

# Renarrating Xiangxi: Narrative Deviations and Translation Strategies in Museum Discourse

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## Abstract

With the growing emphasis on global cultural exchange, the translation of ethnic minority cultures has shifted from a focus on linguistic equivalence to a process of narrative reconstruction. This study examines how translation reshapes cultural representation in museum contexts, taking the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Museum as a case study. Drawing on narrative theory, the research analyzes a corpus of 56 Chinese–English bilingual exhibition texts and identifies four recurring types of narrative deviation: narrative reductionism, frame misalignment, narrative discontinuity, and evaluative silencing. These deviations demonstrate how translation can alter narrative framing, weaken cultural context, and reshape the positioning of ethnic identity in cross-cultural communication. To address these issues, the study proposes a set of renarration strategies, including narrative thickening, dynamic relabeling, macro–micro integration, and evaluative positioning. These strategies are further conceptualized as a narrative-oriented translation model that emphasizes the translator’s role as an active mediator of cultural meaning. The findings contribute to the application of narrative theory in translation studies by offering an operational framework for analyzing narrative shifts, and provide practical insights for improving the international communication of ethnic cultural heritage in museum settings.

## Keywords

Xiangxi ethnic culture, museum translation, narrative theory, renarration, narrative deviation, cultural representation, international communication.

## 1. Introduction

The global landscape of cultural exchange has undergone a significant transformation. With the increasing prominence of the “Global History” perspective, the international communication of ethnic minority cultures has shifted from a focus on linguistic equivalence to a more complex process of narrative reconstruction. In the Chinese context, the international dissemination of ethnic heritage, such as that of the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, has become an important avenue for presenting a pluralistic national image and enhancing cultural visibility in the global arena.

Existing studies on museum translation and cultural communication have primarily concentrated on issues such as terminological accuracy, readability, and strategies of domestication and foreignization. While these approaches have contributed to improving linguistic quality, they often overlook the deeper narrative structures through which cultural meanings are constructed and transmitted. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to how translation reshapes the narrative positioning of ethnic cultures, potentially leading to the marginalization or simplification of indigenous voices in cross-cultural contexts.

Against this backdrop, this study argues that museum translation should be understood not merely as a process of linguistic transfer, but as a form of narrative intervention that actively

constructs cultural meaning. Drawing on Mona Baker's narrative theory[1, 2], this paper examines how narrative deviations occur in the English translation of exhibition texts in the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Museum, and how such deviations affect the representation of ethnic identity. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What types of narrative deviations are present in the translation of Xiangxi ethnic culture in museum contexts? (2) How do these deviations reshape the narrative framing and positioning of ethnic cultural identity? (3) What renarration strategies can be proposed to enhance the effectiveness of international cultural communication?

To answer these questions, this paper analyzes a corpus of 56 bilingual exhibition texts collected from the Xiangxi Museum. By identifying recurring patterns of narrative reduction, frame misalignment, structural discontinuity, and evaluative silencing, the study seeks to move beyond passive translation paradigms and propose a more active, narrative-oriented model of cultural mediation. In doing so, it aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on translation, narrative, and the global representation of ethnic minority cultures.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Narrative Theory and Translation as Renarration

The traditional view of translation as a process of faithful reproduction has been increasingly challenged by the "sociological turn" in Translation Studies, which emphasizes the role of translation in shaping meaning, ideology, and cultural representation[3]. Within this context, narrative theory offers a productive framework for understanding translation not merely as linguistic transfer, but as an active process of meaning construction.

Central to this approach is the work of Mona Baker, who conceptualizes translation as a form of "renarration"[1]. Drawing on narrative theorists such as Margaret Somers and Jerome Bruner, Baker argues that human beings make sense of the world through narratives, and that translation inevitably involves the reconfiguration of these narratives across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Rather than treating translation as a neutral or transparent process, this perspective highlights the translator's role as an active mediator who selectively reconstructs meaning. In this sense, translation is inherently interpretive, involving choices that shape how people, events, and cultures are framed for new audiences[4].

To operationalize this theoretical perspective, Baker identifies several key dimensions of narrative reframing, including selective appropriation, relabeling, framing, and positioning. These concepts provide a useful analytical lens for examining how translation reshapes cultural representation. However, in order to facilitate systematic analysis in specific contexts, such as museum discourse, these dimensions need to be further specified and adapted.

Building on Baker's framework, this study foregrounds narrative positioning as the central analytical concern, while integrating related dimensions into a more operational model. Specifically, the concepts of selective appropriation and relabeling are used to identify patterns of omission and reinterpretation, while framing and positioning are employed to analyze shifts in cultural perspective and narrative voice. These theoretical tools are subsequently developed into four categories of narrative deviation, reductionism, misalignment, discontinuity, and silencing, which guide the empirical analysis in this study.

In addition, this study resonates with broader discussions in cultural and anthropological theory. For instance, the notion of "narrative thickening" proposed in this paper echoes Clifford Geertz concept of "thick description," which emphasizes the importance of contextualizing cultural practices within their symbolic and social frameworks[5]. Such theoretical connections further support the view that translation, particularly in museum contexts, involves not only the transfer of information but also the interpretation and reconstruction of cultural meaning.

By integrating narrative theory with a corpus-based analytical approach, this study aims to move beyond abstract theoretical discussion and provide a more concrete framework for examining how ethnic cultures are renarrated in translation.

### 3. Corpus and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, corpus-based approach to examine narrative deviations in the translation of Xiangxi ethnic culture within a museum context. The data were collected from the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Museum, a representative site for the exhibition and international communication of regional ethnic heritage.

#### 3.1. Corpus Construction

The corpus consists of 56 sets of Chinese–English bilingual exhibition texts collected through field photography in May 2025. The selection of texts followed two main criteria: (1) representativeness, ensuring coverage of major thematic sections within the museum, including “Foreword,” “Natural Geography and Fossils,” “Folk Customs and Rituals,” and “Historical Relics”; and (2) completeness, requiring that each selected item contain both source text (Chinese) and corresponding English translation.

To enhance analytical clarity, the corpus was further categorized into four thematic groups based on exhibition content: natural history (12 items), ritual and folk customs (18 items), historical artifacts (16 items), and general introductory texts (10 items). This categorization enables a more systematic comparison of narrative patterns across different discourse domains.

#### 3.2. Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by Mona Baker’s narrative theory, particularly the concepts of selective appropriation, relabeling, framing, and positioning. Building on these dimensions, this study develops an operational framework for identifying “narrative deviations” in translation. Four major types of deviation are defined:

- (1) Narrative Reductionism: the omission or weakening of culturally embedded meanings in favor of technical or descriptive information;
- (2) Frame Misalignment: the shift of a narrative from one interpretive frame (e.g., sacred, historical) to another (e.g., secular, entertainment-oriented);
- (3) Narrative Discontinuity: the lack of coherence between macro-level narratives and micro-level textual units;
- (4) Evaluative Silencing: the removal or neutralization of evaluative and affective language that conveys cultural stance or identity.

These categories serve as analytical tools for systematically examining how translation reshapes the narrative structure of ethnic cultural representation.

#### 3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, the bilingual texts were segmented into smaller analytical units at the lexical, phrasal, and sentence levels to facilitate detailed comparison. Second, each unit was examined in relation to its corresponding source text to identify instances of narrative deviation based on the four categories outlined above. This process involved iterative reading and constant comparison to ensure consistency in classification. Third, representative examples from each category were selected for in-depth qualitative analysis. These examples were analyzed not only in terms of linguistic differences, but also in relation to their broader narrative effects, including how they influence the framing, positioning, and perceived cultural significance of the translated content. Through this multi-layered analytical procedure, the study aims to reveal systematic patterns in the renarration of

Xiangxi ethnic culture and to provide a grounded basis for proposing targeted translation strategies.

## 4. Critical Analysis: Narrative Deviations in the Translation of Xiangxi Culture

### 4.1. Narrative Reductionism in Natural and Geological Exhibits

Narrative reductionism is prominently observed in the translation of natural and geological exhibition texts, where culturally embedded meanings are frequently minimized or omitted in favor of technical and scientific description. This type of deviation reflects a selective appropriation strategy that privileges empirical data while neglecting the cultural and ecological narratives present in the source text.

In the source texts of the Xiangxi Museum, descriptions of natural landscapes and prehistoric environments often function as more than neutral scientific accounts. They are narratively constructed as the environmental foundation shaping the survival strategies, worldview, and cultural identity of local ethnic groups. For instance, references to the region's karst topography are not merely geological observations, but implicitly linked to the development of stilt-house (Diaojiolou) architecture and adaptive living practices. However, in the corresponding English translations, such descriptions tend to be rendered in a highly technical register, focusing on geological formations, species classification, and chronological data. Cultural references and implicit connections to human activity are frequently omitted. As a result, the translated texts present the natural environment as an isolated scientific object, rather than as an integral component of a broader cultural ecology.

From a narrative perspective, this shift represents a thinning of the original narrative, in which the relational dimension between humans and their environment is significantly weakened. The "homeland narrative" embedded in the source text is thus transformed into a "scientific report," limiting the ability of international audiences to perceive the cultural significance of the landscape.

To address this issue, a renarration strategy of narrative thickening can be employed. This involves selectively reintroducing cultural context into the translation. For example, descriptions of karst terrain could be supplemented with brief references to how such an environment shaped local architectural forms and patterns of settlement. By integrating ecological and cultural dimensions, the translation can more effectively convey the interdependence between nature and ethnic identity, thereby preserving the narrative richness of the source text.

### 4.2. Frame Misalignment: The Desacralization of Ethnic Rituals

Frame misalignment constitutes one of the most significant forms of narrative deviation identified in the corpus, particularly in the translation of ritual and symbolic cultural practices. This type of deviation occurs when a source narrative embedded within a specific cultural or religious framework is reinterpreted through a different, often less appropriate, frame in the target text. A representative example can be found in the translation of "摆手歌" (Baishou Ge). In the source text, this term refers to a ritual performance closely associated with ancestral worship among the Tujia people. It functions not merely as a form of artistic expression, but as a culturally embedded practice that integrates history, belief systems, and communal identity. However, in the museum's English translation, "摆手歌" (Baishou Ge) is rendered as "Waving Song." This translation foregrounds the physical gesture of "waving" while omitting the ritualistic and sacred dimensions of the practice. As a result, the narrative frame shifts from a sacred-ritualistic context to a secular and performative context.

From the perspective of narrative theory, this shift represents a clear case of relabeling that alters the ontological status of the cultural practice. The original narrative positions Baishou Ge as a medium of communication between the living and their ancestors, whereas the translated version repositions it as a form of entertainment accessible to an external audience. This transformation not only reduces the cultural depth of the practice but also reconfigures the relationship between the “ethnic self” and the “international other,” presenting the former as an object of observation rather than a subject of cultural expression.

A more appropriate renarration strategy would involve preserving the ritual frame through explicit lexical signaling. For instance, the term could be translated as: “Baishou Dance: A Ritual Performance in Honor of Tujia Ancestors.” By incorporating elements such as “ritual” and “ancestors,” the translation re-establishes the sacred context and aligns more closely with the narrative positioning of the source text.

This example demonstrates that frame misalignment is not merely a lexical issue, but a deeper narrative shift that affects how cultural practices are interpreted and valued in cross-cultural communication. Addressing such misalignment requires translators to move beyond surface-level description and engage more critically with the underlying narrative structures of the source culture.

#### **4.3. Narrative Discontinuity: The Fragmentation of Macro and Micro Narratives**

Narrative discontinuity emerges as a structural issue in the translation of museum texts, characterized by a lack of coherence between macro-level historical narratives and micro-level artifact descriptions. This form of deviation results in a fragmented reading experience, where individual textual units fail to contribute meaningfully to the overarching narrative framework. In the Xiangxi Museum, introductory panels often adopt a rhetorically elevated style to construct a grand historical narrative. For example, sections introducing the Qin dynasty emphasize themes such as political unification and administrative expansion, positioning Xiangxi within a broader national historical trajectory.

However, this macro-narrative is not consistently sustained in the translation of individual artifacts. A representative case can be observed in the descriptions of the Liye Qin slips. While the source text situates these bamboo slips within the context of frontier governance and bureaucratic practice, the English translations tend to focus narrowly on physical attributes, such as excavation depth, quantity, and material composition.

This shift results in a disconnection between the macro-level narrative of state formation and the micro-level presentation of material artifacts. From a narrative perspective, the absence of evaluative or interpretive linkage creates a “narrative gap,” in which artifacts are presented as isolated data points rather than as meaningful components of a historical process.

Such discontinuity affects the reader’s ability to construct a coherent understanding of the exhibition. Without explicit narrative cues, international audiences may struggle to relate technical details to broader historical significance, thereby weakening the communicative effectiveness of the museum text.

To mitigate this issue, a strategy of macro–micro narrative integration is required. This involves embedding concise interpretive statements within artifact descriptions to maintain alignment with the overarching narrative. For instance, alongside quantitative details, the translation could include a phrase such as “These bamboo slips document the administrative practices of the Qin Empire at the local level.” Such additions function as narrative bridges, enabling individual artifacts to reinforce, rather than fragment, the museum’s overall historical narrative.

#### **4.4. Evaluative Silencing: The Neutralization of Narrative Voice**

Evaluative silencing refers to the systematic reduction or removal of affective and attitudinal language in translation, resulting in a diminished narrative voice. This phenomenon is

particularly evident in the translation of introductory and interpretive texts, where expressions of cultural value and historical significance are often attenuated.

In the source texts of the Xiangxi Museum, evaluative expressions play a crucial role in shaping narrative positioning. Phrases such as “文明的曙光” (the dawn of civilization) or “文化的灵光” (the brilliance of culture) are used to convey a sense of historical depth and cultural pride. These expressions contribute to constructing the “ethnic self” as an active and meaningful participant in the development of civilization.

However, in the English translations, such evaluative language is frequently omitted or replaced with neutralized formulations. For example, expressions that convey affirmation or admiration may be rendered as impersonal statements (e.g., “it is believed that”) or excluded altogether. This tendency reflects an implicit alignment with a perceived norm of academic objectivity in English-language discourse.

From the perspective of narrative theory, this shift constitutes a re-positioning of the narrative voice. The source text adopts an internally engaged perspective, while the translated text moves toward an externally detached stance. As a result, the narrative loses its affective dimension, and the cultural subject is presented in a more observational and less participatory manner.

The consequence of evaluative silencing is not merely stylistic, but interpretive. Without cues that signal cultural significance or emotional resonance, international readers may perceive the content as informational rather than meaningful, thereby limiting the depth of cross-cultural engagement.

To counter this tendency, a strategy of evaluative positioning can be adopted. This involves retaining, or appropriately rearticulating, evaluative elements in a manner consistent with English academic discourse. For instance, instead of omitting expressive phrases, translators may employ moderated yet affirmative language, such as “widely regarded as a significant milestone” or “a remarkable example of early cultural development.” Through such calibrated expression, the translation can preserve narrative voice while maintaining stylistic appropriateness.

## **5. Strategic Pathways for Renarration: Toward a Narrative-Oriented Translation Model**

Building upon the analysis of narrative deviations identified in the previous section, this study proposes a set of renarration strategies aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of translating ethnic cultural narratives for international audiences. Rather than treating translation as a process of linguistic substitution, these strategies conceptualize it as a form of narrative reconstruction that actively shapes cultural representation. Each strategy corresponds to a specific type of narrative deviation, forming a coherent and systematic framework for improving museum translation practices.

### **5.1. Narrative Thickening: Reintegrating Cultural Ecology**

To address the issue of narrative reductionism, this study proposes a strategy of narrative thickening, which involves reintroducing culturally embedded meanings into translations that have been overly simplified or technicalized.

In practice, this requires translators to move beyond purely descriptive language and incorporate contextual information that highlights the relationship between natural environments and human activity. For example, geological descriptions can be supplemented with brief references to their influence on local architectural forms, subsistence strategies, or cultural practices.

By reintegrating ecological and cultural dimensions, narrative thickening enables the translated text to convey not only factual information but also the underlying worldview embedded in the source culture.

## 5.2. Dynamic Relabeling: Restoring Appropriate Narrative Frames

To correct frame misalignment, the strategy of dynamic relabeling is proposed. This involves carefully selecting or reconstructing key terms to ensure that the translated text reflects the appropriate cultural and narrative frame of the source text.

Rather than relying on surface-level or literal translations, translators should consider the functional and symbolic significance of cultural expressions. For instance, ritual practices should be labeled in ways that foreground their religious or communal functions, rather than reducing them to performative or aesthetic activities.

Dynamic relabeling thus requires a shift from lexical equivalence to narrative adequacy, ensuring that the ontological status of cultural practices is preserved in translation.

## 5.3. Macro-Micro Integration: Ensuring Narrative Coherence

To overcome narrative discontinuity, this study proposes the integration of macro- and micro-level narratives within translation. This strategy emphasizes the importance of maintaining coherence between overarching historical frameworks and the description of individual artifacts.

In practical terms, translators should embed concise interpretive elements within localized descriptions to connect specific objects to broader historical or cultural narratives. Such integration helps prevent fragmentation and allows individual textual units to contribute meaningfully to the overall discourse.

By reinforcing narrative continuity, this approach enhances the interpretability of museum texts and supports a more cohesive understanding of cultural heritage.

## 5.4. Evaluative Positioning: Reconstructing Narrative Voice

To counter evaluative silencing, this study advocates for a strategy of evaluative positioning, which involves the careful retention and adaptation of evaluative language in translation.

Rather than eliminating affective expressions in pursuit of perceived objectivity, translators should adopt a balanced approach that preserves cultural stance while adhering to the stylistic norms of English discourse. This may involve moderating, rather than omitting, evaluative expressions to ensure both clarity and engagement.

Through evaluative positioning, the translated text can maintain a meaningful narrative voice, allowing the cultural subject to be represented as an active and self-articulating presence rather than a neutralized object of description.

Taken together, these strategies form a narrative-oriented translation model that foregrounds the role of the translator as a mediator of cultural meaning[6]. By aligning translation practices with narrative structures, this model contributes to a more nuanced and effective international communication of ethnic minority cultures.

## 6. Summary

This study has examined the English translation of exhibition texts in the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Museum through the lens of narrative theory, with a particular focus on how translation reshapes cultural representation in cross-cultural contexts. Based on a qualitative analysis of 56 sets of bilingual texts, the research has identified four recurring types of narrative deviation: narrative reductionism, frame misalignment, narrative discontinuity, and evaluative silencing.

These findings suggest that translation in museum contexts is not a neutral process of linguistic transfer, but a form of narrative reconstruction that can significantly influence how ethnic cultures are framed, interpreted, and understood by international audiences. The study demonstrates that seemingly minor linguistic choices, such as term selection, omission of context, or neutralization of evaluative language, can cumulatively reshape the narrative positioning of cultural subjects.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the application of narrative theory in translation studies by operationalizing key concepts such as framing, relabeling, and positioning within a concrete analytical framework. By linking these concepts to observable textual patterns, the study provides a more systematic approach to examining narrative shifts in translation. In addition, the proposed set of renarration strategies constitutes a preliminary narrative-oriented translation model that extends existing discussions on cultural translation beyond equivalence-based paradigms.

Practically, the findings have implications for the translation of museum texts and the international communication of ethnic minority cultures. By adopting strategies such as narrative thickening, dynamic relabeling, macro–micro integration, and evaluative positioning, translators can produce texts that are not only linguistically accurate but also narratively coherent and culturally meaningful. Such an approach may enhance the accessibility and interpretability of museum discourse for global audiences.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the corpus is restricted to a single museum, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across different institutional or cultural contexts. Second, the analysis is primarily qualitative and text-based, without incorporating audience reception data. As a result, the actual impact of narrative deviations on readers' understanding remains to be empirically verified.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the corpus to include multiple museums or comparative case studies across regions. In addition, integrating methods such as visitor surveys, interviews, or experimental reception studies would provide further insight into how translated narratives are perceived and interpreted by international audiences. Such extensions would help to more fully assess the effectiveness of renarration strategies in real-world communicative settings.

In sum, this study underscores the importance of adopting a narrative-oriented perspective in translation practice. By recognizing translation as an act of cultural representation rather than mere linguistic substitution, it becomes possible to develop more nuanced and effective approaches to the international communication of ethnic cultural heritage.

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