A Study on the Chinese-English Translation of Museum Commentaries from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

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Abstract: Museum commentaries serve as vital vehicles for the dissemination of historical culture, and the quality of their English translations directly impacts foreign audiences' understanding and reception of Chinese culture. Grounded in eco-translatology, this paper examines the translation of museum commentaries into English across three dimensions: linguistic, cultural, and communicative. Through the analysis and comparison of typical translation cases, the study demonstrates that the "three-dimensional transformation" theory effectively guides translation practice. Specifically, in the linguistic dimension, it achieves term standardization and sentence structure optimization. In the cultural dimension, it ensures accurate cultural information transmission. In the communicative dimension, it enhances the acceptability of translated texts.

Keywords: Eco-translatology; three-dimensional Transformation; Chinese museum commentaries; English translation methods

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I. INTRODUCTION

Museums, as vital carriers of historical culture, are entrusted with the crucial mission of preserving human civilization and fostering cultural exchanges. A museum is not merely a repository and exhibition space for cultural relics; it also serves as a bridge for dialogue among different civilizations. Through diverse forms such as the display of cultural relics, the reconstruction of historical scenes, and multimedia interactions, museums showcase the diversity of human civilization to the world. With the acceleration of globalization, an increasing number of foreign tourists are visiting Chinese museums. Museum commentaries, acting as a link between the exhibits and the audience, serve as a crucial window for understanding Chinese culture. These commentaries encompass rich information, including the historical background, craftsmanship features, and cultural connotations of the cultural relics. The quality of their English translation directly impacts the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication.

However, the significant differences between Chinese and Western languages in terms of linguistic structure, cultural background, and ways of thinking pose numerous challenges to the English translation of museum commentaries. At the linguistic level, Chinese emphasizes parataxis and values the idea of "meaning beyond words", with sentences often connected through implicit logic. In contrast, English emphasizes hypotaxis and relies on explicit conjunctions to establish grammatical relationships. This difference makes literal translations prone to semantic ambiguity. At the cultural level, museum commentaries contain a large number of culture-loaded terms, such as "Yin and Yang", "the Five Elements", and "the Imperial Examination System", which lack direct equivalents in English. Balancing the preservation of cultural uniqueness with ensuring comprehensibility is a significant challenge. In terms of ways of thinking, Chinese prefers concrete and emotional expressions, while English focuses on logical rigor and information accuracy. This difference requires translators to consider both the cultural connotations and the cognitive habits of the target language readers.

This theory was proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen, emphasizing that translation is an activity of "adaptation and selection" carried out by the translator within a translation eco-environment composed of elements such as language, culture, and society. The translator needs to make adaptive transformations in three dimensions—linguistic, cultural, and communicative—according to the needs of the target language eco-environment. Its core concept of "three-dimensional transformation" (linguistic dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension) is particularly aligned with the practical needs of the English translation of museum commentaries.

In the linguistic dimension, the translator must pay attention to the differences in sentence structures between Chinese and English, achieving adaptation of language forms through the standardization of terms and the adjustment of sentence structures. In the cultural dimension, accurate transmission of cultural connotations is emphasized, and strategies such as transliteration with annotations and cultural interpretation are adopted for characteristic concepts like "华表" (ornamental columns, Huabiao) and "风水" (Fengshui). In the communicative

dimension, the target audience is centered, and the language style is adjusted according to the needs of different groups, such as tourists and scholars, to ensure the readability and communication effectiveness of the translated text.

This paper explores the specific application of eco-translatology in the English translation of museum commentaries through the analysis of typical cases from some museums selected across the country. Examples include the standardization of the term "blue and white porcelain" for "青花瓷", the transmission of philosophical ideas through the functional equivalent translation of the saying "水能载舟,亦能覆舟" into "The water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up", and the simplification of professional terms in commentaries for ordinary tourists. The purpose of this study is to provide an operational path for improving the quality of museum publicity translation by combining theory and practice, thereby helping Chinese culture to go global in a more appropriate and acceptable manner. This approach aims to achieve mutual learning among civilizations and value resonance in cross-cultural communication.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY THEORY

A. The Origin and Development of Eco-translatology

Eco-translatology was proposed by Chinese scholar Professor Hu Gengshen at the beginning of the 21st century. Its theoretical foundation ingeniously integrates the idea of "survival of the fittest" from Darwin's theory of biological evolution, the ecological philosophical wisdom of "the Unity of Man and Nature" from ancient Chinese thought, and the focus on cross-cultural communication in modern translation theories.

In his article titled *Eco-translatology: A Primer*, Hu creatively regards translation as a dynamic ecological system composed of elements such as linguistic rules, cultural contexts, and social needs. The translator acts as an "adaptive subject" within this ecological system, tasked with finding a balance between the differences of the source and target languages. By adjusting translation strategies (such as literal translation, free translation, and transliteration with annotations), the translator adapts to the language habits, cultural expectations, and social contexts of the target language (TL). This ensures that the translated text can effectively survive in the new ecological environment and achieve cultural dissemination^[1].

The development of this theory exhibits distinct stages. During the theoretical construction phase, Professor Hu further refined the system in his book titled *Eco-translatology: Construction and Interpretation*, introducing the core concept of "translation as adaptation and selection". This concept emphasizes that the "translator-centered" approach does not devalue the original text but highlights the translator's subjective initiative in cross-cultural transformation. Specifically, based on a deep understanding of the original text and in consideration of the target language readers' cognitive habits, the translator must make adaptive choices at the levels of linguistic form, cultural imagery, and communicative intent, etc..^[2]

After entering the application and expansion stage, eco-translatology breaks through the limitations of traditional translation theories and gradually demonstrates its practical value in various fields such as the translation of public signs (such as scenic area signs), literary translation (such as the translation of Chinese classics into foreign languages), and publicity translation (such as museum commentaries)^[2].

Especially in the English translation of museum commentaries, its concept of "three-dimensional transformation" (linguistic dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension) provides precise methodological guidance for solving the difficult problems of translating culture-loaded words (for example, " \pm %" is translated as "Tai Chi, the ancient Chinese concept of cosmic balance"), optimizing the logic of sentence structures (such as transforming Chinese run-on sentences into English complex sentences), and enhancing the effect of cross-cultural communication. It promotes translation from a simple language conversion to an adaptive construction of cultural ecology.

B. Three-Dimensional Transformation in Eco-translatology

The core theory of eco-translatology, the "three-dimensional transformation", encompasses adaptive transformations in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, which are detailed as follows:

Transformation in the Linguistic Dimension

The transformation in the linguistic dimension emphasizes that translators must be mindful of the structural, lexical, and syntactic differences between the source and target languages. Accurate semantic transmission is achieved through adjustments in language form. As a paratactic language, Chinese syntax often unfolds naturally, relying on semantic logic. Sentences typically follow a "flowing-water" linear pattern, with meaning constructed contextually. For example, "凿井而饮,耕田而食" (Dig a well to drink water and till the fields to get food) illustrates the ancestors' lifestyle through the parallelism of verb phrases, with logical relationships implicit in the concatenation of words and sentences.

On the other hand, as a hypotactic language, English relies heavily on explicit grammatical cohesion. It constructs a rigorous logical network through prepositions, conjunctions, subordinate clauses, etc., and requires the

logical relationships between sentence components to be explicit. During the transformation process, translators need to convert the implicit logical relationships in Chinese, such as chronological and spatial order, causal relationships, and conditional assumptions, into the hypotactic structures in English. For coordinate predicates, conjunctions like "and, or" can be used to clarify the semantic connection. For purposes or results, prepositions like "to" or subordinate clauses such as "so that" should be used to make the intention explicit. For complex groups of meanings, long sentences need to be split into logical clauses to avoid comprehension deviations caused by the mixture of sentence structures.

For example, when dealing with "围湖造田, 筑堤防洪" (reclaim land from lakes and build dikes to prevent floods), by using the conjunction "and" to connect the parallel actions and the preposition "to" to introduce the adverbial of purpose, the translation "reclaim land from lakes and build dikes to prevent floods" not only retains the continuity of the actions in the original text but also conforms to the hypotactic expression habits of English. Essentially, this kind of transformation is an adaptive adjustment to the language ecologies of the two languages, ensuring that the semantic meaning is fully expressed in the context of the target language (TL).

Transformation in the Cultural Dimension

The transformation in the cultural dimension requires translators to fully consider the cultural differences between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) in cross-cultural communication. Translators must acknowledge the differences in historical background, values, and cognitive schemas between the SL and TL cultures to avoid comprehension barriers caused by cultural omissions. For culture-laden terms (such as historical allusions, traditional customs, and proper nouns), methods like transliteration, free translation, and the addition of explanatory notes should be employed to ensure the complete transmission of cultural information.

For cultural symbols with physical forms, such as "华表" (Huabiao or ornamental columns) and "榫卯" (mortise-and-tenon, a type of joint), a strategy combining transliteration with annotation can preserve cultural markers while reducing the cognitive load on readers. For example, "华表" can be transliterated as "Huabiao" and accompanied by a functional explanation, such as "a ceremonial column often erected at ancient Chinese palaces". This approach safeguards the cultural proper noun while helping TL readers establish a frame of reference through explanation.

For abstract philosophical concepts like 阴阳 (Yin and Yang) and 五行 (the Five Elements), which lack direct equivalents in English, a combination of free translation and elaboration is more appropriate. By rendering them as "Yin and Yang, the ancient Chinese concept of complementary forces in the universe", these Eastern philosophical concepts can be transformed into cultural images that are perceptible to TL readers.

The core of this translation strategy lies in rejecting the simple "transplantation" of cultural information. Instead, it involves adaptive selection to retain the cultural essence of the SL while building a bridge of understanding for TL readers, thereby avoiding interpretive obstacles caused by cultural conflicts.

C. Transformation in the Communicative Dimension

The transformation in the communicative dimension focuses on the effectiveness of cross-cultural information transmission in translation, requiring translators to center on the target language (TL) readers and adjust translation strategies according to their information needs, cognitive levels, and reading expectations. The audience for museum commentaries is diverse: commentaries aimed at ordinary foreign tourists should avoid overly technical terms and use simple, clear language to enhance the translation's affinity and acceptability, as these tourists are more interested in the intuitive information and cultural appeal of the artifacts. In contrast, for researchers, the accuracy of professional terminology and the completeness of historical background are emphasized. For young people, the expression should combine knowledge with interest.

To this end, translators need to dynamically adapt in terms of terminology use, syntactic complexity, and depth of cultural interpretation. For example, when addressing ordinary tourists, "釉里红" can be translated as "red underglaze, a unique porcelain decoration technique," with a popular explanation following the technical term. For researchers, however, the precise expression "underglaze red, a technique using copper oxide as a pigment under the glaze" should be retained, along with additional details about the craftsmanship.

Moreover, the functional differences of commentaries (such as information transmission, cultural dissemination, and educational guidance) also require flexible adjustments in translation strategies. Informational texts emphasize objectivity and accuracy, strictly adhering to terminological standards. Cultural dissemination texts may appropriately incorporate emotional expressions to activate readers' cultural associations. Educational texts need to balance the depth of knowledge with the logic of explanation.

This communication-oriented translation choice is essentially an active adaptation to the target language's ecological environment, ensuring that the translation "survives appropriately" among different audience groups and effectively enhances cross-cultural communication efficiency.

III. CHINESE-ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF MUSEUM COMMENTARIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

A. Linguistic Dimension: Accurate Conversion and Optimized Expression Linguistic Standardization and Uniformity

Museum commentaries encompass a multitude of specialized terms, including the names of cultural artifacts, historical periods, and craftsmanship techniques. The precise translation of these terms is fundamental to ensuring the effective conveyance of information. From the standpoint of eco-translatology, translators must acclimate to the professional ecosystem of museum translation, consult authoritative translations, and uphold the standardization and consistency of terminology. Inconsistent or erroneous translations can result in the misrepresentation of cultural information and potentially engender misunderstandings. Thus, the establishment of a robust terminological system is of paramount importance.

For instance, "青花瓷" is accurately translated as "blue and white porcelain" in English, rather than the literal translation of "green flower porcelain". The latter translation could lead to a misunderstanding of the color due to the cultural semantic differences between "green" and "青", whereas the former is the standard terminology used internationally in museums and precisely conveys the characteristics of the porcelain, namely its blue glaze and white decorations.

Similarly, "清朝" should be translated as "Qing Dynasty (1636–1912)". Including the years of reign not only aligns with the conventions of historical expression in English but also helps foreign visitors establish a clear temporal context.

The China National Silk Museum employs internationally recognized translations for silk categories such as "绫", "罗", and "绢". For example, "绫" is translated as "twill damask," and "罗" as "luo gauze". These translations retain the unique names of Chinese silk categories while incorporating common terms like "gauze" to explain the material. This approach balances cultural specificity with international comprehensibility, ensuring the accuracy of terminology in a professional context^[3].

Such a strategy for standardizing terminology not only enhances the credibility of the translation but also facilitates the integration of Chinese cultural heritage terms into the global discourse of cultural exchange.

Sentence Structure Adjustment and Logic Clarification

Chinese commentaries frequently utilize four-character phrases and parallel structures, emphasizing rhythm and artistic conception. They rely on the juxtaposition of words and semantic connections to convey logic, with less emphasis on explicit grammatical markers. In contrast, English, as a hypotactic language, emphasizes explicit logical relationships through conjunctions, clauses, and non-finite structures, and values clear hierarchical organization of sentences and information. This linguistic difference requires translators to break away from the rhythmic patterns of Chinese and transform implicit semantic logic into the hypotactic structure of English. This can be achieved by breaking down complex clusters of meaning, adding logical connectors (such as "and," "but," "because," "so that"), or adjusting sentence structures to make the logical flow clear and coherent, in line with the target language's conventions.

Take the commentary from the Ningbo Museum as an example: "在土壤肥沃的河川之滨, 古人开沟引 水, 拓荒垦殖, 饭稻羹鱼, 繁衍生息, 开启了中华文明的先声。" (On the fertile riversides, ancient people dug ditches to divert water and reclaimed wastelands for crops. They prospered by growing rice and catching fish, laying the foundation for Chinese civilization.) The original text, composed of five four-character phrases in a flowing sentence structure, implies a narrative sequence of "location—consecutive actions—final outcome" without explicitly showing the logical connections.

In the translation, this is broken down into two logically connected sentences. The first sentence uses "and" to link "dug ditches" and "reclaimed wastelands," clearly outlining the two key activities of the ancient people. The second sentence uses "by" to connect "growing rice and catching fish," clarifying how they "prospered," and then employs the present participle phrase "laying the foundation" to reveal the ultimate result. This transformation converts the implicit "action—method—result" logic chain in the original text into an explicit expression in English.

This approach not only retains the vivid historical imagery of the Chinese text but also helps foreign visitors organize the information through hypotactic means. It clarifies the purpose and result of the actions, aligning with English expression habits and ensuring the accurate transmission of the underlying cultural information in the target language context^[4].

Vocabulary Selection and Contextual Adaptation

The selection of vocabulary in museum commentaries is not merely a matter of substituting one language for another. Instead, it requires careful consideration of the specific context, cultural background, and cognitive habits of the target audience to avoid semantic distortions or cultural misunderstandings caused by literal translation. This is particularly important when the source language (SL) terms involve specific cultural symbols, artifact names, or traditional concepts. In such cases, translators need to go beyond the literal meaning and find expressions in the target language (TL) that can both preserve the cultural essence and fit the contextual logic, thereby achieving ecological adaptation at the lexical level.

Take the term "彩门" as an example. This term refers to a type of wood-carving decoration covered with gold foil, which is hung in traditional Chinese halls and has both practical and decorative functions. A direct transliteration as "Cai Men" could easily lead foreign visitors to misunderstand it as "a gate belonging to someone with the surname Cai" or a specific place, thus breaking the cultural context. The Foshan Ancestral Temple Museum has adopted a strategy of "transliteration plus annotation," translating it as "Caimen (a sort of wood carving decoration covered with gold foil)." This approach retains the cultural uniqueness while explaining its material and function^[5]. By avoiding the ambiguity of direct transliteration, it provides a model for translating similar culture-specific terms. When a source language term lacks a direct equivalent in the target language (TL), adding functional or descriptive annotations in context can effectively reduce the cognitive load for the audience.

B. Cultural Dimension: Faithful Transmission of Cultural Connotations Translating Culture-loaded Words

For terms with unique cultural connotations, such as historical allusions, mythological tales, and traditional customs, methods like transliteration with annotation, free translation, or cultural substitution should be employed to ensure the effective transmission of cultural information.

When a source language cultural concept lacks a corresponding term in the target language (TL), transliteration with annotation can be used to preserve cultural distinctiveness while aiding comprehension. For example, "华表" (Huabiao), a symbolic object in traditional Chinese architecture, is translated by the Ningbo Museum as "Huabiao (a type of Chinese ceremonial column engraved with entwining dragons and clouds)", which explains its function and decorative features through annotation^[5]. Similarly, "八思巴纹" (Basiba pattern), a motif derived from the Mongolian script used during the Yuan Dynasty, is translated as "Longquan kiln green-glazed porcelain dish with Basiba Chinese pattern". By adding "Chinese", the translation directly clarifies that "八思巴" is a type of Chinese script and provides additional historical and cultural context^[6].

For terms with significant cultural imagery differences, free translation can be used to convey their connotations. For example, "风水" is translated as "feng shui (the ancient Chinese art of arranging buildings and landscapes to achieve harmony with the environment)," which retains the phonetic transcription while explaining its cultural meaning. Similarly, "太极" is translated as "Tai Chi (the concept of the universe in Chinese philosophy, representing the unity of opposites)," helping foreign visitors understand through the explanation of its philosophical concept^[3].

Preserving and Reconstructing Cultural Imagery

Cultural imagery represents a significant challenge in cross-cultural translation, especially when dealing with expressions rich in cultural connotations, such as allusions in poetry and mythology. When translating sentences that contain cultural imagery, it is crucial to avoid distortions caused by cultural differences and to either preserve the cultural characteristics of the source language (SL) or reconstruct equivalent imagery in the target language (TL).

For instance, the philosophical allusion "水能载舟亦覆舟" can be translated as "The water that carries the boat can also capsize it". This translation retains the core imagery of "carrying the boat" and "capsizing the boat" through literal translation, while the use of the modal verb "can" in English clarifies the logical relationship. This approach preserves the metaphorical nature of the original text while aligning with English cognitive patterns.

In contrast, for the more evocative expression "千帆过尽万木春", the translation "A thousand sails pass by, and ten thousand trees burst into spring" reconstructs the natural imagery. It transforms the poetic imagery of the original Chinese into a vivid, concrete picture in English, conveying the underlying philosophy while adhering to English aesthetic preferences. This ensures the cross-linguistic transmission of cultural ambiance.

Such translation strategies exemplify the ecological translation approach, which emphasizes the preservation of "textual ecology". By adaptively converting imagery, the translation creates equivalent cultural associations in the target language context, ensuring that the translated text is both faithful to the original and accessible to the target audience.

Supplementing Historical and Cultural Background

Museum commentaries often involve historical events and allusions. Without sufficient background knowledge, target-language readers may struggle to understand these references. Therefore, it is necessary to add relevant background information through amplification in translation.

For example, the original translation of the "'三元及第'铜镜" at Yichang Museum was "bronze mirror for success in three governmental examinations", which failed to convey the cultural connotations of "三元及第" (referring to achieving first place in three consecutive levels of imperial examinations: provincial, metropolitan, and palace exams). The revised translation with an added annotation reads: "Sanyuanjidi' bronze mirror (engraved with Chinese characters praying for the luck of being the top scholar in three consecutive imperial examinations at different levels)." This detailed explanation clarifies the cultural context and the significance of the imperial examination system, thereby enhancing the cultural communication effect of the translation^[7].

C. Communicative Dimension: Focusing on the Audience and Communication Audience Needs Analysis

The audience for museum commentaries includes a diverse range of individuals such as general visitors, scholars, and students, each with varying levels of knowledge and distinct reading needs. Ecological translation studies emphasize that translators should be audience-centered, adjusting their translation strategies to ensure the readability and acceptability of the translated text.

For general visitors, translations should follow the principles of simplicity, clarity, and fun orientation, avoiding the accumulation of professional jargon and focusing on the popularization of cultural imagery. For example, in the Grand Canal Museum of China, "漕运总督" is rendered as "Governor of Canal Transport", which provides a brief description of the functions to help non-specialist readers quickly build understanding. The proverb "水能载舟亦覆舟" is translated functionally as "The water that carries the boat can also capsize it", which retains the metaphorical imagery while using the explicit logical word "can" to lower the barrier to comprehension^[6].

For the researcher audience, translations must strictly adhere to terminological norms and supplement with technical details and historical context. For instance, "釉上颜料——苦绿" is translated as "overglaze pigment—Deep green", with additional explanation of its application in ceramic craftsmanship^[9].

For the teenage audience, translations can incorporate interactive expressions. In the Hangzhou Museum, for example, the production process of "青花瓷" is translated as "blue and white porcelain, crafted by painting designs with cobalt oxide on raw porcelain before glazing and firing". The dynamic description using verbs like "craft", "painting", and "firing" enhances the visual appeal and interest of the text^[8].

Achieving Communicative Purposes

The communicative purposes of museum commentaries include information dissemination, cultural propagation, and educational guidance. When translating, it is necessary to adjust the language style and content focus according to these different purposes.

When introducing cultural relics, it is essential to ensure that basic information such as the names, dates, materials, and craftsmanship of the artifacts is accurately conveyed. For example, the artifact "民国•雕人物纹贴金木茶壶桶" is translated as "Tea Cup Container, gilded with figurines, Republic Period", clearly indicating the period and craft features^[4].

In emphasizing cultural propagation, foreign visitors often have limited understanding of Chinese cultural relics. Therefore, it is necessary to use vivid language and cultural explanations to spark their interest in Chinese culture^[4]. For instance, when introducing "大红地云蟒纹妆花缎袍" in the China National Silk Museum, not only is the name translated, but the cultural differences between "four-clawed pythons" and "five-clawed dragons" are also explained. This elucidates the symbolic meaning of the python robe in ancient China as a marker of rank and power, enhancing the depth of cultural dissemination^[9].

For young visitors, more engaging and fun expressions can be adopted to serve an educational purpose. For example, "别红毛笔" in the Hangzhou Museum is translated as "Carved cinnabar lacquer brush", with a brief introduction to the process of the carved lacquer technique in the commentary, combining knowledge with entertainment.

Adapting to Pragmatic Functions

Museum commentaries serve pragmatic functions such as direction-giving, explanation, and guidance. The translation needs to be adapted to these functions to ensure the clarity and effectiveness of information delivery.

For example, the directional function requires the translation to accurately point to specific artifacts or exhibition areas. "请往左侧展厅参观'明清瓷器展'" is translated as "Please proceed to the left gallery for the 'Exhibition of Ming and Qing Porcelain'", which clearly indicates both the direction and the content.

The explanatory function demands that the translation provide detailed descriptions of the characteristics and value of the artifacts. For instance, the translation of "云龙柱 华表" not only explains the origin of its name

but also describes the carving techniques and the historical relocation process, allowing visitors to fully understand its cultural significance^[5].

IV. CONCLUSION

The "Three-Dimensional Transformation" theory of Ecological Translation Studies provides a systematic theoretical framework and practical guidance for the English translation of museum commentaries. Its value lies not only in the adaptation of linguistic forms and the transmission of cultural connotations but also in constructing an ecological interactive bridge between translators and target-language readers.

In the linguistic dimension, through the standardization of terminology, adjustment of sentence structures, and adaptation of vocabulary, the translation ensures that the text conforms to the linguistic habits of the target language (TL). In the cultural dimension, by employing transliteration with annotation, free translation, and supplementary background information, the translation achieves accurate transmission of cultural connotations. In the communicative dimension, with an audience-centered approach, the translation adapts to different communicative purposes and pragmatic functions, enhancing the acceptability and dissemination effectiveness of the text.

However, the English translation of museum commentaries still faces many challenges, such as the selection of translation strategies for culturally loaded terms and the balancing of different audience needs. Future research can further expand the application of Ecological Translation Studies in museum translation, combining methods such as corpus analysis to optimize translation methods and promote the international dissemination and exchange of Chinese culture. Through the adaptive choices of translators in the translation ecological environment, the English translation of museum commentaries can become a bridge connecting Chinese and foreign cultures, facilitating the globalization of Chinese culture and achieving ecological balance and harmonious development in cross-cultural communication

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