

A Diachronic Study of Translators' Roles in the Spread of Chinese Culture: An Area Studies Perspective

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Abstract

This paper starts from an area studies perspective and examines the diachronic roles of translators in the overseas spread of Chinese culture. Based on the diachronic line of identities from border residents to migrants and then to overseas Chinese, translators are key carriers of cultural transmission. The prototype of translators is the border residents living in areas where different groups meet, who are also early shapers of regional culture. As population movement becomes large-scale, migrants become mobile carriers of cultural communication. In the process of language adjustment, they continuously engage in cultural negotiation, allowing Chinese culture to integrate into local contexts and continue in localized forms. In this cross-linguistic practice, “overseas Chinese,” as a concept of cultural identity, gradually becomes clear. From an area studies perspective, the spread of Chinese culture is not a one-way output, but a dynamic process that is continuously activated through translators' language practices in different regional contexts. Therefore, placing translators within a diachronic context of population movement provides an analytical perspective of “human as medium” for area studies.

Keywords

Area Studies, Translators, Border Residents, Migrants, Cultural Communication

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Questions

In the context of globalization and regional integration, area studies has gradually become an important topic in both academia and practice, mainly aiming to un-

derstand the politics, economy, culture, and society of specific regions and to provide knowledge support for national diplomatic strategies and international cooperation. With the continuous advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, the importance of area studies has become increasingly prominent, and its “knowledge production characteristics of being cross-national, cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary” have also received broader attention (Li, 2023). Current research mainly focuses on macro-level institutional analysis, while relatively little attention is paid to “people” as micro-level agents. Cultural communication ultimately has to be carried out through people. Xu (2023) once pointed out that translation activities cannot be separated from the translator as the core subject, and the cultural stance and choices of translators directly affect the form and effect of translation. Ma (2006) and others stated that “when languages are not mutually understood, there must be people who interpret”, revealing the fundamental role of translators in cross-cultural communication. They are located at the intersection of language and culture, transmitting information and culture.

The history of the overseas spread of Chinese culture is almost synchronous with the migration of the Chinese nation. From ethnic interactions on the northern grasslands, to commercial exchanges along the Maritime Silk Road, to contemporary global cultural communication, translators have always been present. Wen & Hu (2007) pointed out that “China is a large multi-ethnic country... with a long history of translation, which is of great significance for our in-depth understanding of exchanges between ethnic minorities and the Han, as well as with foreign countries”. The role of translators is not fixed. In early periods, they were border residents living in areas where different groups met; later, they became migrants in large-scale movement; and in contemporary times, they became overseas Chinese with a clear sense of identity. This line of identity evolution is also the diachronic line of the evolution of translators’ roles.

This paper aims to explore how the roles of translators in the overseas spread of Chinese culture evolve along with population movement, including the identity features of translators at different historical stages, the cultural content they transmit, and the mechanisms of identity formation.

In this paper, “the overseas spread of Chinese culture” encompasses four inter-related forms of cultural transmission: 1) language mediation, referring to the everyday practice of bridging communication across linguistic boundaries; 2) literary translation, involving the rendering of Chinese classical and modern literature into other languages; 3) technical transfer, covering the dissemination of productive skills and practical knowledge; and 4) identity-based cultural brokerage, which includes the conscious negotiation of cultural identity in cross-border contexts. These forms are not mutually exclusive but often overlap, with different forms predominating at different historical stages.

1.2. Concept Definition

Translators are the main object of analysis in this paper. The definition of translators’ identity should start from their function. They are often multi-role medi-

ating figures, who may be merchants in cross-border trade, missionaries spreading religion, envoys traveling between countries, or contemporary sinologists, subtitle translators, and translators of online literature. This definition goes beyond the narrow category of professional translators and fits the historical reality of the spread of Chinese culture. Yang (2023), the proposer of knowledge translation, points out that translation, as a cross-linguistic process of knowledge reproduction and dissemination, mainly involves language, translators, and knowledge. In this process, translators are not passive transmitters, but reconstruct knowledge and become a medium of cross-cultural communication.

The area studies perspective in this paper has a specific methodological meaning. Professor Sun (2022) points out that area studies “can be regarded as a form of translation,” because it involves understanding others and requires cross-linguistic and cross-cultural interpretation and transformation. Sun (2022) further distinguishes between “region” and “area”: region refers to a part of a whole with clear boundaries, while area refers to a product shaped by specific intentions and consciousness, with uncertain boundaries and meanings. Bachmann-Medick (2015) emphasizes that attention to translation relations helps to rethink the concept of “region,” and specific “zones of translation” can deepen the understanding of cross-regional connections. Regions are no longer fixed spaces, but fields where translation practices take place.

The diachronic line from border residents to migrants and then to overseas Chinese constitutes the main structure of this paper. Han & He (2026) points out that translation activities should be examined within a spatiotemporal coupling framework to reveal the influence of historical and geographical environments on translators. “Border residents” refer to people living in areas where different groups meet, with fluid identities and naturally acquired bilingual ability, and they are early shapers of regional culture. “Migrants” refer to people who move on a large scale due to livelihood, war, or policy, and they complete the localization of culture in the process of language adjustment. “Overseas Chinese” refers to groups with a clear sense of identity who develop cultural awareness and become cultural transmitters in the context of globalization. This line serves as the analytical framework for observing the evolution of translators’ roles.

Therefore, the area studies perspective adopted in this paper understands regions as zones of translation formed by population movement, language contact, and cultural interaction, rather than static geographical units, and examines translators’ practices in dynamic contexts.

These three categories—border residents, migrants, and overseas Chinese—are not rigidly sequential stages but should be understood as analytical ideal types. In historical reality, they may overlap or coexist: a border resident may also be a migrant in a different context, and an overseas Chinese may retain characteristics of earlier identities. The purpose of distinguishing them is to capture shifts in the dominant modes of translator practice at different moments of population movement, while acknowledging that individual translators may embody multiple cat-

egories simultaneously or transition between them in nonlinear ways.

1.3. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

This paper integrates knowledge translation, cross-cultural communication theory, and identity theory. In *Chengdu Sport University (2024)*, Fu points out that translation studies itself develops on the basis of interdisciplinary integration, which provides a methodological foundation for the use of theoretical frameworks.

Translation, as a cross-linguistic process of knowledge reproduction and dissemination, is essentially the global recognition of local knowledge (*Yang, 2023*). In the translation practice of area studies, the knowledge translation model can explain knowledge reconstruction, transmission, and representation in the translation process from three dimensions: knowledge subjects, knowledge dynamics, and knowledge discourse systems. This helps to understand the transformation of translators from border residents to migrants and then to overseas Chinese, and shows that translation is a medium of cross-linguistic knowledge communication. *Bachmann-Medick (2015)* argues that translation should be analyzed beyond its traditional function of knowledge transmission, which helps reposition area studies in the context of globalization and avoid a binary opposition between global and local. *Simmons & Smith (2025)* point out that although context may change interpretive concepts, the goal of translation is still to develop understandable and recognizable ideas across contexts. *Bourdieu's (1972)* concepts of “field,” “habitus,” and “capital” also provide analytical tools for understanding translators’ social practices. In the translation field, translators are situated in a social network composed of power institutions, publishers, patrons, and readers, and the distribution of capital and power relations influences translation strategies. Therefore, mobility and communication content jointly shape the role of translators as a medium. Mobility determines identity and function, while communication content reflects the main forms of the overseas spread of Chinese culture at each stage. Their interaction constitutes the mechanism of role evolution.

This study takes Australia and Southeast Asia as the main observation areas. These two regions are analytically comparable because they are key nodes in the same historical migration chain: from the 19th century onward, Chinese migrants from Fujian and Guangdong moved first to Southeast Asia (as sojourners and settlers) and later extended their networks to Australia. Southeast Asia represents a region of both transit and long-term settlement, where translators engaged in the localization of Chinese culture within a mixed Malay-Chinese environment. Australia, as a destination at the far end of this migration chain, illustrates how translators shifted from inward cultural maintenance under restrictive policies to outward cultural output in a multicultural context. Together, they offer a complementary picture of how translator roles evolved across different settlement conditions. And the selection of typical cases at each stage follows the principles of representativeness, accessibility of sources, and relevance of communication content,

aiming to explore the trajectory of translators' role evolution along the diachronic line of identity change.

This paper integrates the above theories into an analytical framework, taking population movement as the main line, translators as the variable, and analyzing from three dimensions: function, identity, and practice.

Across the three stages, the interaction between mobility, identity, function, and communication content follows a discernible pattern. Border residents, characterized by low mobility and fluid identities, engage in spontaneous language mediation that transmits everyday skills and oral culture. Migrants, with higher mobility and emerging settlement, develop organized textual translation practices that disseminate literary classics while negotiating identity. Overseas Chinese, operating within globalized mobility and with clear cultural self-awareness, undertake professionalized, bidirectional translation that conveys contemporary values and contributes to knowledge production. This comparative framework helps to clarify how shifts in mobility and identity drive changes in translator function and the nature of cultural transmission.

2. Border Residents

Border residents, as the historical prototype of the translator role, emerge in specific geographic spaces and social structures. This chapter explores, from a linguistic perspective, how border residents naturally acquire bilingual abilities in areas where different groups meet and become early builders of regional culture. Cross-border ethnic groups in Australia and Southeast Asia demonstrate the regional specificity of the border resident role.

2.1. Identity Characteristics and Language Contact of Border Residents

Border residents live at the margins of different ethnic, cultural, and political entities, and their sense of belonging is often fluid and ambiguous. Han & He (2026), in discussing area translators, points out that translation activities should be examined within a spatiotemporal coupling framework to reveal the effects of historical and geographical environments on translators. The borderlands where they reside are not only transitional geographic spaces but also cultural contact frontiers. This special spatiotemporal position naturally generates the need for language mediation. Such borderlands are the soil in which language mediation functions develop.

Ye & Xu (2010) note that “ethnic groups living in close geographic proximity with intensive contact will see many people become bilingual or multilingual”. The acquisition of bilingual ability does not occur through institutionalized education but is naturally achieved in daily productive and social interactions. McGroarty's (2003) definition of language contact provides a theoretical basis for understanding this process: “Language contact refers to the social interaction among different ethnic groups and communities that gives rise to language communication rela-

tions”. Border residents live in such a society where daily interactions are reciprocal and unavoidable, requiring them to switch between languages. This is not a professional choice but a survival necessity.

Cross-border trade requires negotiation; inter-ethnic marriages require emotional communication; dispute mediation requires information transmission. Language mediation skills gradually form through such daily practice. In this process, language switching evolves from an auxiliary behavior in individual interactions into a stable means of communication. Translation practice at the border resident stage can be seen as an early form of cross-cultural communication.

The ethnic settlement patterns during the Yuan and Mongol periods provide a typical example of the emergence of border resident translators. In the early Yuan Dynasty, “northern ethnic groups had already formed partially mixed, partially segregated, and interlaced patterns of production and settlement” (Wang et al., 2024). Such patterns directly gave rise to bilingual or multilingual populations. The case of the Khitan Yelü Chucai is representative: “from childhood he was taught Mongolian by his mother Yang, and was familiar with Mongolian customs and culture,” ultimately becoming a translator and aide to Genghis Khan (Song, 1976). Research by Irinchin (2001) further reveals linguistic continuity among the Xianbei, Shiwei, and Khitan peoples, whose languages share common origins with Mongolian. This linguistic affinity facilitated their acquisition of languages within such mixed settlement patterns.

Although the border resident phenomenon in Australia and Southeast Asia occurs in very different temporal and spatial contexts compared to the Yuan period, its generative logic is similar, emerging naturally from language contact under specific spatiotemporal coupling conditions.

2.2. Linguistic Mediation among Cross-Border Ethnic Groups in Southeast Asia

The mountainous areas of mainland Southeast Asia are typical regions for cross-border ethnic groups. Chinese from Yunnan in Thailand, the Kokang people in northern Myanmar, the He ethnic group in Laos, and the Nong people in Vietnam migrated from southwest China to these areas between the 19th and early 20th centuries. These groups exhibit typical “border resident” characteristics. In terms of nationality, they may hold citizenship in their country of residence, yet their language, customs, and kinship networks remain closely tied to their ancestral homeland. Economically, they rely on cross-border trade networks and move frequently between the Thai-Myanmar, Lao-Myanmar, and China-Vietnam borderlands. Culturally, they occupy an intermediate state, “neither fully Chinese nor fully local.”

This border resident status naturally generates a need for language mediation. Take Yunnanese in northern Thailand as an example: when interacting with the Thai, they use Thai; when trading with nearby mountain ethnic groups (such as the Akha and Lisu), they use local ethnic languages; when communicating with Yunnanese merchants crossing the border, they use Yunnan dialects. Living long-

term in a multilingual environment, border residents often naturally acquire three to four languages, effectively becoming language mediators. Their translation activities are not professional endeavors but practices embedded in daily life: translating official documents for elders who do not know Thai, serving as guides for cross-border trade caravans, and mediating communication barriers in inter-ethnic marriages. As [Tan \(2021\)](#) points out in *Western Translation History Studies*, translation history research should pay attention to the “silent majority.” Beyond official records, countless anonymous translators undertake cultural dissemination in everyday interactions.

It is noteworthy that Southeast Asian border residents inadvertently transmit cultural content while switching languages. Words from Ming and Qing vernacular Chinese preserved in Yunnan dialects entered northern Thailand through their cross-border movement. Chinese folk songs, including melodies and lyrics, were preserved and transmitted in their wedding and funeral ceremonies. Confucian ethics were passed down through family education. This dissemination is not a conscious export of culture but a natural inheritance through daily life. The borderlands inhabited by cross-border ethnic groups in Southeast Asia are precisely such “translation zones.” Here, translation is not a professional activity but a way of survival, and cultural transmission is not intentional but embedded in life itself, with its function not yet independent from social interaction.

2.3. Chinese Fishermen in the Macassan Contact on the Australian Coast

The Macassan contact on the northern coast of Australia is another typical case of border-resident translators. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that this is not a land-based ethnic frontier but a seasonal contact within a maritime trade network. Since the 18th century, Macassan fishermen from Sulawesi, Indonesia, have sailed to the northern coast of Australia with the monsoon to harvest sea cucumbers, engaging in trade with Indigenous Australians. During this process, some Chinese fishermen participated either as members of the Macassan fleets or as independent merchants within this trade network ([Tang, 2019](#)).

The identity of these Chinese fishermen also exhibits border-resident characteristics. They were neither Macassans nor Indigenous Australians, neither permanent settlers nor mere transient visitors. During their seasonal stays, they engaged in language contact with Indigenous Australians, creating simplified communication centered on trade. Archaeological and linguistic evidence partially reflects lexical borrowings in Indigenous Australian languages resulting from Macassan contact, covering sea cucumber trade, ship technology, and daily necessities. [Professor Xia \(2023\)](#) notes that records of translation activities are often concentrated in official archives, while much of the vernacular, daily translation practice is frequently overlooked by historical accounts.

The Chinese fishermen involved in Macassan contact left no names, and direct records of their translation activities are scarce. However, based on the practical

requirements of trade interactions and the linguistic traces preserved in Indigenous Australian vocabularies, it is reasonable to infer that these fishermen performed language mediation functions to a certain extent. This case is therefore presented as a plausible but indirectly documented example of border-resident translators, acknowledging that the evidence for their role is limited compared to the better-documented cases in Southeast Asia. Its inclusion highlights the challenge of recovering vernacular translation practices that lie outside official historical records.

3. Migrants

The migration phase represents a critical turning point in the evolution of translator roles. Unlike the spontaneous and scattered nature of the border-resident phase, translation activities during the migration phase exhibit characteristics of scale, organization, and textualization. As Chinese migration shifted from sporadic movement to large-scale relocation, translators gradually transformed from language mediators in daily interactions to conscious cultural coordinators. This chapter focuses on the waves of Chinese migration from the 19th to the mid-20th century, examining the evolving roles of translators in the process of cultural localization, as well as their identity negotiation amid the interplay of colonial rule, nation-state construction, and Cold War dynamics.

3.1. Identity Characteristics and Cultural Adaptation of Migrants

The distinction between migrants and border residents lies in the scale and direction of movement. Border residents live in relatively fixed ethnic frontier zones, where language contact occurs in daily interactions. Migrants, by contrast, undertake long-distance, transoceanic relocation; they leave their ancestral homelands and enter entirely unfamiliar socio-cultural environments, necessitating the reconstruction of daily life under different linguistic and customary conditions. These survival circumstances determine the unique characteristics of translation activities during the migration phase.

In the mid-19th century, with the development of tin mining in Southeast Asia and the Australian gold rush, large numbers of Chinese from the coastal regions of Fujian and Guangdong migrated abroad, marking the first large-scale wave of overseas migration in modern history. These migrants were, on one hand, “sojourners,” compelled to leave their homes for livelihood purposes. On the other hand, they were “settlers,” required to establish new social networks and adapt to local survival rules. Compared with the border-resident phase, cultural transmission during the migration phase exhibited notable changes. Cultural content began to be disseminated in textual form, forming relatively stable networks through clan associations and newspapers, while translators increasingly demonstrated conscious adjustments and adaptations in their translations.

3.2. Translation Practices of Baba Chinese in Southeast Asia

The Baba Chinese community in Southeast Asia represents early migration-phase

translation activities. The Baba were locally born Chinese, whose ancestors were primarily Hokkien migrants from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Through inter-marriage with local Malay women, they formed a unique hybrid cultural community. The identity of the Baba carries a mediating character. They used Malay as their daily communicative language, but in ethical beliefs and religious practices, they maintained Chinese traditions. The Baba remained thoroughly sinicized in cultural customs and religious beliefs and although their language is a mix of Chinese and Malay, they persistently upheld the ethical, moral, and spiritual essence of the Chinese nation. This duality of Malayized language, Sinicized culture makes the Baba an ideal medium for the localized transmission of Chinese culture.

The peak of Baba translation activities occurred from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, focusing mainly on the translation of Chinese popular novels. Chan Kim Boon's Baba Malay translation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is the most representative. He transformed culturally specific items in the original text, such as official titles, rituals, and weaponry, into concepts familiar to Baba readers, replacing them with locally comprehensible Malay vocabulary and imagery, while preserving the core plot and character representations. This approach enabled the transmission of Confucian ethics and loyalty ideals (Cui & Peng, 2024). Such adaptations were not a betrayal of the original text, but a conscious choice for cultural localization. Through adaptation, the core content of Chinese culture acquired new life in a heterogeneous context. From the perspective of knowledge translation studies, this adaptation constitutes a re-encoding of existing cultural knowledge, making it comprehensible and acceptable in a new context. The significance of Baba translated literature lies not only in literary dissemination itself, but also in the inadvertent localization of Confucian ethics through the translation of Chinese classical novels.

3.3. Language Practices and Cultural Maintenance of Chinese Gold Miners in Australia

Unlike the Baba in Southeast Asia, the historical trajectory of Chinese migrants in Australia presents a different picture. In the 1850s, following the discovery of gold in Victoria and New South Wales, large numbers of Chinese from Guangdong and Fujian migrated to Australia, forming the first large-scale wave of Chinese migration to the country. These gold-seeking migrants were predominantly single males, speaking Cantonese as their primary language, which made it difficult for them to establish broad social networks in English-speaking society.

Research by Fei (2013) shows that the advantage of gold-seeking Chinese lay in their ability to apply traditional production techniques from the Pearl River Delta to mining activities in Australia. This transfer of techniques constitutes a form of silent translation: migrants adapted and applied ancestral production knowledge in a completely new geographical environment. Technology, as a carrier of localized knowledge, was thus disseminated across oceans through the practical engagement of the migrants themselves.

However, the successful transfer of technology did not lead to smooth cultural

integration. In the latter half of the 19th century, Australian society increasingly rejected Chinese migrants, culminating in the discriminatory White Australia Policy. As a result, the linguistic practices of Chinese migrants shifted to venues such as clan associations, with Chinese-language newspapers serving as information conduits and Chinese schools as cultural preservation sites. Grayson (2018) documented efforts by Chinese to maintain cultural identity through community networks in Chinatown, traditional festival rituals, and orally transmitted stories and songs. The Australian gold-seeking Chinese case illustrates that when the external environment becomes restrictive, translators' activities shift from outward cultural dissemination to inward cultural preservation, preserving the seeds for cultural transmission in the subsequent "Chinese" phase. This shift demonstrates that under specific social pressures, translators' practices may pivot from external propagation to internal maintenance, showing clear context-dependency in function.

3.4. Summary

The migration phase represents the central stage in the evolution of translator roles. From the spontaneous mediation of border residents to the proactive mediation of migrants, translators' functions expanded from language transmission to cultural negotiation. The scope of cultural dissemination increased from everyday technical knowledge to the translation of literary classics. From identity-ambiguous border residents to identity-negotiating migrants, translators' self-awareness gradually emerged. All of this laid the foundation for cultural transmission and cross-boundary engagement in the subsequent Chinese phase.

4. Overseas Chinese

The transition from migrants to overseas Chinese marks another profound leap in translator identity. With a clearer sense of identity, "overseas Chinese" developed cultural self-awareness, shifting from passive to active cultural output. This chapter focuses on Chinese translators in Australia and Southeast Asia from the late 20th century to the present, examining how they engage in the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture as cross-boundary actors in the context of globalization.

4.1. Identity Characteristics and Cultural Recognition of "Overseas Chinese"

As an identity concept, "overseas Chinese" has evolved from an ethnic designation to a marker of cultural identity. Wang (2023) notes that translators among the Chinese diaspora encounter multiple cultural conflicts in their cross-cultural experiences, and their cultural translation activities involve complex negotiations of identity. Translation is not merely language conversion; it is also a process of identity negotiation. Wang (2025) summarizes this group's function as a "bridge population," acting as institutional interfaces between China and the West, serving an

irreplaceable intermediary role in cultural dissemination.

Research indicates that the dual identity of being Malaysian citizens and members of the Chinese cultural group gives overseas Chinese a natural advantage in bridging cultural gaps in international communication. The interaction among cross-cultural adaptation, identity affirmation, and the surrounding environment drives the transformation of overseas Chinese identity toward that of “cultural bridge” (Zhong et al., 2024), which also applies to understanding the identity formation of Chinese translators. Through the use of language skills and cultural resources, translators gradually accumulate and convert cultural capital, gaining greater influence within cross-cultural fields.

4.2. Translators among Southeast Asian Overseas Chinese

The fundamental difference between Southeast Asian Chinese translators and those in the migrant phase lies in the shift in identity positioning. While Baba translators of the migrant phase had settled locally, their translation activities were limited to rendering Chinese literature into local languages for the benefit of the Chinese community. Contemporary Southeast Asian Chinese translators engage in both inward and outward translation, serving both the Chinese community and the mainstream society, elevating their role from cultural coordinators to cultural bridges.

Joaquin Sy is one of the most prominent Chinese translators in the Philippines, exemplifying this role evolution. For decades, he has engaged in bidirectional translation between Chinese and Filipino, translating works such as Bai Ren’s *Drifting in the South Seas* (awarded the Philippines National Book Award in 2008) and Ba Jin’s short stories into Filipino, and translating the Philippine national cultural publication *One Hundred Events Shaping the Philippines* into Chinese. This conscious bidirectional translation contrasts sharply with the unidirectional input of migrant-phase translators, positioning him not only as a disseminator of Chinese culture but also as an interpreter of Philippine culture in Chinese. This practice demonstrates the translator’s shift from cultural receiver to cultural constructor.

Joaquin Sy’s adherence to translation principles reflects the professional consciousness of contemporary Chinese translators. He insists on translating directly from the original text, noting that many existing Chinese literary translations in the Philippines were first translated into English and then retransferred into Filipino. Direct translation from the source text offers advantages in both linguistic precision and cultural fidelity. This approach surpasses the pragmatic orientation of migrant-phase translators, demonstrating a commitment to translation quality. Moreover, he has advocated for the formal inclusion of Chinese-derived terms such as “sioti” (little brother), “siobe” (little sister), “kungfu” (martial arts), and “naicha” (milk tea) into the Filipino Dictionary, recognizing language as both a medium and a record of cultural exchange. The increasing incorporation of Chinese vocabulary into Filipino indicates growing Sino-Philippine cultural interac-

tion, illustrating that Chinese translators are actively participating in the linguistic construction of the target culture—a cultural influence unattainable by migrant-phase translators.

Joaquin Sy's understanding of his role encapsulates the positioning of contemporary Chinese translators: "Filipino Chinese naturally bear the mission of connecting the Philippines and China. Born and raised in the Philippines, rooted in local society, we carry the spiritual legacy of Chinese culture. This dual cultural identity allows us to perceive both the commonalities and differences between the two cultures, granting us unique cross-cultural expressive and mediating abilities" (Shi, 2025). This statement illustrates that they are no longer outsiders or transitional figures but cross-boundary actors rooted in both cultural soils, with translation activities evolving from cultural adaptation to cultural dialogue.

4.3. Translators among Australian Overseas Chinese

The evolution of Australian Overseas Chinese translators likewise illustrates the transition from the migrant stage to the Overseas Chinese stage. Unlike the inward-focused translation practices of Australian gold miner Chinese during the migration phase, contemporary Australian Chinese translators have developed professionalized translation practices, expanding their audience from the Chinese community to the mainstream society, and elevating the content from cultural materials to academic ideas and contemporary values.

McDougall (2011) is one of the most prominent sinologist translators in Australia, notable for integrating Sinology research with literary translation. It is evident that her scope of practice and influence have expanded compared to the migration phase, positioning her as a theorist of translation activity. In *Translation Zones in Modern China*, she (2011) proposed that state-supported authoritarian command models and interpersonal gift-exchange models provide an analytical framework for understanding translation activities in different contexts. This theoretical construction shows that Overseas Chinese not only engage in translation practice but also reflect on and theorize translation itself, elevating it from skillful operation to scholarly practice.

Han Jing represents the path of audiovisual translation, and her work demonstrates how translators in the Overseas Chinese stage effectively convey contemporary Chinese cultural values to mainstream society. She served as the head of the subtitling department at SBS Television in Australia for 23 years, translating over 300 Chinese audiovisual works, including *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero*, and *If You Are the One* (Shandong Technology and Business University, 2025). Han Jing summarized the essence of subtitle translation as reconstructing a complete cultural scene for the audience within a limited time-space, emphasizing that translation design must consider the linguistic and cultural context of the audience (Shandong Technology and Business University, 2025). This approach contrasts sharply with the inward-focused translation practices of the migration stage. Han Jing's translations target mainstream Australian society; the goal is not

to maintain the cultural memory of the Chinese community but to introduce Chinese culture to mainstream viewers. The shift in audience marks the transition from migrant to Overseas Chinese translator roles.

The academic influence of Australian Overseas Chinese translators has extended beyond translation practice itself. Australian translation scholars such as Wang & Fang (2026) have revealed translators' cognition and strategies in translation practice, providing scientific foundations for translator training. This demonstrates that the Australian Overseas Chinese translator community has achieved significant results in translation practice and formed an active academic community in translation theory research, shifting from cultural dissemination to knowledge production.

4.4. Summary

The Overseas Chinese stage represents the contemporary form of translators' role evolution. From cultural negotiators in the migrant stage to cultural disseminators in the Overseas Chinese stage, translators' functions shift from passive to actively constructing cultural communication. This evolution confirms the argument of this paper: translators are key mediators in the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture, and their roles evolve alongside population movements.

5. Conclusion

Starting from the perspective of area studies, this paper examines translators' evolving roles in the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture along the diachronic trajectory of border residents, migrants, and Overseas Chinese. Drawing on theoretical references from studies of translators during the Yuan dynasty and analyzing representative cases from Australia and Southeast Asia, this study attempts to reveal how translators' roles evolve alongside population movements and the cultural functions they assume at different historical stages. The following conclusions are drawn.

In the border resident stage, translators lived in ethnic frontier zones, where their language mediation skills developed naturally, and cultural dissemination primarily involved everyday skills and oral culture.

During the migrant stage, translators moved into settlement areas along with large-scale migration. Translation activities became more textualized and organized, and translators gradually shifted from mere language mediators to cultural coordinators.

In the Overseas Chinese stage, translators' identity became clarified, leading to cultural self-awareness, and they emerged as agents of cross-boundary cultural dissemination.

As mediators, translators' roles are shaped jointly by their mobility and the content they transmit. Australia and Southeast Asia, as key nodes in the Chinese migration chain, fully demonstrate this evolution. Examining translators within the diachronic context of population movement provides an "individual-mediated"

analytical pathway for area studies. The notion of a region is not a fixed geographic concept but a product of population movement and linguistic contact.

In summary, across different historical stages, although translators' identities and forms of practice continually change, their core role as mediators of cultural dissemination persists. It should be noted that the three identity categories—border residents, migrants, and overseas Chinese—are analytical constructs rather than a deterministic sequence. In practice, these roles can coexist, and translators may move between them in non-linear ways depending on specific historical and geographical contexts. Not all translators follow the same trajectory, and the purpose of this framework is to capture dominant patterns while allowing for complexity and variation. The historical experience of their role evolution offers valuable insights for understanding cultural communication in today's globalized context.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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