

Translation of Local Seasonal Culture-Loaded Words in *Seasons of China*: A Reception-Aesthetic Perspective

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Abstract

Seasons of China (2019) is a 24-episode documentary; it was produced by Xinhua News Network Corporation, and it is presented by Dominic Johnson-Hill, a British expatriate. The series gives international audiences a rare look at China's Twenty-Four Solar Terms and the farming traditions that are closely tied to them. This paper draws on three episodes—Grain in Ear (Mangzhong), Autumn Equinox (Qiu fen), and Grain Rain (Guyu)—and it uses the perspective of audience reception as its theoretical frame; the aim is to see how words that carry local seasonal culture travel across different languages and cultures. The study is guided by two ideas from Jaus: “horizon of expectations” and “aesthetic distance.” Six representative examples are looked at, which cover folk farming rituals, seasonal specialty foods, regional eating customs, and farm products that have been adapted to local conditions. The findings show a flexible set of strategies—transliteration supported by context, functional paraphrasing, calling on shared cultural knowledge, and literal translation together with added context—each of these is adjusted to find a working balance between keeping the culture real and making it understandable for the audience. A British host also appears in the series, and his on-screen learning process works as a kind of cultural bridge, because it mirrors how an imagined foreign viewer might learn. By paying attention to farming cultural knowledge more than to translation skills alone, this study brings a fresh angle to the growing research on Chinese publicity documentaries.

Keywords

Reception Aesthetics; horizon of expectations; agrarian culture-loaded words; Twenty-Four Solar Terms; *Seasons of China*.

1. Introduction

In 2016, China's Twenty-Four Solar Terms were placed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and this event brought new international interest to the old Chinese system of marking time by farming seasons. The solar terms were developed over more than two thousand years of farming practice; they express a clear idea of “acting according to the season,” and they still guide farming decisions in China today, especially in the countryside. To introduce this heritage to viewers from other countries, Xinhua News Network Corporation released the bilingual documentary *Seasons of China* in 2019; each of the twenty-minute episodes focuses on one solar term.

The most noticeable feature of the documentary is Dominic Johnson-Hill, a British businessman who has made China his home since 1993 and speaks fluent Mandarin. He travels to more than forty places across twenty-four provinces and municipalities, and at different moments, he takes on the roles of narrator, participant, and person who explains the culture. Because he is a long-term foreign resident, his position changes how the documentary communicates: instead of presenting Chinese culture only through self-told stories, the film stages a cross-cultural exchange, and many people connect this quality with its appeal abroad.

This paper looks at three episodes: Grain in Ear (Episode 9), Autumn Equinox (Episode 16), and Grain Rain (Episode 6). Each episode is centered on an important point in the farming calendar—the peak of wheat harvesting, cotton picking in the dry northwest, and the spring tea-picking season—and each one brings together seasonal customs, local crops, and food practices. The main question is how culture-loaded words about seasonal life are shown in these episodes, and how the chosen strategies handle the aesthetic distance between Chinese farming traditions and an international audience.

Existing research on *Seasons of China* has applied ideas from Eco-Translatology, Skopos Theory [1], and methods that use language databases; however, the perspective of audience reception has been given little attention in this area. This gap is worth noting, because the theory has already been helpful when studying culture-loaded words in similar documentaries, such as *Masters in the Forbidden City* [2]. This study aims to fill that gap, while it keeps in mind the particular communication situation of a popular bilingual documentary.

2. Theoretical Framework: Reception Aesthetics

Reception Aesthetics emerged from the Constance School in Germany during the 1960s. Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser redirected critical attention away from the author-text relationship and toward the interaction between text and reader. Meaning, in this account, is not simply contained in the text; it takes shape through the reader's active interpretation [3]. The usefulness of this framework depends, in this setting, on treating documentary viewers as participants in meaning-making rather than as passive recipients.

The first central concept is the horizon of expectations (*Erwartungshorizont*). It describes the cultural norms, prior knowledge, and aesthetic assumptions that readers bring to a text [4]. International viewers of *Seasons of China* may have limited knowledge of lunar-solar calendars, regional farming cycles, and Chinese folk belief systems. Many references in the source text therefore lie beyond their immediate interpretive reach, particularly when the documentary provides little explanatory context.

A second concept, aesthetic distance, refers to the gap between what an audience expects and what a text presents. A moderate distance can stimulate curiosity and encourage viewers to enlarge their interpretive horizon. An excessive distance may instead lead to confusion or disengagement. The translator must consequently calibrate this gap: cultural difference should not be reduced to false familiarity, but neither should it become an inaccessible barrier. Iser's related concept of textual gaps (*Leerstelle*) adds that texts offer only a schematic structure; viewers supply unstated details through their own cognition. Translation can narrow or widen these gaps, depending on how much information it provides and where that information is placed.

Culture-loaded words are especially revealing in this regard. They encode concepts for which the target language has no ready equivalent, so aesthetic distance becomes particularly visible at the lexical level. In *Seasons of China*, examples include the ritual of bidding farewell to the Flower God, the seasonal herb *Jingjie*, and the regional food *Xiangchun* toon sprouts. Reception Aesthetics makes it possible to examine how these items are adjusted for foreign viewers without assuming that accessibility and cultural preservation are identical goals.

3. Case Analysis

3.1. Episode 9: Grain in Ear (Mangzhong)

Example 1:

The episode begins with two customs associated with the Grain in Ear solar term. The English narration states: “Paying thanks to the flower god and making wine with fresh plum berries, all show the Chinese people’s closeness and respect for nature.”

The Chinese source term *song hua shen* (送花神, bidding farewell to the Flower God) is about a folk practice, and this practice is tied specifically to Mangzhong. It comes from a farming belief that flower gods leave when summer begins, and that is also the time blossoms fade. The translator does not use a bare sound-based form like *Huashen*; instead, the expression is given as “Paying thanks to the flower god.” In this context, the meaning of the ritual is made immediately easy to grasp by this functional way of putting it.

The reason it is easy to understand is that “flower god” calls up a shared cultural idea. Viewers who know about Greco-Roman myths may already have a way of thinking about nature gods, for example, Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers, and so the English phrase gives an unfamiliar Chinese custom a recognizable point of entry. It also makes the distance between the audience and the culture feel smaller, while the Chinese setting is not taken away. The central meaning of the ritual—showing thanks to nature and noticing how the seasons change—is still left open to the audience, achieving the partial *fusion of horizons* that Jauss [5] framed as the goal of cross-cultural reception. What is played down is its roots in farm life: this is not just a general flower celebration, but a farming community’s way of marking the move from spring flowers to summer work. The translation therefore allows a partial coming together of understandings, as long as the audience can accept the broad idea of a nature god.

Example 2:

The narration then introduces a seasonal herb associated with wheat-growing areas of Henan province: “Jingjie, used as a herbal medicine, has a fragrant and strong smell. It can only be eaten around the time of Mangzhong”.

Jingjie (荆芥, *schizonepeta*) belongs to the food and medicinal culture of central China. It is valued as both a culinary herb and a medicinal plant, especially in early summer. Since common English vocabulary offers no direct equivalent with the same regional and cultural associations, the translation retains the pinyin form and adds three explanatory details: “herbal medicine,” “fragrant and strong smell,” and “eaten around Mangzhong.”

The information is arranged as a gradual introduction rather than as a single definition. A standalone pinyin term would remain outside most viewers’ horizons of expectations. The references to medicine and seasonal food provide familiar categories, while the sensory description gives the ingredient a concrete presence. Viewers do not receive a complete botanical or cultural account, but they obtain enough information to recognize *Jingjie* as part of a Chinese food-medicine tradition. The pinyin form preserves a moderate aesthetic distance, particularly among viewers who are curious about unfamiliar regional terms, and leaves room for further interpretation rather than closing the meaning through an overly familiar equivalent.

3.2. Episode 16: Autumn Equinox (Qiufen)

Example 3:

The episode connects the Autumn Equinox with the Mid-Autumn Festival through the statement: “every Mid-Autumn Festival families get together for a bit of moon worship.”

The Chinese term *ji yue* (祭月, moon sacrifice) points to an old harvest ritual; this ritual goes back further than the time when the Mid-Autumn Festival became a widely celebrated holiday. It grew out of farming communities giving thanks for the autumn harvest, and it was carried out around the time of the Autumn Equinox. The short translation “moon worship” gives viewers from other countries a quick way to get the idea.

The phrase is effective, because worship that is aimed at an object in the sky is something that can be recognized in many cultural traditions, for instance, the ancient Greek practices of

worshipping the moon and various native customs; by placing this unfamiliar ritual inside a broad group that viewers might already know about, the cultural distance is made smaller, and this effect works under the short time of a documentary episode. The translation also makes the farming roots of the ritual less clear; it can suggest a family or religious practice more quickly than a way of giving thanks for the harvest. In this situation, the trade-off matches a strategy that is centered on the audience's reception: when the time shown on screen is limited, the translation brings forward the layer of meaning that is the easiest to reach, while the fuller historical importance can only be partly taken in by the viewers.

Example 4:

At a Dunhuang agricultural research station during the autumn cotton harvest, the host observes: "it is also the largest colored cotton testing station in the country."

"Colored cotton" is a literal and semantically transparent rendering. On its own, however, the phrase gives Western viewers little sense of the product's regional or agronomic significance. The surrounding narration supplies that missing structure by referring to the desert environment, the 1,500-year history of cotton's introduction through the Silk Road, the ability of ancient farmers to adapt crops to local conditions, and cotton's economic importance to local livelihoods.

The term therefore acquires meaning through its narrative surroundings rather than through lexical explanation alone. Viewers begin with a familiar noun, "cotton," and gradually connect it with environmental adaptation, Silk Road exchange, and regional agricultural development. Iser's textual gap is not eliminated; it is filled through the accumulation of contextual information. Conditional on viewers following the entire segment, "colored cotton" becomes more than a type of fiber. It comes to represent Chinese farmers' adaptive knowledge and the diversity of farming systems developed in response to different environments. The literal translation is thus domesticated at the word level but culturally re-enriched through the documentary's larger structure.

3.3. Episode 6: Grain Rain (Guyu)

Example 5:

Speaking from his own home in northern China, the host introduces a seasonal food: "Xiangchun is a seasonal food unique to northern China. ... the Xiangchun tree in my yard sprouts little shoots and I invite great friend Xiaotao, and we pick off the Xiangchun from the tree, which is very, very fragrant. And cook it with eggs and enjoy a meal with some friends."

Xiangchun (香椿, Chinese toon sprouts) is an edible wild vegetable strongly associated with the Grain Rain solar term and with northern Chinese rural and domestic food culture. The translation keeps the pinyin form throughout and does not introduce a generic equivalent such as "toon sprouts." Its meaning is instead developed through the surrounding action: it is seasonal, grows on trees, has a strong fragrance, is picked in spring, and is cooked with eggs and shared with friends.

The strategy becomes more effective because the host embodies the cultural practice. A purely textual transliteration would create a considerable aesthetic gap. Here, viewers see Johnson-Hill pick the sprouts from his own tree, smell them, cook them, and eat them with friends. His response supplies an experiential point of reference for viewers who may have no prior knowledge of the ingredient. The pinyin preserves cultural otherness, while his familiarity makes that otherness approachable. Particularly among international viewers who rely on visual and interpersonal cues, horizon fusion is therefore performed socially as well as linguistically. The example shows that multimodal context can compensate for the limited explanatory power of transliteration.

Example 6:

The narration next presents a beverage custom from Anhua's tea-growing communities: "Lei tea is another special tea of Anhua. Lei means ground. And every season, locals add the freshest tea to rice, peanuts, sesame, ginger crush together to make a tea mix for the whole neighborhood."

Lei cha (擂茶, pounded tea) is a communal drink traditionally made by grinding tea, grains, and nuts together. It belongs to the farming communities of southern China and functions as both a daily beverage and an expression of rural hospitality, especially during busy agricultural periods such as Grain Rain. The translation introduces the item in stages: first the pinyin name *Lei tea*, then the gloss "ground," and finally a description of its ingredients and preparation.

This sequence allows viewers to move from a familiar category—tea—to an unfamiliar regional practice. The gloss explains the name, while the ingredient list and preparation method fill in the cultural and material details. Cognitive overload is limited because the information arrives incrementally. The host's candid comment, "It's actually not very nice," adds another layer of mediation. His judgment does not claim that all viewers will share the same response; instead, it presents the drink as an experience open to personal evaluation. Conditional on the audience treating the host as a credible intermediary, this unscripted reaction may support longer-term horizon expansion more effectively than idealized praise. It acknowledges difference without pretending that cultural appreciation requires immediate personal preference.

4. Discussion

4.1. Translation Strategies Classified by Degrees of Aesthetic Distance

The six examples form a range rather than a single dominant translation pattern. At the culture-preserving end, transliteration with contextual supplementation is used for culturally specific produce and foodways, including *Xiangchun*, *Jingjie*, and *Lei cha*. These terms retain their pinyin identities, while description, function, preparation, and embodied demonstration supply the missing information. Their aesthetic distance remains relatively large, but it becomes productive when the documentary offers sufficient support.

Ritual concepts occupy a middle position. "Paying thanks to the flower god" and "moon worship" employ functional paraphrase and activate cultural schemas familiar to many Western viewers. This arrangement favors quick comprehension while retaining the basic cultural meaning of each practice. The strategy is particularly effective when viewers need to understand the ritual's immediate significance but are not given enough screen time for a detailed historical account.

At the most assimilative end is literal rendering with contextual enrichment, represented by "colored cotton." The phrase itself appears familiar and culturally unmarked. Its significance emerges only through the surrounding account of desert conditions, Silk Road exchange, and local agricultural adaptation. In this setting, the documentary domesticates the lexical expression but restores cultural depth at the discourse level.

The overall pattern is consistent with a broader tendency in publicity documentaries: cross-cultural knowledge transfer generally places greater weight on comprehension than literary translation does, while still preserving enough foreignness to signal cultural difference. The balance is conditional on the documentary's multimodal resources. Where images, narration, and participation reinforce one another, a larger aesthetic gap can remain without becoming obstructive.

4.2. The British Host as Embodied Cultural Mediator

Johnson-Hill's presence on the screen changes how the work is received, and this change goes deeper than what any single word choice can do. *Seasons of China* is not like a documentary that uses only voice-over; it shows him picking toon sprouts from his own yard, tasting pounded tea,

walking through cotton fields, and watching the harvest customs of a village, and through these actions, his body and his responses become part of the way translation happens.

From an audience-centered point of view, he acts out the move from not knowing toward a partial meeting of perspectives. When he tastes *Lei tea* and gives a plain opinion, or when he says that he eats *Xiangchun* every spring, the viewers are given a model: a person from another country can step into a local custom without having to turn into someone who is culturally the same as the original people. His being British also helps to treat the first feeling of unfamiliarity as normal, not as a shortcoming, and this matters especially for viewers in other countries who meet these practices for the first time; the host's step-by-step participation makes the widening of understanding something that can be seen and that feels believable in a social way.

This kind of mediation through the body adds to the spoken story in ways that subtitles or voiceover by itself cannot fully bring about. The cultural distance is made smaller not only by the words that are chosen, but also by the fact that a Western person can be seen moving through Chinese cultural places with success, and what this effect should not be taken to mean is that the two cultures are made completely equal. Instead, if the host seems believable and the viewers are willing to connect with him, his being there makes these unfamiliar practices easier to get close to.

4.3. Merits and Limits of an Audience-Centered Approach

The six examples show the practical advantages of audience-centered calibration. For casual international viewers encountering Chinese solar-term culture for the first time, moderate aesthetic distance combined with explanatory support is likely to be more accessible than an aggressively foreignizing approach. Viewers are given a concrete sense of how farming communities experience the solar terms through food, ritual, and crop choices.

The approach also has limits. The deeper cosmological and philosophical dimensions of the solar terms—such as the unity of heaven and humanity and the system's role in traditional Chinese medicine—remain largely in the background.

Rituals, as a result, may look like cultural oddities, and not like they give shape to a connected set of beliefs; a related risk is carried by making things too familiar, because when differences are turned into something plain and universal, the special cultural detail the documentary wants to share can be weakened.

Seasons of China deals with this push-and-pull more successfully than many similar programs do; it does not rely on leaving things out completely, and words like *Xiangchun* and *Jingjie* stay where they can be seen, while the background given makes them easy to reach. For a popular twenty-minute show that is made for general viewers, this seems like a reasonable middle point; the film opens a way into Chinese farming life, though people are not expected to pick up its full deep ideas in one viewing. This balance can be defended, especially when the aim is to offer a first step into a culture, and not a full, detailed study of a people.

5. Conclusion

The rendering of local seasonal culture-loaded words in three episodes of *Seasons of China* has been looked at by this paper, and it has done this through the lens of Reception Aesthetics. A changing set of strategies is identified by the analysis, instead of one single way of translating. For terms like *Xiangchun*, *Jingjie*, and *Lei cha*, the pinyin form is given together with some added context; expressions such as “paying thanks to the flower god” and “moon worship” are shaped by rewriting based on meaning and by calling on shared cultural ideas; “colored cotton” is given its wider cultural meaning through a direct translation that has been filled out with more background. Each of these strategies is a response to a different amount of aesthetic distance,

and each one involves giving up some direct clarity in order to keep cultural depth, or the other way around.

Across the examples, what stands out is that things are adjusted with the audience in mind; local farming customs are mostly made easy to reach by the documentary, and their cultural identity is not taken away completely, and when the information is made simpler, the reduction falls more heavily on the deep philosophical and cosmological layers than on the things that can be seen, like food, ritual, or seasonal work. This pattern happens because the documentary uses narration, pictures, and the host's participation all at once; the words alone would not always give the same level of access.

Another layer of cultural bridging is added by Johnson-Hill's bodily presence. His way of seeing things from the outside lets viewers watch horizon fusion as a social process that goes on, not just as an idea about translation that stays on paper; he does not only give explanations of local practices, but he walks into them, shows his reactions, and makes his own half-familiarity something that the audience can use. This bodily bridging, especially in the cases of *Xiangchun* and *Lei cha*, takes what can be done by words a little further.

When all this is taken together, the findings show that Reception Aesthetics gives a helpful frame for looking at publicity documentaries; these documentaries aim to move cultural knowledge across borders in an effective way, not to achieve exact word-for-word sameness. Future studies could put together this kind of careful, quality-focused way of working with studies that test how real audiences receive things, in order to see if viewers from other countries really pick up the cultural meanings that were meant, and also to see whether keeping some moderate distance—instead of making everything fully familiar—leads to better learning over a long time.

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