

Resituating the Grand Canal Translation Practices within the Communicative Ecology of Cultural Heritage*

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Heritage translation is often seen as a task of finding the right words. A museum label or a piece of text gets translated, and once the words look equivalent, the task is treated as done. This article looks instead at the work songs sung by boatmen on the Grand Canal. It argues that translating living heritage needs to be understood within the wider communicative setting where that heritage actually lives. The argument draws on a three-dimensional account of cultural space and on a close reading of examples of how this heritage has been presented internationally. What emerges is a recurring sense of detachment. The sound of a work song gets separated from the body that once laboured to produce it, and overseas audiences are left with a metaphor but no clear image of the physical work behind it. The article then suggests three principles that follow from this ecological view, while also acknowledging the practical limits that digital heritage projects often face. The study tries to offer a shared starting point for heritage communication research and translation studies. It also provides a modest set of criteria for those who present the Grand Canal's living heritage to international audiences.

Keywords: the Grand Canal, multimodal metaphor, heritage translation, communicative ecology

Introduction

The Grand Canal was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014¹, and its cross-cultural visibility has been a standing policy priority ever since. Research on how canal symbols travel beyond China has grown accordingly. Fan (2026) develops a three-dimensional cultural space model that separates the physical, behavioural and symbolic layers of the canal. The multimodal metaphor strategies aim at broad coverage and draw mainly on heritage sites and staged performances, which leaves auditory labour heritage with little direct attention. Yang et al. (2026) survey the state of international communication in Huai'an's Grand Canal cultural

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¹ UNESCO. The Grand Canal (China)[EB/OL]. [2026-08-26]. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1443>.

construction. They find participatory design underdeveloped, but they treat translation as a logistical detail rather than as an analytical object. Li (2023) uses spatial evidence to map the distribution of folk-song heritage in the Grand Canal basin, which advances domestic preservation though not cross-cultural transfer. Domestic commentary on the canal's significance has multiplied in the same period, with recent work interpreting its cultural role in the language of national strategy (Shao, 2024).

Translation studies has approached Chinese intangible heritage mainly through the text. Researchers evaluate bilingual exhibit captions, documentary subtitles and printed folk-lyric translations, and they judge success by lexical precision and semantic equivalence. The assumption embedded in this work is that written verbal text can carry heritage meaning on its own. That assumption sits uneasily with the definition of intangible heritage that UNESCO adopted in 2003, which insists that living heritage exists through the communities that practise it². Kurin (2004) added the accompanying warning early and clearly, that intangible heritage loses its character once it is treated as a listable object. What tends to drop out of text-centric evaluation is embodied practice, the non-verbal modalities and the socio-cultural contexts that anchor a place-bound heritage form.

The gap matters most for auditory expressions, especially the boatmen's work-songs known as haozi. The chants are already marginal in global dissemination, and the way they are translated often deepens the marginalisation. This study focus on the two questions. How do current multilingual translation and digital curation outputs detach the work-songs from their living environment, and what forms of multimodal metaphor mis-mapping arise for international audiences. The study narrows its scope to the translation of boatmen's work-songs on the Grand Canal, focusing on how this translation operates within a communicative ecology defined by physical, behavioural and symbolic dimensions.

Theoretical Framework

Text-oriented translation theory treats the source text as a self-contained linguistic object and takes the translator's task to be the replacement of its verbal signs with signs of another language. For heritage that lives in sound and movement, this starting point is hard to defend. Forceville's analysis of pictorial metaphor shows that metaphor does not need language, and in living heritage it rarely stays inside language (Forceville, 1996). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) made the broader point that metaphor is a mode of thinking rather than a figure of speech. A work-song image such as hauling a boat as if shouldering a mountain works through the voice, the rhythm and the straining body together. Translate only the words, and the mapping survives in name alone.

The analytical framework used here comes from a three-dimensional cultural space model. Physical space supplies the tangible ground, the narrow waterway, the stone lock, the worn towpath. Behavioural space holds the coordinated exertion of the trackers, the repetitive rhythms of lock-passing, the communal pacing of labour. Symbolic space carries the collective values that canal life produced, such as resilience, solidarity and continuity. For the haozi these layers are not background scenery. They are the conditions under which the chant means anything at all.

Calling this arrangement a communicative ecology is not a loose metaphor. Altheide (1994) used the idea of an ecology of communication to describe how meaning emerges from the interaction of formats, settings and

² UNESCO. Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage[EB/OL]. (2003-10-17)[2026-08-26]. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>.

participants, and the same logic applies to heritage. The ecological vocabulary has a home in translation studies as well. Hu (2008) argues that translating well means adapting to the whole environment of the text, linguistic, cultural and communicative, rather than transferring words in isolation. Multimodal discourse theory points the same way. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) describe communication as the orchestration of several modes, and O'Halloran (2011) shows how analysis must track multiple semiotic resources at once. Taken together, these strands point to a simple claim. A work-song is an event, and translating an event cannot be reduced to translating its transcript.

This paper gives the failure mode a name, ecological de-contextualisation. It occurs when curatorial or translation practice peels a metaphor's source domain away from the behavioural and physical contexts that ground it. For auditory heritage the consequence is multimodal metaphor mis-mapping among overseas receivers. Two distorted readings are common. The chant is heard as exotic entertainment, a curious piece of local colour, or its symbolic weight is simply lost. Neither reading does justice to what the song was for.

Empirical Analysis of Ecological De-Contextualisation in Disseminated Outputs

The analysis rests on some purposively sampled artefacts, all publicly accessible and aimed at international viewers. They include short-form social media clips, museum online exhibits and subtitled promotional excerpts featuring the haozi. No large-scale audience surveys were involved. The design is qualitative on purpose, tracing textual-audio-visual configurations to see where ecological de-contextualisation shows up. Eight artefacts cannot establish how widespread the problem is. They can indicate where it is most visible, which is enough for the present argument.

Consider a widely circulated overseas social media clip, Raw work-song audio is layered over generic drone footage of quiet canal water, stone arch bridges and rippling surfaces. The footage never shows a tracker hauling a boat, a lock operator, or any form of historical canal labour. English captions translate short fragments of the lyrics but say nothing about the work the chant originally drove. The sound functions as atmosphere. Everything that once anchored the metaphor, the muscle strain, the coordination, the lock-passing operation, has been edited out, and an international listener hears a disembodied vocal burst with no way to connect it to human effort.

Museum displays reproduce the same detachment in a calmer register. One digital international exhibit places translated haozi lyrics next to static photographs of heritage canal sites. Brief historical notes explain the importance of canal, yet no multimedia cue connects the sung rhythm to the towing ritual. The chant is framed as an antique folk art, severed from the behavioural space in which it once directed coordinated labour. A visitor may reasonably conclude that these are pleasant local songs. The labour-based solidarity embedded in the sound stays invisible.

Not every sampled output fails this way. Two exhibit clips insert short archival snippets that show boat-towing movements alongside the chant audio, and these fragments restore part of the link between sound and practice. The point is worth making because it shows the problem is correctable. Such cases remain rare in the available material, though. Most current outputs favour canal aesthetics, pretty water and old stone, at the expense of the physical-behavioural-symbolic bonds that give the haozi its metaphorical weight.

Table 1 condenses the three layers of the ecology and records how each one fares across the sampled outputs.

Table 1

Ecological De-contextualisation Across the Three Layers in the Sampled Outputs

Layer	Core elements	Typical presentation in sampled outputs	Observed effect
Physical	narrow waterway, stone lock, worn towpath, boat tackle	generic drone footage of water and bridges, static site photography	the tangible ground of the metaphor drops out
Behavioural	coordinated tracking, rhythmic lock-passing, communal pacing of labour	archival snippets in only two clips, most outputs omit human labour	the chant loses its link to collective exertion
Symbolic	resilience, solidarity and continuity of canal life	translated lyrics without labour context, chant framed as decorative folk art	the collective values behind the sound stay invisible

Ecology-Informed Multimodal Translation Principles**Re-evaluating Translation Loss within Heritage Communicative Ecology**

Text-oriented frameworks locate loss in the gaps between languages. The findings here point elsewhere. Loss arises when the ecological connections across physical, behavioural and symbolic layers are broken, even if every word is rendered correctly. One sampled museum exhibit is a case in point. The lyric translation is fault-free, yet the text sits beside landscape photography and nothing else, so the bodily source domain disappears. Judged by lexical accuracy the output is a success. Judged by what the chant can still mean to a viewer it is a failure. One might object that the lyrics themselves carry the meaning and the visuals merely decorate. The exhibit suggests otherwise. Heritage translation quality cannot be assessed from the words alone, and the multimodal output has to be checked for whether it sustains the links to the original behavioural space. Figure 1 sets out the layered structure that a translation output has to preserve.

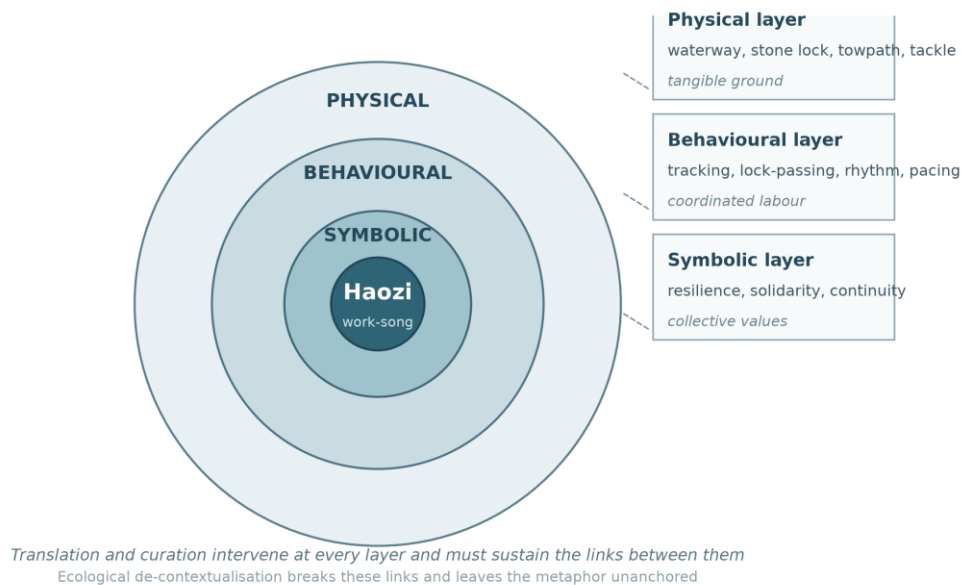


Figure 1. The three layers of the communicative ecology in which the haozi operates. Translation and curation intervene at every layer, and they have to sustain the links between the layers at the same time.

Practice-grounded Guidance for Auditory Canal Heritage

Read against the observed patterns, three forms of guidance suggest themselves, and all three stay within the limits of what the data can support. No universal rules for world heritage are offered.

Producers can embed tangible cues of labour practice alongside translated text and original audio. A social media cut aimed at overseas viewers can carry short archival footage of trackers moving in synchrony on a split screen with the chant. Generic drone footage of empty water does not have to dominate the composition. This is a modest production choice, and it keeps the metaphor's source domain visible. Translators and curators would do well not to finalise multimodal content without consulting living inheritors. The people who still sing the haozi know how the rhythm shifts when a boat passes a lock, and that granular knowledge is exactly what prevents a labour chant from being flattened into decorative folk audio. Brief pre-production interviews can feed site-specific experience into content planning and filter out mismatched visual-audio pairings before publication.

Haozi audio deserves to be treated as a carrier of meaning rather than filler. People can pause the landscape visuals at the rhythmic peaks of the chant, small shifts of timing that direct attention to the sonic dimension itself.

Table 2 maps the three principles onto the ecological layers and lists the operational elements each one involves.

Table 2

Three Ecology-informed Translation Principles and Their Operational Elements

Principle	Ecological layer addressed	Operational elements	Expected effect
Embed tangible cues of labour practice	physical and behavioural	split-screen archival footage of tracking synchronised with the chant, restraint on aerial landscape shots	the metaphor's source domain stays visible
Consult living inheritors before finalising content	behavioural	pre-production interviews, site-specific knowledge of rhythm shifts at locks	a labour chant is not flattened into decorative audio
Treat haozi audio as a carrier of meaning	symbolic	pause landscape visuals at rhythmic peaks, foreground the sonic dimension	the chant carries its own cultural weight

Practical Constraints for Digital Heritage Projects

None of this is cost-free. Short-form video run-times are tight, museum digital budgets are limited, and archival footage may not exist for every stretch of the canal. The argument is not that full historical reconstructions are required. Concise, targeted multimodal cues can mitigate the worst effects of ecological de-contextualisation, and that may be enough as a first step.

Conclusion

Taking the haozi as a bounded case, this article has asked what translation means for place-rooted living heritage. The answer is that it means more than producing correct text. The multimodal materials examined here show tangible harm from ecological de-contextualisation. Linguistically precise lyric translations still fail to transmit the full cultural meaning once the sonic metaphors lose their ties to canal-side labour, because the physical and behavioural ground of the metaphor has been cut away. Overseas audiences then read the chants as colourful regional folklore, and the deeper layer of communal solidarity forged through collective work goes unseen.

Three-dimensional cultural space framework acquires a working use here. The effect is to shift the criterion by which heritage translation is judged. Textual equivalence remains a necessary condition, but it is no longer a sufficient one. Assessment has to ask whether the multimodal output preserves the interdependent links that hold

the heritage's communicative ecology together, and whether those links can survive contact with a foreign audience.

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