

# Cross-Cultural Analysis of Honorific Translation and Interpersonal Meaning in the English Subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace*

Peiying Deng

College of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies South China Business College, Guangdong, China  
Email: dpirene415@foxmail.com

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**Abstract**—With the global dissemination of Chinese palace dramas, the honorifics employed in these series reflect the hierarchical social structures of imperial China. To ensure target audiences comprehend the hierarchical relationships and plot developments embedded in these linguistic forms, the translation of honorifics has become a critical concern. The American version of *Empresses in the Palace* features a well-defined honorific system, making its official English subtitles particularly representative for examining interpersonal meaning transmission. This study employs a combined methodology of literature review and case study, establishing an integrated theoretical framework drawing on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and Brown & Levinson's Face Theory. Using the official American subtitles as corpus data, this research analyzes translation strategies for honorifics and the cross-cultural transmission of interpersonal meaning, investigating how translators reconstruct comprehensible "face mechanisms" for target audiences. This framework offers analytical support for honorific translation in palace dramas, while the summarized strategies provide practical guidance for similar subtitle translation projects.

**Keywords**—honorific translation, interpersonal meaning, subtitle translation, cross-cultural pragmatics, empresses in the palace

## I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese historical dramas serve as significant vehicles for disseminating traditional Chinese culture, where the quality of subtitle translation directly impacts their overseas reception. The honorific system in the *Empresses in the Palace* presents feudal hierarchy, ritual culture, and interpersonal relationships, forming the core of character interaction and meaning construction, yet posing considerable translation challenges due to the dual demands of linguistic structure and cultural connotation [1, 2].

Existing research reveals notable tenor deviations in the American version's subtitles, failing to fully reconstruct hierarchical relationships and interpersonal interaction characteristics [3]. Studies grounded in interpersonal function theory within Systemic Functional Linguistics confirm that the accurate transformation of mood and modality systems is essential for conveying interpersonal meaning [4]. Additional scholars, integrating politeness principles and face theory, propose that honorific translation functions as a central mechanism for maintaining face in cross-cultural communication, directly affecting translation efficacy [5, 6].

Nevertheless, current research exhibits distinct limitations.

Most studies adopt either linguistic or pragmatic theoretical perspectives in isolation, lacking an integrated analytical framework that combines both approaches. This deficiency impedes the comprehensive analysis of interpersonal meaning transmission and cultural adaptation in honorific translation. Addressing this gap, the present study establishes an integrated analytical framework for honorific translation from a cross-cultural perspective, drawing upon interpersonal function theory from Systemic Functional Linguistics and Brown & Levinson's face theory. Focusing on translation strategy selection and the effectiveness of interpersonal meaning transmission in the English subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace*, this research aims to fill the void in integrated theoretical application, provide an operational analytical paradigm for honorific translation in historical drama subtitles, and offer practical guidance for the cross-cultural dissemination of film and television content representing excellent traditional Chinese culture.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Film and Television Subtitle Translation

From previous research, film and television subtitle translation constitutes a distinctive field due to its inherent constraints of immediacy, mass accessibility, and temporal-spatial limitations. Subtitles must convey core information concisely and clearly within restricted timeframes and screen space. Unlike written text translation, subtitle translation must synchronize with visual pacing, requiring viewers to simultaneously process images, audio, and textual information. This multimodal reality necessitates a concise, accessible rendering that enables rapid comprehension without disrupting the viewing experience [7].

Taking the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* as an example, scholars have examined culturally loaded expressions in subtitles from cross-cultural communication perspectives, discussing the balance between domestication and foreignization strategies, or applying skopos theory and communicative translation theory to analyze the transmission of address terms, official titles, and poetic elements. Other studies adopt register theory to identify deviations in field, tenor, and mode in the American subtitles, or investigate how different language versions construct the palace cultural contexts through multimodal analysis and person deixis

examination [5, 7–9].

### *B. Research on Honorific Translation and Interpersonal Meaning*

In terms of honorific translation and interpersonal meaning, Brown and Levinson's face theory and the interpersonal function theory from Systemic Functional Linguistics are commonly employed to explain politeness strategies in cross-cultural communication [1, 2]. These two approaches complement each other, providing solid theoretical grounding and an analytical framework for examining interpersonal meaning transmission in honorific translation. Specifically, Brown and Levinson's face theory divides "face" into two categories: positive face, which involves the desire for recognition, approval, and respect from others, and negative face, which concerns the wish for autonomy and freedom from interference. The theory maintains that the core of politeness strategies lies in protecting the face needs of both communication participants.

Existing research has adequately demonstrated the applicability of these theories to honorific translation and interpersonal meaning studies. For example, Han and Yin found in their film subtitle analysis that the treatment of mood, modality, and polarity directly influences the conveyance of character relationships and emotional attitudes [6]. Meanwhile, Huang Huang observed in business address translation that English-to-Chinese translation requires converting direct name addresses to respectful forms such as "Dr. Zhang" to meet Chinese face management requirements [10].

### *C. Research Gaps and the Focus of This Study*

However, current research on *Empresses in the Palace* subtitles has largely concentrated on culturally loaded expressions themselves, with limited systematic examination of how the three variables—face needs, power relations, and social distance—interact to shape translation strategies that reconstruct acceptable "face management" mechanisms for target audiences. In other words, although existing literature acknowledges the importance of honorifics and politeness in cross-cultural translation, it still lacks in-depth exploration that integrates face theory, interpersonal function analysis, and concrete honorific translation operations.

Therefore, this study proposes to ground its analysis in Brown and Levinson's face theory, combined with Halliday's interpersonal meaning framework from Systemic Functional Linguistics, to examine how honorific translation in the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* reconstructs a politeness system aligned with English-speaking viewers' expectations under the constraints of power relations, social distance, and face needs. This research contributes to deepening the understanding of interpersonal meaning transmission in film and television subtitle translation and offers practical reference for cross-cultural honorific translation.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF SFL AND FACE THEORY

### *A. Interpersonal Function Theory of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)*

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) conceptualizes language as a resource for constructing social meaning. Among its three metafunctions: deontic, interpersonal, and textual. The interpersonal metafunction focuses on how language establishes and maintains social relationships, expresses personal attitudes and emotions, and influences others' behavior [11]. Salotti systematically elaborated on SFL's potential as a theoretical framework for translation practice, noting that its three metafunctions effectively connect linguistic analysis with broader social contexts, providing an objective perspective for evaluating gains and losses in meaning transmission [12]. Han and Yin further applied SFL's interpersonal function theory to film subtitle translation, demonstrating through their analysis of mood, modality, and polarity in *Good Will Hunting* that accurate transmission of interpersonal meaning is essential for preserving character emotions and relational dynamics [4]. This research trajectory indicates that SFL offers refined analytical tools for examining interpersonal meaning reconstruction in translation.

Within the SFL framework, the extensive honorifics employed in *Empresses in the Palace* can be understood as resources for interpersonal meaning. During translation, lexical choices and conversions directly affect the construction of social relationships between speakers and listeners across different cultural backgrounds, consequently influencing the overseas dissemination of traditional Chinese culture.

### *B. Brown and Levinson's Face Theory*

Brown and Levinson systematized face theory, building upon earlier scholarship. This theory examines how individuals maintain social status and identity in interpersonal communication, with politeness strategies representing rational behaviors adopted by interlocutors to preserve each other's face [13]. Huang demonstrated the applicability of face theory to subtitle translation analysis through a case study of business greeting videos, showing how politeness principles guide translators in adjusting linguistic strategies—such as adding or omitting "thank you"—to meet target audience cultural expectations [10]. Honorifics essentially constitute systematic negative politeness strategies that protect the hearer's negative face by signaling respect and maintaining distance, particularly in relationships characterized by power asymmetry. This supports the feasibility of applying face theory to analyze honorific strategy conversion in subtitle translation within this study.

### *C. Construction of the Integrated Framework*

This study constructs a three-level analytical model to examine honorific translation in the American version of *Empresses in the Palace*. At the linguistic level, it identifies the formal realizations of source-text honorifics—for example, I (臣妾), Your Majesty (皇上), award (赏), and analyzes their

corresponding forms in the target text. At the interpersonal functional level, it assesses what changes occur in the roles, attitudes, and relational distance between interlocutors, specifically whether the translation shifts from “marked hierarchy” toward “equality and directness.” Finally, at the face-theoretical level, it explains how such changes are influenced by face needs, power relations, and social distance in cross-cultural contexts, and how translators reconstruct a comprehensible “face mechanism” for target audiences through honorific translation, thereby facilitating the overseas dissemination of palace dramas embodying China’s distinctive hierarchical system.

#### IV. CASE ANALYSIS: HONORIFIC TRANSLATION STRATEGIES AND INTERPERSONAL MEANING RECONSTRUCTION

This study categorizes honorific translation strategies into three types: humble self-reference strategies (managing one’s own face), respectful address strategies (maintaining others’ face), and ritual modality strategies (regulating communicative distance), and conducts case analysis combining the American version subtitles with original dialogue.

##### A. Self-Deprecatory Address Strategy

Humble self-reference constitutes a linguistic device in Chinese that reduces the speaker’s own face to elevate the addressee’s status, serving as a social strategy to “give face” to others. Examples from the drama include terms such as “臣妾,” “奴婢,” and “微臣.” During English translation, however, translators often face a dilemma due to the absence of a systematic humble self-reference system in English culture: they must remain faithful to the original meaning while ensuring the translated English sounds natural and fluent. Table 1 illustrates the translation approaches for “臣妾”.

Table 1. The translation of “臣妾 (I)” across different contexts

臣妾以前倒是听太医说过	I’ve heard from an imperial doctor before
臣妾才要回宫休息	I’m on my way back to the palace to rest

From the perspective of language, in the source language, “臣妾” is a humble first-person pronoun, indicating the speaker’s (the concubine’s) subordinate status to the listener (the emperor or a person of high rank); however, in the translation, “I” is directly used instead, failing to reflect the difference in their status. Analyzed from the interpersonal level (SFL interpersonal meaning), the original text uses the word “臣妾” to demonstrate a clear hierarchy in the relationship, meaning the speaker lowers her status to show respect to the listener. But in the translation, the relationship is reconstructed as an equal “I-you” relationship, blurring the original cultural hierarchical differences. Finally, from the perspective of face theory, the use of a humble pronoun in the original text is a negative politeness strategy, that is, by devaluing oneself to protect the listener’s negative face (the right not to be disturbed). The translator’s choice to omit the humble pronoun is, on the one hand, due to the grammatical requirements of English, and on the other hand, reflects the target culture’s

preference for “equal individuals.” Although this strategy ensures the acceptability of the translation, it sacrifices the faithful transmission of the hierarchical relationship expressed through the change in address terms in the source language.

Humble expressions are generally omitted or neutralized (converted to “I”) in English translations, reflecting the English culture’s preference for equal individuals and low tolerance for hierarchical markers. Translators primarily follow the cultural norms of the target language rather than being faithful to the hierarchical coding of the source language.

##### B. Honorific Address Strategy

Honorifics are terms used in the Chinese language system to elevate the status of the addressee or a third party, such as the titles “Emperor,” “Empress,” and “Lady” in some dramas. The original intention of these words is to meet the positive face needs, that is, to be recognized and respected. When translating honorifics from Chinese to English, the strategies of “retention, conversion, and omission” are usually adopted, and sometimes they are used in combination, as shown in Table 2 for the translation of the word “Emperor.”

Table 2. The translation of “皇上 (the emperor)” across different contexts

皇上	Your Majesty
皇上万福金安	May blessings and peace be with you, Your Majesty
皇上就从轻发落吧	Your Majesty, please go easy on her

From a linguistic perspective, “皇上” as an exclusive title for the emperor is translated as “Your Majesty,” which is capitalized and conveys a sense of dignity. According to the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) interpersonal meaning analysis, “皇上 (emperor)” in the source language is not merely a title but also implies the “sacredness of the Son of Heaven.” Translating it as “Your Majesty,” which literally means Your Majesty, Your Highness, and Your Sovereignty, achieves functional equivalence through abstraction, transforming the specific identity into a title emphasizing the attribute of “majesty.” From the perspective of face theory, this translation is actually an enhanced positive politeness strategy, satisfying the listener’s positive face needs by bestowing the supreme title. Notably, the translator consistently uses “Your Majesty” in all contexts where “皇上 (emperor)” appears, whether in requests, commands, or casual conversations. This indicates that the institutionalized honorific is treated as a culturally specific item to be retained in translation rather than a strategic choice.

When encountering titles such as “Niangniang” (Empress Dowager), “Guifei” (Imperial Consort), or “Pinfei” (Concubine), the translator opts for English noble titles like “My Lady,” “Consort,” or “Noble Lady” to establish a comprehensible hierarchical framework and achieve functional equivalence. The translation of honorifics presents institutionalized high-level titles, such as “Emperor” and “Empress,” through functional equivalence, while for other middle-level titles, such as those of imperial concubines, a

hierarchical correspondence is adopted. It can be seen that the translator prioritizes ensuring the comprehensibility of core power relations, while making selective choices regarding more nuanced distinctions, employing a dual strategy of functional equivalence and foreignization retention, thus achieving a balance between comprehensibility and cultural transmission.

### C. Ritual Modality Strategy

The Ritual Modality refers to linguistic devices that reflect hierarchical relationships through the use of modal verbs, modal particles, and sentence structure selection, with typical examples including expressions such as “please,” “could you,” and “award.” Within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), these items fall into the categories of the modal system and the mood system; from the perspective of face theory, they correspond to negative politeness strategies, which express avoiding a harsh tone, leaving room for the interlocutor, and saving their face.

Table 3. The translation of “award” across different contexts

那就赏夏常在一丈红吧	Then I will award Attendant Xia the Scarlet Red
皇上赏的	It was a gift from His Majesty

From a linguistic angle, “赏 (award)” is a specialized verb for superiors bestowing rewards or punishments, signaling a top-down power flow (Table 3). The translation renders it as both “award” and “gift.” Interpersonally, this character clearly marks the speaker as superior and the listener as subordinate. “Award” preserves this “granting by authority” meaning with high functional equivalence; “gift” neutralizes the power dynamic into an ordinary exchange, losing the hierarchical distinction. From face theory, this word publicly exercises power, threatening both the listener’s negative face (controlled action) and positive face (demeaned status). Choosing “award” keeps this power intact, showing the translator deemed power relations narratively crucial enough to sacrifice naturalness for.

The translation of ceremonial modality mainly prioritizes functional equivalence with selective adaptation. Power markers like “赏” that serve narrative functions are preserved as “award”; otherwise, the translator tends to soften overt hierarchical traces, since the target culture values equality and shuns blunt rank distinctions.

## V. DISCUSSION

This study employs SFL interpersonal metafunction theory and face theory to analyze honorific translation strategies based on the official US version and original subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace*. It examines how honorifics are handled in translation and how such treatment conveys original interpersonal meanings across cultures, with particular focus on how translators help target readers grasp the source text’s “face” concepts.

The core finding is that honorific translation is not mere linguistic conversion but “interpersonal meaning reconstruction across cultures.” Throughout the translation

process, translators constantly balance the source language’s hierarchical face system against the target language’s equality norms—staying faithful to the original while ensuring naturalness. This aligns with Salotti’s view that SFL emphasizes the connection between linguistic meaning and context [12]. Building upon this, the study links linguistic form, interpersonal function, and face motivation to present a more complete picture of how interpersonal meaning travels through translation.

These findings also resonate with Yang Junyan and He Lingjing’s study based on communicative translation theory, which notes that culturally loaded terms are mostly handled through domestication [7]—consistent with how humble self-references are omitted or neutralized here. However, this study further reveals that core power markers like “Your Majesty” actually employ foreignization, indicating translators don’t simply choose one strategy but apply differentiated, hierarchical treatment based on each term’s weight within the power structure.

The framework established here integrates SFL and face theory, moving beyond single-theory limitations: SFL clarifies formal shifts in honorifics, while face theory explains the social motivations behind translators’ choices. This combination both responds to Fang Kejia’s call and provides a more practical analytical angle for the complex discursive strategies in *Empresses in the Palace* subtitles [14].

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that honorific translation involves far more than linguistic conversion—it demands reconstructing expressions of character relationships, social distance, and hierarchical distinctions across languages and cultures to achieve interpersonal meaning reconstruction.

Most existing research on *Empresses in the Palace* subtitles focuses on culturally loaded terms themselves, with limited systematic connection between functional equivalence and interpersonal meaning. The SFL and face theory framework established here links face needs, power relations, and social distance to examine what strategies translators employ to build a “face mechanism” comprehensible to target audiences. These findings offer practical insights for future audiovisual subtitle translation: honorific translation requires context-based balancing between “faithfulness” and “naturalness” rather than uniform standards. Translators should distinguish which interpersonal meanings are essential for plot comprehension versus which can be adjusted or omitted, moving beyond mere content accuracy.

However, this study has certain limitations. First, the corpus is narrow; future research could expand its scope. Second, only translator strategies were analyzed without examining actual target audience reception—future work could employ surveys or other empirical methods.

In conclusion, this systematic analysis of honorific translation in *Empresses in the Palace* English subtitles reveals the essential nature of honorific translation as “interpersonal meaning reconstruction across cultures.” The integrated SFL interpersonal metafunction and face theory framework

provides not only precise analytical tools for unpacking this complex process but also a theoretical pathway for subsequent research in audiovisual subtitle translation. As global cultural integration deepens, how to precisely calibrate the balance between “cultural fidelity” and “audience acceptability” remains a core issue demanding further exploration in this field, meriting continued scholarly investigation with greater breadth and depth.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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