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Translating Imagery Metaphors in *Li Sao*: An Embodied-Cognitive Translatology Approach

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This paper examines the translation of imagery metaphors in Qu Yuan's *Li Sao* using an Embodied-Cognitive Translatology (ECT) approach. It investigates how the poem's intricate metaphors, such as orchid (*lan*), pepper and cassia (*jiao and jun'gui*), and crescent eyebrows (*emei*), are translated into English while maintaining their cultural, emotional, and philosophical depth. The study explores the challenges translators face when rendering these culturally specific metaphors, and it identifies strategies such as literal translation, adaptation, substitution, and paraphrasing used by translators to preserve the metaphors' essence. Drawing on the principles of ECT, the paper examines how metaphors function not just as linguistic elements but as cognitive symbols embedded in cultural contexts, reflecting the translator's cognitive processes. The research highlights the importance of aligning the translation process with the cognitive and emotional resonance of the original text, thus ensuring the metaphor's full meaning is conveyed. This paper also discusses the broader implications of translating metaphors from ancient Chinese literature, offering insights into the complexities of cross-cultural translation. It concludes with suggestions for future research in translating classical Chinese works, focusing on improving the preservation of metaphorical and cultural integrity.

Keywords: Li Sao, metaphor translation, Embodied-Cognitive Translatology, cultural specificity, cognitive linguistics, literary translation

Introduction

Li Sao, written by Qu Yuan during the Warring States period, is a cornerstone of classical Chinese literature. The poem reflects the poet's personal struggles, including political exile, and explores themes of political corruption, moral integrity, and the tension between personal values and societal expectations. At its heart, Li Sao is rich in imagery metaphors, many of which are drawn from the natural world. These metaphors serve not only as literary devices but as vehicles for Qu Yuan's emotional turmoil, disillusionment, and existential reflections. The metaphors in the poem are essential in conveying its aesthetic and emotional depth.

However, translating these metaphors into English presents significant challenges. Chinese metaphors often carry layers of cultural, historical, and philosophical meaning that may not be easily translated into English. Thus, a simple linguistic transfer is inadequate; the translator must capture both the cognitive and cultural resonance

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behind these metaphors. This is where Embodied-Cognitive Translatology (henceforth referred to as ECT), a theory that integrates cognitive linguistics and translation studies, proves useful. ECT suggests that cognition is grounded in human sensory and physical experiences, and that translation is a cognitive process shaped by both the translator's cultural background and the embodied nature of language.

ECT emphasizes that metaphors are not merely linguistic expressions but cognitive constructs shaped by the embodied experiences of the source culture. Translators must therefore account for both the cultural context and the cognitive processes underlying the metaphors in order to preserve their meaning. Wang Yin's introduction of ECT to translation studies underscores the dynamic nature of translation, framing it as an embodied cognitive activity that bridges the source and target cultures.

The objective of this paper is to examine how Li Sao's metaphors are translated into English, focusing on the strategies used by Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie, and exploring how ECT informs the translation process. This study will assess how effectively these strategies preserve the emotional and philosophical resonance of the original text while adapting metaphors to fit the cognitive and cultural frameworks of English-speaking readers.

Literature Review

The translation of Li Sao and its complex imagery metaphors has been the subject of considerable academic research. Although Li Sao itself has been extensively analyzed within Chinese literary studies, its English translations have drawn significant scholarly attention, particularly regarding the translation of its metaphors. The translation of these metaphors poses unique challenges due to the cultural and cognitive nuances embedded within them. This section provides a review of previous research on the translation of Li Sao, focusing on the role of metaphor translation, the application of cognitive linguistics, and the relevance of ECT.

Previous Studies on Li Sao's English Translation

The first English translations of Li Sao emerged in the late 19th century, with contributions from scholars like Parker, the British Minister to China. These early translations, while important historically, were limited by the translators' lack of familiarity with the poem's cultural and philosophical context. Over time, more comprehensive translations have emerged, notably those by Yang and Dai, whose version, first published in 1953, remains one of the most well-known and widely appreciated translations of Li Sao. Their translation strikes a balance between fidelity to the original and readability for English-speaking audiences, often employing a somewhat literal approach while adapting certain phrases to enhance accessibility. However, despite their strengths, Yang and Dai's translation struggles with certain cultural and cognitive nuances, particularly regarding the poem's complex metaphors (Yang & Dai, 2004).

Recent studies have examined the translation strategies used in Li Sao, especially with regard to its imagery metaphors. Scholars like Gao and Wu have applied cognitive linguistics to explore how culturally loaded terms in Li Sao are translated, highlighting the cognitive processes behind metaphor translation. These studies underline the difficulty of translating terms with deep cultural significance without losing their essence. However, they fail to fully address the cognitive structures that shape these metaphors, an area where ECT offers valuable insights (Gao & Wu, 2021).

Theoretical Approaches to Metaphor Translation

Metaphor translation is a well-established area of study in translation theory. Early work by Newmark in *Approaches to Translation* categorized metaphors into five types: dead, clich \(\xi\) stock, recent, and original. For each type, he proposed specific translation strategies, including literal translation, substitution, paraphrase, or deletion. While Newmark's framework provides a useful foundation for understanding metaphor translation, it does not fully account for the cognitive and cultural dimensions of metaphor. These dimensions are especially important when translating literary texts like *Li Sao* (Newmark, 2001).

Cognitive linguistics, particularly the work of Lakoff and Johnson, has significantly advanced the understanding of metaphor translation. Their theory of conceptual metaphor, outlined in *Metaphors We Live By*, posits that metaphors are central to human cognition and shape the way we conceptualize the world. According to this theory, metaphors are not merely linguistic features but are deeply embedded in cultural and cognitive frameworks. This insight has profound implications for translation, suggesting that metaphors must be understood within the context of their culture and cognitive structures (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

ECT builds upon this framework by emphasizing the embodied nature of cognition and how it informs the translation process. Wang, in particular, has extended these ideas into translation studies, proposing that translation is a dynamic cognitive activity that involves the mapping of meanings across languages while accounting for their cultural and cognitive contexts. ECT offers a more holistic understanding of metaphor translation by considering the cognitive, emotional, and cultural layers of both the source and target languages (Wang, 2021).

While the translation of *Li Sao* has been well studied, particularly in terms of its linguistic accuracy and fidelity to the original text, there is still much to be explored regarding the translation of its imagery metaphors. Existing studies have primarily focused on the general translation strategies used in *Li Sao*, such as literal translation or free translation, but few have considered the cognitive and cultural dimensions of metaphor translation in detail. This paper aims to apply the principles of ECT to the analysis of the imagery metaphors in *Li Sao* and seeks to explore how ECT can inform the translation of Chinese metaphors into English. In doing so, it will contribute to the growing body of research on the role of cognition and culture in literary translation, particularly in the context of Chinese classics.

Analysis and Translation Strategies of Imagery Metaphors in *Li Sao*

The metaphors in *Li Sao* are pivotal to Qu Yuan's expression of his internal emotional conflicts, disillusionment with the political environment, and longing for moral and political purity. These metaphors, derived from nature, myth, and Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions, encapsulate both Qu Yuan's personal struggles and broader cultural values. Translating these metaphors into English presents a unique set of challenges, as they carry specific cultural, historical, and philosophical meanings that may not easily resonate with English-speaking audiences.

Analysis of Key Imagery Metaphors

Metaphors in *Li Sao* are integral to the poem's emotional depth, capturing Qu Yuan's longing for justice and his frustration with the political system. The four key metaphors explored here—orchid (*lan*), pepper and cassia

(jiao and jun'gui), the idealized woman (meiren), and Yao and Shun—reveal the complex interplay between individual emotion and cultural values.

(1) The Orchid (lan)

The orchid is one of the central metaphors in *Li Sao*, symbolizing purity, nobility, and moral integrity. In traditional Chinese culture, the orchid represents both aesthetic beauty and virtuous character, making it a fitting symbol for Qu Yuan's moral ideals. The orchid's association with Confucian values, including honor, nobility, and integrity, deepens its significance in the poem. However, in Western contexts, the orchid is typically associated with beauty, luxury, and refinement, with little connection to moral virtue. To preserve the metaphor's full meaning, translators must find ways to adapt it while maintaining the original symbolism.

(2) Pepper and Cassia (jiao and jun'gui)

The metaphor of pepper and cassia in Li Sao symbolizes noble character, virtue, and moral strength, representing the poet's idealized sense of moral integrity. In Chinese culture, these spices were often associated with the royal court and temples, where their fragrance symbolized moral righteousness, and strength of character. However, in Western culture, the metaphor may not carry the same cultural weight. While pepper and cassia are recognized in the West, their symbolic associations with nobility and virtue are not immediately obvious. To ensure that the metaphor maintains its full meaning in English, a translator could consider adapting the metaphor to more familiar symbols that evoke similar meanings.

(3) The Idealized Woman (meiren)

In Li Sao, the metaphor of the idealized woman (meiren) represents Ou Yuan's lofty ideals of moral and political purity. The idealized woman in this context is not just a figure of physical beauty but an embodiment of virtue, wisdom, and integrity. This concept is closely linked to the Confucian ideals of virtue and the Daoist notion of balance and harmony. The metaphor reflects Qu Yuan's longing for a virtuous and morally pure world, where the rulers and officials act with wisdom and integrity.

(4) Yao and Shun

Yao and Shun are two legendary rulers in Chinese mythology, known for their wisdom, moral integrity, and idealized governance. In Li Sao, Qu Yuan references these figures as symbols of virtuous leadership. Yao and Shun were revered as paragons of moral excellence, and their stories became emblematic of the qualities that a righteous ruler should possess. Translating the reference to Yao and Shun presents a challenge because these figures are deeply embedded in Chinese historical and philosophical contexts. To preserve the metaphor's meaning, an accurate translation would retain the names "Yao" and "Shun" and add a brief explanation to provide context.

(5) *Emei*

The metaphor *Emei*, which refers to the crescent-shaped eyebrows, is another crucial metaphor in *Li Sao*. This image of delicate and graceful features in traditional Chinese literature symbolizes not only physical beauty but also fragility and purity. The crescent eyebrows are symbolic of the idealized feminine beauty that Qu Yuan longed for in both an aesthetic and moral sense, representing an ideal world where beauty and virtue coexist harmoniously. Therefore, this metaphor presents a challenge in translation, as the cultural understanding of *Emei* may not be easily accessible to English readers who are unfamiliar with its symbolic weight.

Translation Strategies

The translation of these metaphors requires a combination of literal translation, adaptation, substitution, and paraphrasing. The approach used will depend on the metaphor's cultural resonance and the translator's goal of maintaining the emotional, philosophical, and cultural depth of the original.

Literal Translation: Retaining the Same Imagery

One of the primary strategies used in the translation of *Li Sao* is the literal translation of imagery, particularly when the source and target languages share a similar cognitive and cultural understanding of the metaphor. This method is often applied to universal symbols that have comparable meanings in both cultures, enabling the translator to preserve the imagery in its original form.

For example, the image of the "lan" is directly translated into English as "orchid." The orchid is a symbol of purity, elegance, and noble character in both Chinese culture and Western literary traditions. By retaining the same imagery, the translators preserve the metaphor's emotional resonance and cultural significance.

Table 1
Translation of The Orchid (lan)

Principle	Reality	Cognition	Language
Chinese	lan 兰	Noble character	纫秋兰以为佩
English	Orchid	Elegance and	"And Orchids late that by the Water grew, I wove for Ornament; till creeping
		purity	time."

In this line, the metaphor of the orchid conveys not only aesthetic beauty but also moral purity. The translators' decision to use the literal term "orchid" maintains the connection between the source and target cultures, allowing English-speaking readers to understand the metaphor's universal symbolism. By retaining the same imagery, the translators ensure that the metaphor's essential meaning remains clear to the target audience.

Adaptation: Understanding the Culture

In some cases, a literal translation may not fully convey the original metaphor's cultural meaning due to differences between the source and target cultures. In these instances, the translators must adapt the metaphor to the target culture, either by providing additional context or by choosing an image with similar connotations in the target language. This adaptation helps maintain the emotional and cognitive impact of the original metaphor while ensuring that it resonates with the target audience.

For example, the metaphor of "cassia and pepper" represents nobility, chastity, and moral integrity in Chinese culture. However, these spices may not have the same cultural resonance in Western cultures. To make the metaphor comprehensible to English-speaking readers, Yang and Dai translated it as "Cassia and Pepper," retaining the literal imagery but losing some of its specific cultural symbolism.

Table 2
Translation of Pepper and Cassia (jiao and jun'gui)

Principle	Reality	Cognition	Language
Chinese	jiao and jun'gui 椒、菌桂	Noble and chaste character	杂申椒与菌桂兮
English	Pepper, Cassia	No corresponding meaning	"Cassia and Pepper of the Mountain-side."

While this literal translation captures the general meaning of the spices, it omits the deeper cultural significance that these spices hold in Chinese society. A more effective translation might have included a clarifying phrase such as "virtuous cassia" or "noble pepper" to emphasize the moral associations of these spices in the source culture. The adaptation strategy ensures that the metaphor's emotional impact is retained, even if the cultural context is modified for better understanding.

Substitution: Specifying the Metaphors

When a metaphor is highly culture-specific and does not have a direct equivalent in the target language, the translator may choose to substitute the source metaphor with one that carries a similar meaning in the target culture. This strategy helps convey the metaphor's cognitive meaning while ensuring that it is both comprehensible and emotionally resonant for the target audience.

An example of substitution can be seen with the metaphor "idealized woman." In Chinese culture, "meiren" not only refers to physical beauty but also symbolizes moral excellence and high character. This metaphor is closely tied to Qu Yuan's lofty ideals and aspirations in Li Sao. In their translation, Yang and Dai substituted "meiren" with "my Dream," a more abstract concept, in order to maintain the metaphor's emotional and aspirational tone.

Table 3 Translation of The Idealized Woman (meiren)

Principle	Reality	Cognition	Language
Chinese	meiren	High character, lofty aspirations	恐美人之迟暮
	美人		
English	Dream	A wish to have or be something difficult to	"The Dusk might fall before my Dream was
		achieve	found."

The substitution of *meiren* with "my Dream" broadens the scope of the metaphor, shifting the focus from a concrete vision of beauty to a more abstract longing for unattainable ideals. This substitution strategy effectively captures the emotional depth of the metaphor, although it requires a shift in interpretation for English readers.

Paraphrasing: Clarifying the Meaning

When a metaphor is complicated to translate due to its cultural specificity or abstract nature, paraphrasing may be employed to explain it more straightforwardly. Paraphrasing helps to make the metaphor comprehensible to the target audience while preserving the original meaning.

For example, the image of Yao and Shun, two legendary rulers in Chinese mythology, is used in Li Sao to represent wisdom, integrity, and virtuous leadership. However, the reference to these figures may not be immediately recognizable to English-speaking readers. In their translation, Yang and Dai paraphrase the metaphor by rendering Yao and Shun as "two Monarchs," simplifying the reference for better understanding.

Table 4 Translation of Yao and Shun

Principle	Reality	Cognition	Language
Chinese	Yao and Shun 尧	Saintly monarchs, brightness and	彼尧舜之耿介兮
	舜	uprightness	
English	Monarchs	No corresponding meaning	"Two Monarchs then, who high Renown
			received."

While this translation effectively conveys the general idea of virtuous rulers, it loses the historical and cultural significance of Yao and Shun in Chinese mythology. A more detailed translation could have kept the names Yao and Shun while adding a brief explanation, such as "two legendary Chinese rulers known for their wisdom and virtue," to provide the necessary cultural context. Paraphrasing enables the translators to provide clarity without compromising the metaphor's underlying cognitive meaning.

Possible Loss in Translation

One final example that highlights the challenges of translating metaphors in Li Sao is the metaphor Emei, which refers to the delicate and graceful crescent eyebrows. In traditional Chinese literary symbolism, the crescent eyebrow shape is often associated with beauty, fragility, and elegance. This metaphor appears in Li Sao to express the delicate beauty that Qu Yuan envisions, linking it to purity and the fragile nature of idealism.

Table 5 Translation of Emei

Principle	Reality	Cognition	Language
Chinese	Emei 蛾眉	Beauty, grace, fragility	蛾眉皓齿
English	Delicate brows	Delicate beauty, emotional purity	"The delicate brows and the gleaming teeth."

Here, *Emei* is translated as "delicate brows," which captures the essence of the imagery in English, though the direct reference to crescent eyebrows is omitted. The translation retains the visual beauty of the metaphor but loses some of the symbolic fragility associated with the crescent delicate features. While the metaphor is effectively translated to evoke beauty and grace, the loss of the crescent symbolism reduces its emotional depth. To maintain the full impact of the metaphor, the translator might consider using "crescent eyebrows" or adding an explanatory note about the fragility and beauty of the crescent features.

In practice, the translation of metaphors in Li Sao often requires a combination of strategies. Literal translation, adaptation, substitution, and paraphrasing may all be used to ensure that the metaphors are both culturally relevant and emotionally resonant for the target audience. The application of ECT provides a framework for understanding how metaphors work within the cognitive and cultural context of the source and target languages. By analyzing the translation strategies used by Yang and Dai, it becomes clear that successful translation is not merely about linguistic accuracy but about capturing the emotional and cognitive essence of the source text. The ultimate goal of translating metaphors in Li Sao is to convey the poem's deep emotional resonance and cultural significance, ensuring that the target audience can appreciate its beauty and depth.

Impact of the Translation of *Li Sao*

The translation of Li Sao into English is not only a linguistic exercise but also an effort to bridge two vastly different cultures, philosophies, and ways of thinking. By translating Qu Yuan's complex metaphors and embedding the emotional, philosophical, and political undercurrents of his work, Yang and Dai have made Li Sao accessible to a global audience. This section examines how their translation affects English-speaking readers, with a focus on cultural understanding, the emotional resonance of the work, and the transmission of Chinese literary and philosophical ideals.

Cultural Understanding

One of the main challenges in translating *Li Sao* is preserving the cultural nuances of the metaphors, which are often deeply rooted in Chinese history, philosophy, and literary tradition. For English-speaking readers, understanding these metaphors requires not only knowledge of the Chinese language but also familiarity with Chinese culture and philosophy. In cases where the metaphors are culturally specific, such as "pepper and cassia" or "Yao and Shun," translators have to navigate the delicate balance between faithfulness to the source culture and accessibility to the target culture.

Emotional Resonance

The emotional impact of *Li Sao* is a critical part of its effectiveness. Qu Yuan's yearning for a just ruler, his disillusionment with corrupt leadership, and his deep emotional expression of exile and despair resonate with readers across cultures. In translating these metaphors, Yang and Dai have to ensure that the emotional undertones of the original text are preserved while making the content relatable to English-speaking readers.

The emotional core of the poem is carried forward in the translation, but some nuances are inevitably lost in translation. Therefore, the translation's success hinges on how well these emotional connections can be communicated to readers who may not be familiar with the specific cultural references embedded in the text.

Philosophical and Literary Transmission

The philosophical and literary significance of *Li Sao* is deeply intertwined with its use of imagery metaphors to express political and moral ideals. Qu Yuan's political integrity, his loyalty to his country, and his advocacy for virtuous rule are reflected in the metaphors he uses, such as "Yao and Shun" and "crescent eyebrow." Translating these ideas into English requires not only linguistic translation but also a careful consideration of how to transmit these Confucian and Daoist principles to a Western audience. Therefore, a more detailed explanation of the moral and political philosophy embedded in the text would be beneficial, helping readers appreciate the depth of Qu Yuan's political commentary.

The translation of Li Sao into English by Yang and Dai represents a significant effort to bridge the gap between Chinese and Western literary traditions. By translating the metaphors in Li Sao, the translators not only conveyed the words but also the emotional, cultural, and philosophical essence of the original. While the translators' efforts succeed in transmitting the emotional resonance and literary beauty of Li Sao, some cultural and philosophical nuances inevitably get lost in the translation process.

As Li Sao continues to be read and appreciated in the West, further translations may consider additional explanatory notes or contextual adaptations to better capture the full depth of Qu Yuan's work. Despite these challenges, Yang and Dai's translation remains a powerful and effective means of sharing this important piece of Chinese literature with a global audience.

Theoretical Implications and Reflections

The translation of *Li Sao* is not just a linguistic exercise but a theoretical exploration of how metaphors, deeply embedded in Chinese cultural and philosophical contexts, can be conveyed across languages. This section delves into the theoretical implications of the translation strategies used and reflects on the broader challenges of translating culturally specific imagery. In particular, we will discuss how ECT provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of translating metaphorical language and conveying the cognitive and cultural dimensions of Qu Yuan's work.

Embodied-Cognitive Translatology and Its Application

ECT emphasizes that translation is not just a linguistic act but also a cognitive one, deeply tied to the cultural and mental schemas of both the source and target languages. In this framework, translation is seen as a process of cognitive mapping, where the translator's own experiences, along with cultural and cognitive frameworks, influence how meaning is transferred between languages.

In the case of *Li Sao*, the metaphors used by Qu Yuan are culturally and philosophically rich. These metaphors, such as *orchids* and *crescent eyebrows*, carry meanings that are deeply rooted in Chinese traditions, particularly Confucianism and Daoism. Translating these metaphors into English requires not just linguistic fidelity but an understanding of the cultural schemas that shape the metaphor's cognitive function in Chinese society.

Cognitive and Cultural Dimensions of Metaphor Translation

Translating metaphors like "pepper and cassia" and "Yao and Shun" involves navigating not only linguistic meaning but also the cognitive and cultural layers of the metaphors. These layers are often deeply rooted in the traditions, history, and moral frameworks of the source language. The cognitive challenge for the translator is to bridge the gap between the target language and its own cultural frameworks, which may not have direct equivalents for these metaphors.

From an ECT perspective, this translation process involves not just finding equivalent words but also considering how the cognitive and cultural contexts of the source and target languages shape the metaphor. This challenge is a key aspect of metaphor translation, as cognitive schemas and cultural associations are not always transferable.

Challenges in Translating Philosophical Ideas

In *Li Sao*, Qu Yuan's metaphors are often intertwined with political and philosophical commentary, reflecting his frustrations with corruption and his longing for virtuous leadership. Translating these figures requires the translator to consider both their cultural significance and their philosophical context.

Yang and Dai's translation choices reveal the delicate balancing act of staying true to the source while making the text comprehensible to a broader audience. Their work raises important questions about how much of the original meaning can be preserved when translating highly culturally and philosophically specific metaphors.

The translation of *Li Sao* into English is a complex process that highlights the challenges of conveying cultural, emotional, and philosophical depth across languages. ECT offers a valuable framework for understanding how metaphors in *Li Sao* work cognitively and culturally, and how they can be effectively translated to preserve their original meaning. The strategies employed by Yang and Dai reflect this understanding, as they balance literal translation with adaptation, substitution, and paraphrasing to navigate the cognitive and cultural challenges presented by the metaphors.

Conclusion

The translation of Li Sao by Qu Yuan into English is not merely a linguistic transformation but a deep, complex process of cultural and cognitive negotiation. The metaphors in Li Sao are integral to its poetic and philosophical essence, and translating these metaphors while maintaining their emotional, cultural, and cognitive significance is a formidable task. Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie's translation of Li Sao represents a significant achievement in this regard, capturing the poem's lyrical beauty and emotional depth while making it accessible to English-speaking readers.

Through the course of this analysis, we have examined the various translation strategies used by Yang and Dai, including literal translation, adaptation, substitution, and paraphrasing, and how these strategies relate to ECT, which provides a framework for understanding how metaphors are not merely words but cognitive structures deeply embedded in cultural and emotional contexts. It highlights the cognitive and cultural gap that translators must navigate to make the meaning of a metaphor resonate in a new linguistic and cultural environment. Key findings, including translation strategies, cultural and cognitive considerations, and emotional and philosophical resonance, can be found throughout the research.

The translation of *Li Sao* is a remarkable achievement in the field of literary translation, but it also raises important questions about the nature of translation itself. Translating metaphorical language is not a simple act of linguistic substitution; it is an intricate process of cultural negotiation, cognitive mapping, and emotional resonance. Through the lens of ECT, we can better appreciate the complexities of translating works like Li Sao, which are steeped in deep cultural and philosophical significance.

While Yang and Dai's translation of Li Sao has made the poem accessible to a global audience, there remains room for further exploration in the field of literary translation. As with any complex literary work, multiple translations provide opportunities for new interpretations and insights. The possible future directions for translating Li Sao and other classical Chinese works include incorporating explanatory footnotes and contextual notes, collaboration with cultural experts, and adapting for different audiences.

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