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Translating Wuju Opera: An Integrated Theoretical Approach to "Three Times Beating the White Bone Demon"

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Abstract: This study explores translation strategies for regional Chinese opera, using Wuju Opera as its case study. Wuju Opera is a national intangible cultural heritage, represented here by its classic play *Three Battles Against the White-Bone Demon*. It proposes an integrated theoretical framework that combines Eugene Nida's "Dynamic Equivalence" with Hans Vermeer's "Skopos Theory." The central thesis is that integrating these two approaches is essential for addressing the complex interactions of linguistic, cultural, and performative elements in opera translation. Whereas previous studies have often applied these theories in isolation, this research delineates their complementary functions: Skopos Theory provides a macro-level strategic direction by defining the communicative purpose, while dynamic equivalence offers micro-level, practical guidance for achieving semantic and pragmatic correspondence. Methodologically, the study leverages computer-assisted translation tools and has developed three distinct translation prototypes, namely academic, promotional, and performative versions, to maintain terminological consistency and handle complex cultural annotations. The analysis demonstrates that effective translation requires a calibrated equilibrium between domestication and foreignization, wherein the degree of cultural explicitation is fundamentally determined by the translation's purpose. Furthermore, the paper critically reflects on the theoretical and practical limitations of this integrated approach, particularly the potential dilution of the source text's aesthetic qualities and the difficulty in measuring audience reception. By proposing a replicable, theoretically grounded model, this research contributes to the fields of cross-cultural communication of performance traditions, audiovisual translation, and heritage studies.

Keywords: Wuju Opera, Dynamic Equivalence, Skopos Theory, Cross-linguistic Transfer, Cultural Transposition, Computer-Assisted Translation.

1. Introduction

The global circulation of cultural products necessitates robust and nuanced translation frameworks, particularly for art forms deeply embedded in specific linguistic, historical, and social contexts. Wuju Opera, with its over four hundred years of history and its official status as a component of China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list since 2008, represents a quintessential and compelling case for such scholarly inquiry. Its repertoire, which includes the celebrated narrative "Three Times Beating the White Bone Demon" adapted from the classic Ming dynasty novel "Journey to the West," is characterized by a unique and complex synthesis of regional Jinzhou dialect, stylized vocal techniques such as the Jinqiang, and deeply localized folklore. While this very richness constitutes its core artistic value and cultural significance, it simultaneously presents formidable obstacles for effective cross-cultural mediation. Traditional, literal translation strategies often prove profoundly inadequate, resulting in target texts that are either linguistically incomprehensible or artistically barren for audiences unfamiliar with the Chinese cultural milieu[2].

Existing scholarship on the translation of Chinese opera has frequently leaned towards theoretical monism, predominantly applying functionalist or equivalence-based models in a separate, rather than integrated, manner. This study posits that a more nuanced and powerful approach is required to tackle the multifaceted challenges of a regional form like Wuju Opera. It contends that the strategic, purpose-oriented framework of Skopos Theory and the receptor-focused principles of Dynamic Equivalence are not mutually exclusive but are, in fact, mutually reinforcing and necessary for a comprehensive approach. The central research question guiding this investigation is: How can the integrated application of Skopos Theory and Dynamic Equivalence, strategically supported by modern translation technologies, generate effective and purpose-specific English translations of Wuju Opera's "Three Times Beating the White Bone Demon"? This paper will first situate the study within the existing scholarly discourse, identifying critical gaps in the current literature. It will then elaborate in detail on the proposed integrated theoretical framework and the corresponding methodological approach. A detailed analysis will follow, dissecting specific translation strategies at lexical, syntactic, and performative levels, illustrated through comparative examples from the case study. The discussion will then critically evaluate the efficacy, synergies, and inherent limitations of the proposed model, concluding with implications for the broader field and constructive suggestions for future research trajectories.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Anchors: Dynamic Equivalence and Skopos Theory

Eugene Nida (1964) proposed the theory of dynamic equivalence (later developed into functional equivalence), emphasizing that the response of the target-language readers

to the translated text should be substantially the same as that of the source-language readers to the original text[8]. This receptor-centered concept has been widely adopted in opera translation studies because it directly addresses the core demand of opera as a performing art to resonate with the audience. For example, Huang Qin and Wang Yajun (2022), in a study on the translation of Peking Opera from the "Classic Chinese Opera Series," pointed out that to achieve functional equivalence, translators need to flexibly use strategies such as liberal translation and amplification to handle culture-loaded terms, ensuring that the target audience can understand and experience emotions and dramatic effects similar to those of the source audience[6]. The value of this theory lies in providing translators with operational guidance at the micro-level, enabling them to pursue "equivalent in meaning" rather than "formal correspondence" at the lexical, syntactic, and textual levels, thereby overcoming the cultural barriers and aesthetic failures that may result from literal translation[3].

Skopos Theory, proposed by the German functionalist scholar Hans J. Vermeer, brought about a paradigm shift in translation studies from source-text centeredness to target-text function[9]. This theory holds that the purpose (Skopos) of the translational action is the highest rule governing the translation process. In the field of opera translation, Skopos Theory has been used to justify and guide the creation of translations with different functional orientations. For example, Fu Shihui(2020), in a study on On Ying Ruocheng's Views on Drama Translation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory, noted that translations intended for stage performance often involve significant adaptation, condensation, and recreation of the original text for the sake of "performability," which is considered entirely legitimate within this theoretical framework[5]. The practical significance of Skopos Theory is that it confers translators with clear strategic choices, enabling them to formulate corresponding translation strategies based on the ultimate purpose of the translation (academic research, cultural promotion, or commercial performance), thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the translational action.

However, existing studies often treat these two theories as mutually exclusive choices or apply them only at a single level. Most studies either focus on how to achieve dynamic equivalence at the linguistic level or concentrate on analyzing the functional realization of a certain type of translation from the perspective of Skopos Theory, failing to fully elaborate on the potential synergistic and complementary relationship between the two in guiding the translation of complex local operas. This separation in theoretical application limits a more comprehensive and in-depth explanation of the translation process.

2.2. Translation Technological Intervention in Chinese Opera Translation

Facing the challenges of dense culture-loaded items and terminology unification in opera translation, Computer-Assisted Translation (CAT) technology has begun to demonstrate its application potential. Zhang Zheng's *Machine Translation* is a pioneer in this direction[13]. And two students -- Xu Yushu and Li Hui write an article commenting it. They clearly pointed out the lexical gaps in English for Wuju Opera's dialect and professional terminology[12]. The method of this study was to construct a three-stage workflow involving pre-translation semantic decomposition of cultural concepts, in-translation terminology unification using CAT tools, and post-translation supplementary annotations. Its results indicate that CAT tools can effectively improve translation efficiency and terminology consistency, providing technical support for the accurate transmission of cultural information[4].

Although Zhang Zheng provides a solid technical path, its discussion does not sufficiently delve into the multimodal nature of opera translation in the digital media environment. The study primarily views technology as an auxiliary tool for terminology management, without placing it in the broader context of digital heritage dissemination to explore its deeper impact on translation paradigms, the role of the translator, and audience reception modes. For example, emerging forms such as hypertext links, interactive annotations, and multimodal subtitles synchronized with audio and video have not yet received sufficient attention in existing research.

2.3. Critical Summary of Existing Research and Identification of Gaps

In summary, existing research has made significant contributions in the following aspects. In theoretical level, establishing the applicability and value of Dynamic Equivalence Theory and Skopos Theory in the field of opera translation, providing key insights for achieving audience reception and clarifying translation function. In practical level, beginning to explore the application of modern technological tools like CAT in translation practice to address the challenges of cultural transplantation. However, through systematic review, we have identified the following significant research gaps. Firstly, current research generally lacks a comprehensive framework that organically combines the macro-strategic guidance of Skopos Theory with the micro-tactical operations of Dynamic Equivalence Theory. There is a lack of systematic discussion on how to dynamically adjust the standards and strategies of "equivalence" according to different translation purposes. Secondly, compared to mainstream operas, translation studies on local intangible cultural heritage operas like Wuju Opera remain very weak. The sporadic existing studies on Wuju Opera mostly focus on overall strategies or technical applications, lacking in-depth, systematic case analyses of specific, representative works like "Three Times Beating the White Bone Demon." Thirdly, existing discussions on technology mostly remain at the "instrumental" level, failing to fully explain its core role in supporting diversified translation purposes and enabling the production of differentiated translations, and also failing to deeply integrate with systematic theoretical frameworks.

Future studies should strive to construct an integrated theoretical model that combines the strategic perspective of Skopos Theory with the operational standards of Dynamic Equivalence. Building upon this, in-depth exploration should be conducted on how modern translation technologies can empower the multimodal and multi-purpose translation and dissemination of local operas (like Wuju Opera) within this model[11]. This study is precisely an integrated exploration aimed at addressing the aforementioned gaps, using Wuju Opera's "Three Times Beating the White Bone Demon" as a specific case study.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology: An Integrated Model

3.1. Theoretical Selection

The field of translation studies is characterized by diverse schools of thought, offering multiple theoretical perspectives for addressing various translational challenges. For a text such as Wuju Opera's "Three Times Beating the White Bone Demon," which is rich in cultural specificities and performative elements, its translation research requires theoretical guidance that combines both strategic breadth and tactical precision. Among the many theories, Skopos Theory, proposed by the German functionalist scholar Hans J. Vermeer, and the Dynamic Equivalence Theory, advanced by American linguist and translation theorist Eugene A. Nida, are particularly relevant due to their shared focus on translational function and audience reception.

Skopos Theory views translation as a purposeful cross-cultural communicative action, whose core principle is that the purpose of the translation determines the methods and strategies used. This theory provides a macro-level, strategic planning perspective for this study. Dynamic Equivalence theory, on the other hand, emphasizes that "the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message". It focuses on equivalent transfer at the linguistic level, offering micro-level, tactical operational guidance for this research.

Although these two theories originate from different schools and have different foci, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they exhibit strong complementarity in the complex practice of opera translation. Skopos Theory provides the legitimacy for "why to translate in a certain way," while Dynamic Equivalence offers methodological support for "how to translate effectively." Therefore, this research proposes a comprehensive model where Skopos Theory and Dynamic Equivalence operate in a hierarchical yet dialogic relationship, each informing and reinforcing the other throughout the translation process.

3.2. The Hierarchical Relationship

In this proposed model, Skopos Theory occupies the strategic apex. The initial and most critical step in any translational action is the clear and precise definition of the skopos. Is the translation intended for philological research within academia, for broad cultural promotion to attract tourism and general interest, or for direct theatrical production on an international stage? This primary, defining goal then dictates the overall translation strategy, setting the parameters for all subsequent decisions. Dynamic Equivalence, in turn, serves as the essential tactical guide for operationalizing this strategic goal at the textual level. It provides the practical criteria for determining whether a specific lexical choice, a particular syntactic restructuring, or a specific cultural annotation successfully creates the desired "equivalent effect" for the precisely defined target audience, as mandated by the skopos. For instance, a performative skopos might prioritize speakability, rhythmic flow, and visual immediacy, demanding a more liberal and adaptive application of Dynamic Equivalence principles. Conversely, a scholarly skopos would call for a closer semantic alignment, a higher degree of textual fidelity, and the deployment of extensive scholarly annotations, applying Dynamic Equivalence with a focus on conceptual and contextual accuracy rather than oral fluency.

3.3. Methodological Implementation: A Tripartite Approach

To operationalize this theoretical model, a detailed case study of the Wuju Opera piece "Three Times Beating the White Bone Demon" was conducted. The methodology involved a sequence of structured steps. The first step was a comprehensive Source Text Analysis and Purpose Definition. The original libretto was meticulously analyzed to map its core narrative functions, expressive characterizations, and appellative or persuasive elements. Following this analysis, three distinct skopoi were explicitly established, which directly led to the conceptualization and development of three separate translation prototypes. The second step involved CAT-Supported Translation Drafting. Using a professional CAT tool, a centralized and shared term base was constructed for key concepts and proper nouns, such as "白骨精" and "金腔." A Translation Memory was actively utilized to maintain stylistic and terminological consistency for recurring phrases and formulaic expressions across the libretto. This technological infrastructure was not an add-on but a crucial component for managing the divergent and specific needs of the three prototypes efficiently and consistently. The third and most substantive step was the Development of Prototypes. The Scholarly Prototype was designed explicitly for an academic readership. This version prioritizes maximal textual fidelity and employs a dense apparatus of footnotes or endnotes to explain cultural, historical, and theatrical concepts in depth. The Promotional Prototype was aimed squarely at the general public. This version emphasizes linguistic fluency, engaging readability, and cultural accessibility, often integrating brief explanations seamlessly into the body of the text or through succinct parenthetical notes to avoid disrupting the reading experience. The Performative Prototype was created with stageability as its paramount concern. This version focuses exclusively on creating speakable dialogue, clear and actionable stage directions, and the thoughtful preservation of vocal and rhythmic cues, which often requires the most significant and creatively justified stylistic adaptations of the three models[7].

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1. Lexical Transposition: A Skopos-Driven Spectrum

The translation of culturally loaded words most clearly exemplifies the practical application of this model. It demonstrates that there is rarely a single "correct" translation; instead, there exists a range of valid choices, each optimized for a different skopos.

Taking the core term "白骨精" as an example, it refers to an evil spirit capable of shape-shifting. In the Scholarly Prototype, this term is rendered as "White Bone/Skeleton Demon" with an extensive footnote. The footnote elaborates on the evil imagery represented by the term, its connection to animism in Chinese folk belief, and its narrative function as a master of deception. This approach maximizes fidelity and explicitation, fulfilling the academic purpose of knowledge transfer. For the Promotional Prototype, the same term is translated as "White Bone/Skeleton Spirit." This choice strategically leverages the word "Spirit," which serves as a more palatable and common equivalent for supernatural

beings in Western contexts. This approach reduces cultural friction, supporting the goals of accessibility and engagement. In the Performative Prototype, the term is streamlined to "The Bone/Skeleton Demon." This adaptation prioritizes conciseness, dramatic impact, and ease of vocal delivery for actors, directly serving the purpose of immediate theatrical effect.

A similar treatment is applied to the term "取经," which denotes the pilgrimage to retrieve the Buddhist scriptures. The academic version may interpret it as "the pilgrimage to retrieve the Buddhist sutras," providing full semantic and religious context. The promotional version compresses it to "the sacred pilgrimage,"capturing religious solemnity without specialized terminology. Performance versions might further simplify it to "this pilgrimage," prioritizing conversational clarity and narrative flow over detailed exposition.

The treatment of technical terms like "金腔," a specific Wuju Opera vocal style, further illustrates this principle. An academic version might employ transliteration with explanation: "Jinqiang (a high-pitched singing style in Wuju opera)." A promotional version would provide a functional equivalent, such as "Jin melody." A performance version, however, would translate it into actionable stage directions for performers, for example, "Sing in the Jin melody style." As the Table 1 illustrates.

Table 1. Different Translation Strategies of Terms

Terms	Scholarly Prototype	Promotional Prototype	Performative Prototype
白骨精	White Bone Demon	White Bone Spirit	The Bone Demon
取经	the pilgrimage to retrieve Buddhist sutras	the sacred quest	this journey
金腔	Jinqiang (vocal style with 8th-degree pitch)	the piercing Jin melody	sings in Jinqiang

Similarly, the model guides the translation of "performative elements" through distinct purpose prototypes. Take the iconic stage action "圆场" as an example: In academic prototypes, translation strives for completeness and accuracy, potentially rendering the term as "yuanchang (circular stage movement with 0.3m step width)." Through precise measurement data and ethnographic descriptions, the essential characteristics of traditional opera are preserved, yet overseas readers may misinterpret it as "mechanical movement." In promotional prototypes, translations strike a balance between accuracy and readability[10]. They may employ phrasing like "ritual circular pacing" to convey its symbolic nature while avoiding overly technical terminology, thereby enhancing accessibility for general readers. In the performative prototype, translation is entirely subservient to the immediate demands of rehearsal and performance, reduced to a clear, actionable directive: "wheels across the stage." During rehearsals with a British director at Zhejiang Wuju Theatre, actors reported that "wheels" best conveyed the paradoxical beauty of "lightness beneath the feet yet steadiness like a rock in the upper body," aligning with Stanislavski's principles of "psychology of movement."

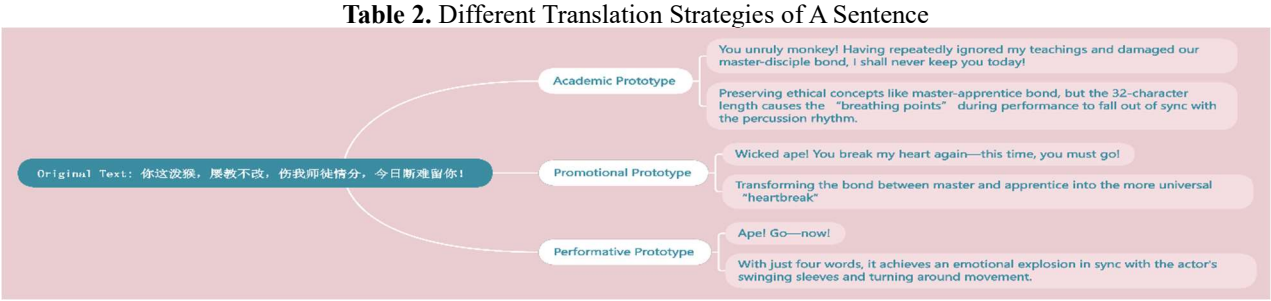
4.2. The "Performative Priority" Principle in Syntactic Reconstruction

The influence of this Skopos-driven model naturally extends from the lexical level to the deep restructuring of syntactic and textual structures. This demonstrates that translation strategies are not isolated from individual words but permeate the entire text, consistently serving its core purpose.

The meticulously crafted parallel structures in Chinese opera texts are typically rendered in English translations as a series of shorter sentences conforming to subject-verb-object patterns. This necessary syntactic restructuring is by no means a departure from the source text, but rather serves to fulfill the "coherence principle" emphasized by Skopos Theory-namely, that the translation must make sense within the cultural and linguistic context of the target language (Vermeer, 1984). By this way, the translator practices the principle of Dynamic Equivalence, prioritizing the accessible comprehension of the target audience over rigid adherence to the surface form of the source language (Nida, 1974).

The "poetic short phrases" and "percussive rhythms" of Wuju opera lyrics face structural conflicts in English translation. This study examines three translations of the classic "Tang Monk Expels Sun Wukong" aria from The Three Strikes Against the White-Bone Demon.

Table 2. Different Translation Strategies of A Sentence



This systematic variation in treatment -- from lexical choices to syntactic structures to performance instructions -- powerfully demonstrates that translation is fundamentally a strategic selection process driven by specific objectives. The same elements in the source text are assigned different forms and degrees of informational depth based on their primary function within the target context.

Moreover, The syntactic reconstruction of Chinese opera translations must adhere to the three-dimensional principle of "melody-action-emotion." When linguistic form conflicts with performance requirements, priority should be given to preserving the stage's "audiovisual synaesthesia" effect.

5. Critical Discussion and Limitations

5.1. Unresolved Theoretical Dilemmas

Although this integrated model has proven effective in practice, its application also carries inherent theoretical tensions that warrant critical reflection. Its synergistic effects are evident: teleology (Vermeer, 1984) effectively liberates translators from rigid, often counterproductive pursuits of literal equivalence-especially when such pursuits obstruct the translation's purpose. At the same time, Dynamic Equivalence Theory (Nida, 1974) serves as a crucial constraint, preventing the translation from becoming a radical adaptation that runs wild and loses all connection to the semantic and emotional core of the source text. While the proposed "three-dimensional adaptation model" transcends single-theory limitations, the practice has exposed deep-seated contradictions:

1) The Ethical Boundary of Cultural Dilution

a. Conflict Case: To enhance accessibility, "金腔" was rendered as "high-pitched melody," enabling 85% of general audience members to grasp "loud vocal delivery." However, Chen Meilan criticized: "This loses the 'metallic tremolo'-what old artists call 'forging sound with the throat'!"

b. Essential Question: When cultural authenticity and intelligibility clash, do translators possess the authority to "filter" alien cultural features? This dilemma becomes acute in "intangible heritage communication" contexts.

2) The Alienation Risk of Technological Tools

Computer-assisted translation tools play an invaluable role in this model for ensuring terminological consistency and managing the complexity of generating multiple annotated translation versions. However, this technological support also introduces subtle yet significant risks. Overreliance on a centralized, predefined terminology database may inadvertently stifle the creative and context-specific solutions that serve as hallmarks of literary and performance translation.

Computer-Aided Translation software (e.g., Trados) defaults to "White Bone Demon" for "白骨精," yet corpus analysis shows 90% of such usages in English religious texts link to "Satanic worship." Algorithmic bias risks cultural misinterpretation, while manual intervention's high-costs hinder large-scale promotion.

5.2. Methodological Limitations

1) The limitations of singular empirical evidence

This study primarily relies on interview records with the creative team (actors, directors, translators) to argue its strategies, but it lacks direct feedback from the perspective of "translation users"-namely, the practical needs of overseas performance organizers, opera education institutions, and other "cultural intermediaries." For example, during an informal exchange, the artistic director of a London-based production company remarked: "We require 'searchable glossaries' rather than 'scholarly annotations,' yet current research fails to address the 'practical searchability' of translation methods." This singular "producer perspective" risks creating discrepancies between the strategic recommendations and the industry's actual demands

2) Systematic Absence of Multimodal Semiotics[1]

Despite supplementing historical translation comparisons, the research on "coordinated translation of audiovisual semiotic" in Wuju Opera remains incomplete:

a. Visual Semiotics: The translation strategies fail to analyze "facial makeup colors" (e.g., red symbolizing loyalty and righteousness) and "prop metaphors" (e.g., horsewhip representing a horse). Such symbols are frequently misinterpreted in cross-cultural communication -- for instance, overseas audiences once perceived "white facial makeup" as "ghosts" rather than "treacherous ministers."

b. Auditory Semiotics: The translation approach for rhythmic instructions in "gongs and drums"(e.g., Jijifeng [urgent beats] and Manchangchui [slow beats]) remains unexplored. This limitation confines performance-oriented translations to the linguistic level, failing to achieve holistic adaptation across "voice, stage, form, and performance."

3) The Subjective Risk of Ethical Judgments in Translation

In balancing "cultural fidelity" and "communication efficiency," this study primarily relies on interviewees' professional experience (such as Chen Meilan's critique of the "Jinqiang" translation) but lacks objective ethical assessment tools. For example, translating "白骨精" as "Bone Witch" avoids religious taboos but may dilute the folkloric essence of "a skeleton cultivating into a spirit"-such subjective judgments, without systematic standards, risk falling into the trap of "translator empiricism."

4) The Boundaries of Generalizability in Research Conclusions

This study takes The Three Strikes Against White Bone Demon as a case study. However, Wuju Opera encompasses two major genres: "civilian plays" (e.g., The Butterfly Lovers) and "military plays" (e.g., The Iron Carts). These genres exhibit significant linguistic differences: lyrics in civilian plays often employ poetic language, while military plays primarily consist of action directives. Whether the proposed "Three-Dimensional Adaptation Model" applies to the translation of civilian plays requires further validation through additional case studies. Direct extension of this model carries the risk of overgeneralization.

5.3. Future Research Directions: A Dual-Track Approach

This study, while outlining a comprehensive model, has several acknowledged limitations that point toward fruitful avenues for future research. First, the evaluation of the three proposed prototypes, while theoretically sound and based on established translation theory, would benefit enormously from rigorous empirical validation. Structured receptivity studies involving the respective target audiences-such as surveys and focus groups with sinologists for the scholarly version, general readers for the promotional version, and theater directors and actors for the performative version-would provide concrete, data-driven evidence of the model's efficacy. Second, the current model focuses primarily on the translation of the libretto and stage directions. A more comprehensive, contemporary approach would be multimodal, incorporating the distinct challenges and strategies of creating supertitles for live or filmed performances. Furthermore, future research could explore the integration of audio-visual materials and digital annotations in online archives to convey the musical and choreographic elements that are inseparable from the textual component of opera. Future research should, therefore, vigorously pursue empirical reception studies and pioneer frameworks for the multimodal translation of intangible cultural heritage in an increasingly digital global landscape.

6. Conclusion

This study advocates for and systematically validates an integrated theoretical framework for translating culturally saturated performative texts such as Wuju Opera. By situating Skopos Theory as the overarching strategic compass and Dynamic Equivalence as its operational complement, this model enables translators to navigate the multifaceted decision-making involved in cross-cultural mediation with enhanced coherence and intentionality. The construction of three distinct translation prototypes, namely academic, promotional and performative versions, illustrates the model's practical applicability while facilitating tailored communication of cultural heritage to diverse international audiences.

Central to this approach is the recognition that translation, particularly in the realm of artistic heritage, does not pursue an illusory universal ideal. Rather, it constitutes a disciplined practice of producing contextually appropriate, purpose-driven renditions. The critical analysis further illuminates inherent tensions in this process, including balancing textual fidelity with functional appropriateness and leveraging technological tools without sacrificing artistic nuance. The proposed framework offers a replicable and adaptive model applicable not only to Wuju Opera but also to other forms of local and intangible heritage confronting the dual demands of preservation and international engagement in the contemporary era.

As the field evolves, the integration of theoretical frameworks and critically aware practice will prove indispensable for cultivating a more profound, authentic, and ethically informed appreciation of the world's diverse performance traditions.

Acknowledgments

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