

# The Derivative Connotations of International Publicity Translation in China from the Cultural Semiotics perspective

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## Abstract

The crucial role of international publicity translation (IPT) in bolstering a nation's soft power is undeniable, yet its effectiveness often faces hindrances due to a lack of nuanced social interpretations. China, like many other nations, grapples with this challenge. This paper explores the intricate relationship between IPT in China and Lotman's Cultural Semiotics, aiming to examine the evolution of cultural connotations in China's IPT through Cultural Semiotics. Through a comprehensive set of case studies, it illustrates the applicability and value of Cultural Semiotics, particularly its text theory, in addressing social and cultural disparities, revitalizing cultural memory, and bridging cultural divides in diverse societies. Rooted in Semiotics, this interdisciplinary research paradigm offers profound insights into the ideological foundations of cultural formation and the political system. It emphasizes the imperative of interpreting texts accurately in the field of translation studies, highlighting the disparity between the text manipulated through ideological processes in China's IPT and its authentic intent.

**Keywords:** International publicity translation, China, Cultural Semiotics, Lotman, text.

### 1.1 Research Background

"Translation" yesterday was defined in a certain context. Today, in a more globalized and digitalized world, the concept is changing, becoming more fluid (Gambier, 2023). Translation converges with life. And life constitutionally is to interpret and translate signs. Consequently, a symptom can be variously interpreted (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2023). International publicity translation (IPT) is profoundly interwoven with the fabric of human

life; it is inseparable from the act of translation and represents a symbolic behavior intricately linked to our daily existence. The cultural vitality of IPT lies in its translation of different symbols and codes, which plays a crucial role in promoting cultural exchanges between countries, facilitating the effective dissemination of global narratives and the positive image of countries. However, there is a lack of value interpretation and meaning expression based on one's own cultural system, leading to the phenomenon of

"loss" of the essence and connotation of IPT culture. And the current research on cultural interests in China's IPT lacks sufficient attention to the social and cultural significance itself from Semiotic perspective. To address this issue, Lotman's Cultural Semiotics can be used to provide a rigorous theoretical argumentation, re-examine the meaning of IPT in China, and explore the derivation and evolution process of the internal meaning of China's IPT.

1.2 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore the derivative connotations of IPT in China, employing Lotman's Cultural Semiotics as the theoretical framework. The study aims to examine the evolution of cultural connotations in China's IPT and how these can be better understood and utilized to enhance the effectiveness of cultural communication and exchange on a global scale.

1.3 Research Questions

- (1)What are the key challenges and limitations faced by IPT in China?
- (2)How can Lotman's Cultural Semiotics provide a framework for understanding the cultural connotations in IPT?
- (3)In what ways can the application of Cultural Semiotics improve the effectiveness of IPT in bridging cultural gaps and promoting cultural exchange?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Review of IPT

In the 1990s, IPT study in China commenced, focusing on Chinese-to-English translation, epitomized by Ma's (1991) work. Huang (2004) and Zhang (2013) significantly contributed by defining IPT as translating extensive Chinese information into foreign languages for dissemination through various media. Zhang (2013) further delineated big and small international publicity. Scholars from Shanghai International Studies University and Beijing Foreign Studies University laid a robust foundation for IPT

research from the 21st century (Tang, 2023). According to China National Knowledge Infrastructure(Figure 1&2), from 2013 to 2023, 3,532 studies focused on IPT, with 2,233 in journals, 239 in Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index journals, 19 doctoral dissertations, and 647 master's theses. However, IPT research accounted for only 2% of translation studies in the past decade, with a declining trend. Despite contributing to national interests and global opinions, IPT's satisfactory results remain elusive (Wang, 2018), with high-level publications comprising just 0.94%. Although IPT research spans linguistics, philosophy, communication, translation, and narratology, it lacks coherence and systematic cultural investigation, particularly from a semiotic perspective.

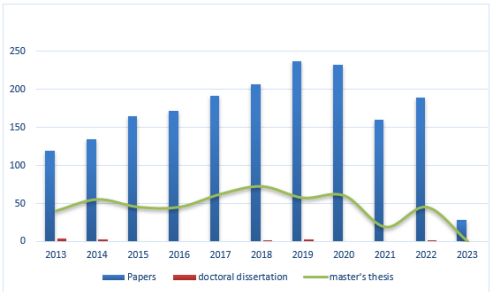


Figure 1. The research on the topics related to international publicity translation on China National Knowledge Internet (CNKI) from 2013 to 2023

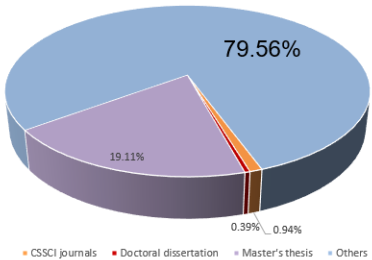


Figure 2. Proportion of Pancakes in studies on international publicity translation from 2013 to 2023

The landscape of IPT research demonstrates robust scholarly engagement, particularly among Chinese academics, with approximately 76% of contributions originating from Chinese scholars, as evidenced by a comprehensive search spanning from 2013 to 2023 in the Web of Science database. Diverse theoretical frameworks such as relevance theory, pragmatics, and equivalence theory are employed to address various aspects of IPT. While some studies focus on specific Chinese urban locales or literary works, others, particularly by foreign scholars, concentrate on translating foreign literary texts, albeit with limited output. Translation, especially within IPT, has historically shaped political narratives and disseminated cultural messages since World War II, with influential scholars like Eugene Nida, James S. Holmes, Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere, Mona Baker, Sharon O'Brien, and Federico M. Federici exploring translation theory's political nature and cross-cultural communication implications. However, there's a gap in utilizing semiotics as a methodological framework in translation studies, constraining the application of cultural theories. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary approach and expanding research field offer promising avenues for further exploration and advancement in IPT studies.

## 2.2 Related Theories of Cultural Semiotics

Semiotics, influenced by Saussure (1916), explores signs' social role, integrating linguistics, cybernetics, and information theory. Cultural Semiotics, emerging in the 1960s, assimilated key semiotic concepts. The Moscow-Tartu semiotics, a fusion of Tartu and Moscow Schools, was pivotal. Both schools, rooted in literary analysis, employed structuralist linguistics to study text symbols, communication dynamics, and interpretation. Their approach expanded to encompass images, films, and cultural phenomena. By the 1990s, their research extended to cultural typology. The Moscow-Tartu school laid a robust theoretical

groundwork for local culture studies and is regarded as twin pillars in cultural semiotics.

Lotman's Cultural Semiotics is a product of the pluralism derived from Saussure's linguistics, Bakhtin's dialogue theory, and Jakobson's Six Elements and Six Functions theory. By examining the relationship between text and language, Lotman has inherited and developed Saussure's linguistics. Moreover, Lotman's dynamic interpretation of the relationship between text and dialogue is a new breakthrough in Bakhtin's dialogue theory, and the integration of Jakobson's Six Elements and Six Functions theory has greatly optimized the three functions of the text. The "diversity" characteristic of Cultural Semiotics is "open, dynamic, and integrated," providing a solid foundation for interdisciplinary interpretation of reasoning. Influenced by Saussure's views on language, Lotman (1990, p.14) believes that in many cases, language does not exist before the text but rather before the language. Lotman explores the deep cultural connotations of the text by revealing the relationship between language symbols and artistic texts. Lotman's research on text overcame the one-sided nature of the pure epistemology prevalent in Russian aesthetics and the pure structuralism analysis method of western structuralism semiotics, which separated from the content, and the text became a more open collection of symbols. Bakhtin's dialogic theory posits that "text" is a fundamental unit of humanistic and linguistic thought, and the investigation of textual issues is conducted through the analysis of "textual problems" that are expressed in the form of discourse (Bakhtin, 1986). Lotman (2005, p.205-229) believes that dialogue is a method of transmitting information between various coding systems, and dialogue communicates through text, which coincides with Bakhtin's viewpoint. However, Lotman's dialogue theory emphasizes the inherent cultural novelty generated by the self-communicative dialogue model of "I-I," where the sender of information is both the speaker and the receiver of information. Based

on Jacobson's Six Elements and Six Functions theory, Lotman pointed out that text is an organism that transmits multiple information, awakens multiple memories, and generates multiple meanings. And "the text operates with three types of information: 1) information transmitted from one system of coding to another; 2) information, which is stored in the memory of a society and is transmitted through the text from one generation to another; 3) information which is created by the text itself as a result of its own structures" (Lotman, 1992, p. 148). Text is not only the basic unit of Lotman's Cultural Semiotics research, but also the core of Cultural Semiotics research. The derived "text memory function," "text transmission function," and "text creative function" emphasize the aggregation of meaning, which is a kind of meaningful symbol "combination." The text is no longer understood as a stationary object with stable characteristics, but as a function, a meaning collector and transmitter with powerful functions similar to the "black box" of an airplane.

In summary, Lotman's Cultural Semiotics focuses on analyzing cultural symbol systems' isomorphic laws, treating culture as its research object. It views the text as a potent medium for collecting and transmitting meaning, shaped through multilingual co-construction and multi-code interaction. This approach facilitates both internal communication between readers and text and external communication with authors, culture, and the social environment. Lotman's later textual research shifted towards a functional perspective, enhancing its semantic connotation and communicative efficacy. As a guiding theory of the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics, Lotman's Cultural Semiotics holds enduring cultural significance.

## METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis involves a detailed examination of case studies to illustrate the applicability and value of Lotman's Cultural Semiotics in IPT. Specific instances of IPT are analyzed to identify patterns and strategies that can address social and cultural disparities, revitalize cultural memory, and bridge cultural divides. The data collection for this analysis includes a comprehensive review of academic literature, analysis of various IPT materials (such as government publications, media content, promotional materials, and translations of key Chinese cultural texts) in translation studies, cultural studies, and semiotics. These methods aim to provide deep insights into the cultural and semiotic aspects of IPT.

### 3.2 Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis entails a bibliometric review utilizing CNKI database. This analysis aims to delineate the intellectual landscape of International Publicity Translation (IPT) research in China from 2013 to 2023. The methodology encompasses data collection on IPT-related publications, citation counts, and impact factors from high-impact journals, doctoral and master's theses. The analysis scrutinizes the volume and dispersion of publications to pinpoint pivotal journals and significant contributions. Additionally, it identifies predominant themes, emerging trends, and influential works in IPT research. This quantitative scrutiny furnishes a comprehensive overview of the progression and ramifications of IPT research.

## FINDINGS

Translation, as noted by Alhashmi (2023), presents a dual nature where its effects can range from beneficial to adverse. This complexity is mirrored in IPT, an interdisciplinary field merging translation and communication studies (Zhu & Zhang, 2021, p. 34). Through IPT, nations utilize semiotic resources to shape perceptions, values, and attitudes, enhancing soft power and national

discourse. Cultural Semiotics offers a lens for examining IPT's role in China, elucidating cultural regeneration and variation. By employing case studies, Lotman's framework aids in navigating cultural heterogeneity, reconstructing memory, and transcending cultural barriers. This research seeks to invigorate cultural exchange, strengthen cultural identity, and deepen understanding of China's ideological and political systems.

#### 4.1 The Memory Function of Text: Association and Reconstruction of Historical Scenery and Cultural Genes

In the development of cultural concepts, Lotman (2000, p. 89) defines culture as the aggregation of non-hereditary information and its organizational and storage methods. Additionally, he characterizes culture as nonhereditary collective memory manifested through systems of taboo and prescription (Lotman, 1971, p. 147). Rooted in cultural symbolic systems and intricate memory mechanisms, culture functions as a collective memory mechanism with "text" serving as its primary element. This perspective aligns with the tenets of new historicism, asserting that "history is text" and "culture is memory". The preservation, retrieval, and oblivion of cultural collective memory rely on "text", which acts as a reservoir of cultural memory and a fundamental aspect of cultural memory mechanisms. The memory function of text involves its capacity to maintain past contexts, eliciting synchronic and diachronic resonance among readers, reviving historical memory, reconstructing cultural genes, and regenerating cultural cognition. Translation, such as the term "Kung Fu" (功夫) from China, serves as a valid verification in international publicity, illustrating the intricate nature of cultural transmission and interpretation. Lotman's conceptualization of text extends to viewing culture both as a text, capable of generating language, and as a repository of cultural memory. Texts, in this framework, not only generate meaning but also retain

historical contexts, crucial for the existence of historical science. Culture, thus seen as a comprehensive text, plays a vital role in preserving historical information and context, periodically "sealed" yet capable of "awakening" in specific contexts. For instance, Shakespeare's "Hamlet" transcends mere authorship, encapsulating various interpretations and historical associations. This memory function of text is evident in Chinese proper nouns like "the Qixi Festival" or "Qingdao," triggering memories of historical events and subtly altering cultural meanings. The translation of geographical names, like the Yarlungzangbu River into the Brahmaputra River, illustrates how colonial legacies can distort cultural associations. Hence, precision in translation, such as referring to it as "Yarlungzangbu River, the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra River in China," is crucial to avoid misconceptions and foster understanding across cultural contexts.

Although cultural meanings may undergo dynamic changes, text has the ability to preserve past information, deepen clear memories of the past, and reconstruct the space for cultural associations. Text is the repository of cultural memory, serving as the fundamental theoretical cornerstone of cultural memory function and the aggregation of different cultural meanings. It carries clear imprints originating from the past and can preserve the context in which information occurs. By reproducing information, text can restore the historical landscape and reconstruct cultural genes, reproducing and restoring the interdependent associative relationships between information. As cultures develop, they undergo self-awareness and self-adjustment, reconstructing old cultures and forming new historical and cultural views. Therefore, the memory function of text is a vital channel for generating the internal meaning of China's IPT. By utilizing memory associations to comprehend abstract cultural concepts of time and space, humans demonstrate a high level of intelligence, which facilitates the diversity and

renewal of the internal meaning in China's IPT. This process triggers resonance among readers in both diachronic and synchronic language environments, revealing the cultural demands behind the text and influencing the reconstruction of historical and cultural values. Besides, it calls for attention to the discrepancy between the text manipulated by ideological operations in IPT and the actual meaning of the text, highlighting the importance of text interpretation in translation.

#### 4.2 The Transmission Function of Text: Slow Propagation and Elimination of Unequal Value Information and Uneven Culture

Lotman (1990) introduced the concept of the "semiosphere", akin to Vernatsky's "biosphere", as a dynamic space where cultural values and meanings intersect to shape individual and collective identities. This realm exhibits heterogeneity, driving complex cultural expression and the generation of unequal value information (Lotman, 2005). Language diversity within the semiosphere results in varied encoding and decoding processes, posing challenges for transmitting and preserving meanings. Moreover, the pace and magnitude of linguistic development create binary oppositions between cultural centers and peripheries. Cultural blending further complicates the semiosphere, accelerating the formation of information asymmetry. Despite these challenges, texts remain essential for conveying cultural meaning and mitigating information inequality. However, decoding heterogeneous cultures through texts is hindered by language experiences, standards, and memory storage differences. Nonetheless, texts serve to make information "social" and "cultural", thereby reducing information noise and addressing cultural disparities, particularly salient in China's IPT context. Thus, texts play a vital role in navigating the complexities of the semiosphere and promoting cultural understanding and equality.

Reported by China Global Television Network:

"The U.S. has no right to instruct China what to do in terms of respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity," said Hua. "Just some 20 years ago, the Chinese embassy in the Yugoslavia was bombed by NATO. Today, we still face the real threat of the U.S. and its so-called 'allies' interfering in China's internal affairs on issues related to Xinjiang, Hong Kong SAR, and Taiwan region, undermining China's sovereignty and security."

The diplomatic exchange between Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying and US State Department Spokesperson Price over the Russia-Ukraine conflict has garnered international attention. Hua Chunying emphasized China's stance on sovereignty and territorial integrity, citing historical events like the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia. She criticized US interference in China's internal affairs, particularly regarding Xinjiang, Hong Kong SAR, and Taiwan, as threats to China's sovereignty and security. To foster a balanced understanding among foreign audiences and underscore the compatibility and inclusiveness of Chinese culture, national media institutions have employed various translation techniques. Notably, negative connotations of the term "allies" were rendered neutrally rather than as "executors" or "destroyers," aiming to resonate with readers and deepen engagement with the topic. Additional translations, such as appending "Hong Kong SAR" while directly translating "Xinjiang" and "Taiwan," highlight China's stance on regional autonomy and sovereignty issues. These translation strategies reflect China's political will to intervene in sovereignty matters while addressing inherent misconceptions and ensuring cultural compatibility and openness to diverse perspectives.

Through the transmission of information at the textual level, culture not only strengthens political consciousness, but also mitigates

political bias, avoids discourse conflicts, demonstrates cultural compatibility, inclusivity, and openness, and promotes the variation and regeneration of the internal meaning of IPT in China. The text delves deeply into the slow propagation process of unequal information and eliminates the phenomenon of uneven cultural quality. In China's IPT, the translation is quietly supplemented, slimmed down, and restructured, achieving a roundabout and tactful treatment effect on heterogeneous cultures. This helps to alleviate the dilemma of unequal information caused by the dual influence of information asymmetry and asymmetry in the process of text dissemination, and promotes the coexistence of heterogeneous cultures.

#### 4.3 The Creative Function of Text: Filling and Identifying Cultural Gullies and Heterogeneous Cultures

According to Lotman's Cultural Semiotics, multilingualism is the core of "text theory." In the process of text communication, the multilingual nature makes the accuracy and completeness of information extremely complex, and the generation of cultural significance even more diverse. Lotman posited that a text is not expressed by one language, but rather by multiple languages simultaneously. In principle, any text is multilingual, comprising a symbolic whole composed of many subsystems at different levels (Kang, 2005, p. 43). Within the text, there is a complex multilingualism that causes various subsystems to engage in "games" and "dialogues." As a result, "the text can establish new information and form new meanings" (Kang, 2005, p. 44), which is the creative function of the text. Lotman argues that only a unified code can achieve an unbiased text decoding. However, in real communication, text interpretation is achieved through the cooperation of multilingual codes, each of which has a different subsystem. These subsystems intersect, overlap, and merge together to generate new decoding content, thereby promoting the generation of new meaning and endowing the text with diverse creativity. Lotman (1990, p. 14-

15) once used two classic illustrations to demonstrate the impact of multilingualism on the encoding and decoding processes in communication (Figure 3).

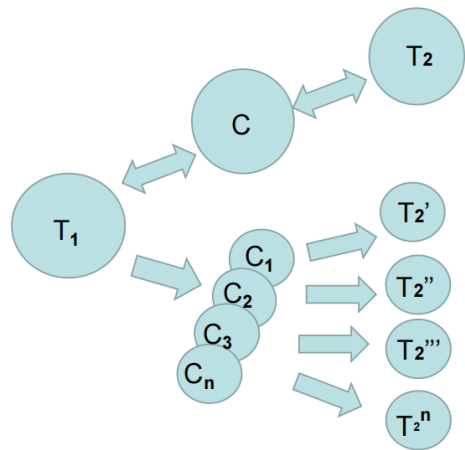


Figure 3. Diagram of the encoding and decoding process of multilingualism in textual information generation

In two different decoding contexts, the same coded text  $T_1$  will generate multilingual information. When  $T_1$  encounters an ideal decoding context  $C$ , the information generated from  $T_1$  to  $T_2$  or vice versa should be identical in both quantity and quality, and  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  can be converted bidirectionally. In another decoding context, when  $T_1$  encounters multiple decoding contexts  $C_1, C_2, C_3, \dots, C_n$ , text decoding will produce corresponding codes  $T_2', T_2'', T_2''', \dots, T_2^n$ , influenced by the understanding and reading levels of the decoding groups at different levels. Additionally, in real life, decoding contexts  $C_1, C_2, C_3, \dots, C_n$  always overlap to different degrees, and the decoding results are the sum of codes  $T_2', T_2'', T_2''', \dots, T_2^n$ . In fact, each code  $C_1, C_2, C_3, \dots, C_n$  has a complex multi-level structure internally, which blends together to form a new set of texts originating from  $T_1$ , creating new content and generating new meaning. "One culture can be understood using a different code that shares

only a part of the codes used by the creator of the text, or even none at all. This asymmetry in encoding and decoding makes translation a process and behavior of generating new information, and it realizes the information-creating function of the text." (Lotman, 1990, p. 44) This statement still applies to the process of communication through translated texts in IPT. If we consider the text of IPT as T1, in the first scenario, T1 and T2 are decoded as a unified translation text C, and the decoding result T2 is almost the same as T1. In the second scenario, when encountering various translation texts such as C1, C2, C3, ..., Cn, each text has its own complex structure, and the resulting text is no longer the T2 in the first scenario. However, regardless of the situation, T1 always remains the source text of all decoding texts, and codes such as T2', T2'', T2''', ..., T2n are new variants of T1 to varying degrees. In summary, the text is given new content, creates new meanings, and realizes the creative function of the text.

As a multilingual field, IPT in China is limited by the multilingual culture and differences in education background, political ideology, professional characteristics, cognitive structures, and expected perspectives of overseas audiences and elites. Therefore, cultural decoding can only be translated with approximate or similar meanings. Multilingual culture guarantees the dynamic and diverse nature of China's IPT, forming a cultural innovation mechanism. This innovation mechanism continuously generates new information and new meanings, and the process repeats endlessly. The new meanings generated by cultural innovation promote communication between different cultures and mother cultures, bridging cultural gaps and achieving the recognition of heterogeneous cultures. Typical examples are often seen in the translation of neologisms in China's international publicity.

China's IPT face limitations due to diverse education, politics, and cognition. Cultural decoding yields only approximate meanings, fostering a dynamic IPT. New meanings from

cultural innovation enhance cross-cultural communication, as seen in translating Chinese neologisms. China's global cultural influence is evident, with US slang dictionaries including Chinese phrases like "不作不死(No zuo no die)" and neologisms such as "中国大妈(Tu Hao or Da Ma)," "中国好人(Good Samaritan of China)," "点赞(Give a thumb up)," "甜野男孩(Herder wows)," "萌萌哒(Cute, lovely, lovable and adorable)," "坑爹(Deceiving me)," "剩男剩女(Leftover singles)," "中国网民(Chinese netizens)," "土豪(Nouveau rich)," and "香菇蓝瘦(Under the weather)" that appropriately fill cultural and conceptual gaps. However, translating terms like "中国宇航员(taikonaut)" for Chinese astronauts poses challenges. While "taikonaut" coined by Yang Liwei gained recognition, some Western media still use "astronaut." This reflects the complexities of bridging cultural gaps in IPT.

To overcome these barriers, cross-cultural communication requires the use of "text" to fill cultural gaps, recognize differences between cultures, identify variations and regenerations of internal meanings in translated texts, and achieve communication and identification in non-symbolic and external symbolic spaces. Text plays a powerful role in international publicity by serving as the main driving force to cross barriers in heterogeneous cultural and multilingual fields. It is the driving force behind identifying inherent meaning variations and regenerations in China's IPT. The interference and intermingling between multilingual texts not only ensure the transmission and preservation of cultural information but also create new unpredictable meanings. Text crosses the existing cognitive framework of multilingual field filtering, competes for and creates cultural space. To achieve cultural exchanges with non-symbolic and external symbolic space, IPT in China needs to confront the complex multi-level structure inside each text code, shape and



reconstruct cultural and ideological histories with the help of text media, promote the expansion of knowledge pedigree, and play a unique cultural creative function, adding new ideas.

## CONCLUSION

The study of Chinese culture by foreign scholars is becoming increasingly prevalent, and as a result, there is a growing need to find new and innovative ways to promote the transmission of Chinese culture (Liu, 2023). In conclusion, international publicity translation in the context of China plays a pivotal role as a conduit for effectively disseminating the narratives of diverse cultures. Its cultural vitality stems from the dynamic interplay and juxtaposition of various symbols and codes. However, realizing the full potential of IPT in China necessitates precise interpretation and expression of its own cultural elements. This study, leveraging Lotman's Cultural Semiotics, has delved into the derivation and evolution of internal meanings within China's IPT, offering innovative perspectives to foster interdisciplinary research. Textual cognitive mechanisms possess a robust memory function, awakening historical resonances among readers, reviving cultural legacies, and promoting coexistence among diverse cultures. Additionally, the text's transmission function counters cultural inequality and resolves information disparities. Simultaneously, the creative function of text bridges cultural divides and reconstructs cultural

and ideological histories. The application of Cultural Semiotics not only helps circumvent academic blind spots and interpretation biases but also presents a fresh interdisciplinary research paradigm for China's IPT, reinforcing cultural self-assurance. Furthermore, it provides deeper insights into the socio-economic and political systems underpinning textual production. This underscores the pivotal role of text interpretation in translation, especially within the realm of China's IPT, enriching our understanding of the intricate relationship between language, culture, and power dynamics. Embracing this comprehensive approach not only advances more effective IPT in China but also contributes to a broader discourse on the intricate complexities shaping our global cultural landscape. Importantly, the insights gained from applying Lotman's Cultural Semiotics extend beyond China's context, offering a framework with global applicability to enhance the comprehension and efficacy of international publicity translation across diverse cultural and social contexts. This interdisciplinary approach encourages critical examination of the socio-economic and political dimensions involved in textual production and interpretation, laying a valuable foundation for future research in the field of international publicity translation. In embracing this holistic perspective, we endeavor not only to enhance IPT in China but also to contribute to a broader dialogue on the multifaceted forces that mold our global cultural landscape.

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