaozhou, another delicacy made with brine can make even the best gourmets drool.

Analysis: The Chinese expression “垂涎三尺” is a highly expressive idiomatic phrase with significant cultural and emotional connotations. It’s not just a simple way of describing

someone's hunger or desire for food, but a vivid way to portray an intense, almost uncontrollable longing for something delicious. The phrase combines the literal “垂涎” (to drool) with “三尺” (three feet), an exaggeration suggesting the drooling is so intense that it extends to an extraordinary length, amplifying the desire. This expression is not only a visual image but also conveys a deeper cultural meaning— an intense craving that transcends ordinary appetite and touches on an almost poetic level of sensory indulgence. In the translation, the term “垂涎三尺” is rendered simply as “drool.” While this captures the basic physical action of salivating, it misses the exaggerated, almost humorous visual image embedded in the original phrase. The cultural weight of “三尺,” which adds a sense of boundless, exaggerated yearning, is also lost.

Example 8:

ST: 放置六个小时后, 柑肉变得香糯绵软。(Chaozhou Mandarin Orange, 6:09)

TT: After setting it aside for six hours, its flesh becomes soft and silky.

Analysis: The four-character description “香糯绵软” is a masterfully compact, multi-sensory quartet that engages both the olfactory and tactile senses to paint a complete picture of the transformed mandarin orange flesh. Each character carries distinct semantic weight: “香” (xiāng) refers to the aromatic fragrance released by the fruit; “糯” (nuò) describes a specific, desirable sticky and slightly glutinous texture, akin to that of perfectly cooked sticky rice, implying a pleasant, soft chewiness; “绵” (mián) suggests a fine, cotton-like, and fluffy softness; and “软” (ruǎn) denotes the general state of tenderness and softness. The translation “soft and silky” demonstrates a commendable effort to capture the textural elegance of the original through the use of alliteration, which subtly mirrors the rhythmic quality of “香糯绵软.” The word “silky” is a particularly apt choice as it effectively conveys the smooth, sleek, and premium mouthfeel implied by “绵.” However, this translation necessarily condenses the four-fold original characters into a two-fold expression. In doing so, it makes two significant omissions. First, the aromatic dimension of “香” (fragrant) is entirely lost, severing the crucial link between the fruit's scent and its taste. Second, while “soft” covers “软,” and “silky” covers the smoothness of “绵,” the distinctive, slightly elastic and sticky quality of “糯” remains unrepresented.

Example 9:

ST: 蓬松酥脆的炒米入口即化。(Lei Cha, 8:46)

TT: The crispy fried rice melts in your mouth.

Analysis: The Chinese phrase “蓬松酥脆” is a compound texture description that creates a

sophisticated, multi-sensory experience. “蓬松” (péng sōng) depicts a physical state of lightness, fluffiness, and airiness, suggesting a structure that is expanded and full of tiny air pockets. “酥脆” (sū cuì) combines the idea of a brittle, crumbly fragility (“酥”) with a sharp, snap-like crispness (“脆”). Together, they describe a texture that is simultaneously ethereal and delicate yet delivers a satisfying, audible crunch. This specific combination is crucial because the “蓬松” quality is what makes the “酥脆” texture so uniquely delicate and quick to dissolve. The use of a single word in the target text, “crispy,” acts as a significant reduction of this complex textural narrative. While “crispy” accurately conveys the brittle, breakable aspect of “脆,” it completely omits the “蓬松” (fluffy) dimension. This omission flattens the sensory experience for the reader. Without the “蓬松” quality, the subsequent “melts in your mouth” effect feels less logical; a merely “crispy” may get the original taste description discounted to much extent. The cause-and-effect relationship between the described texture and the general experience is weakened.

5. Conclusion

Translation techniques are chosen based on specific needs, ranging from preserving cultural elements to ensuring readability for the target audience. In the process, deduction is often used when translating four-character expressions, while adaptation commonly occurs to culture-bound terms.

Subtitling is expected to impart the core information that is meant for the target audience (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021). However, to fully achieve the acceptability of a translated text, efforts must be made to align it with the target culture (Toury, 1995). In documentaries, accurately introducing and translating region-specific ingredients from areas like Chaoshan is of paramount importance. The cultural translation emphasizes that the choice of words and expression ensure the accurate conveyance of distinctive features of the source language and regional image. Documentaries detailing food preparation processes and techniques require translation that not only accurately describe steps and methods but also consider the cultural background. When describing the taste experience of food, selection of appropriate gustatory vocabulary literally matters. Chinese employs specific terms to describe mouthfeel, aroma, and texture; it's essential to reproduce this experience using the taste lexicon of the target language. Cultural translation encourages translators to go beyond literal word-for-word translation. When conveying tastes, they must account for differences in cultural backgrounds and palate preferences, selecting expressions that can maximally stimulate the sensory imagination of the target audience. *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan* does not merely present Chaoshan's cuisine to a global audience; it strives, through subtitles, to achieve “functional equivalence” at the cultural level.

In cultural translation, understanding and adapting to the target context is of vital significance. In

Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan, for descriptions of specific ingredients, preparation processes, and the interlingual transfer of taste, it's essential to make the content comprehensible and accessible for audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Future translation efforts should place greater emphasis on the target cultural context when selecting vocabulary and modes of expression to enhance viewers' immersion and comprehension while watching.

6. Limitations of the Study

While this study offers a detailed analysis of the cultural translation strategies in docuseries *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan*, it is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the research is inherently limited by its scope as a single-case study. The findings and conclusions are drawn exclusively from the analysis of one docuseries, *Flavorful Origins: Chaoshan*. Consequently, the translation patterns identified may not be fully representative of the strategies used in other Chinese culinary documentaries or in series focusing on different regions (e.g., *Flavorful Origins: Gansu & Yunnan*). The generalizability of the findings is therefore limited. Second, the study employs a qualitative and descriptive approach based on textual analysis. While this allows for an in-depth exploration of translation phenomena, it lacks the complementary perspective of quantitative data and audience reception studies. Finally, the analysis is constrained by its text-centric focus. It does not account for the multimodality of documentaries. The interaction between subtitles, visual elements, background music, and sound effects undoubtedly plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's overall understanding and cultural perception. The study's focus on the verbal text alone means that the synergistic effect of these multimodal elements on the reception of the translation is not examined.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a foundational and focused investigation into the translation of Chaoshan's culinary culture. It highlights key areas for future research, such as cross-regional comparative studies, audience-based reception research, and multimodal analysis of culinary documentaries.

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