

The Translation and Adaptation of Chinese Songs from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory: A Case Study of the MelodyC2E Team at Shanghai International Studies University

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Abstract

This study examines the Chinese-to-English song translation practice of MelodyC2E, a student-run translation team at Shanghai International Studies University, within the theoretical framework of Nida's functional equivalence. The team, composed of non-professional student translators, releases English translations and cover versions of Chinese songs across three genres: Chinese-style songs, pop songs, and film and television soundtracks. Drawing on functional equivalence theory, the study constructs an analytical framework encompassing the lexical, syntactic, cultural, and rhythmic dimensions, and applies it to a purposive sample of nine representative songs, including "Big Fish," "Encounter," and "Light Chaser." The analysis reveals that MelodyC2E's translation strategies are governed by the dual goals of musical adaptation and cultural dissemination, with reader-response equivalence as the core principle and singability as the primary requirement. Translators adjust their strategies according to genre: Chinese-style songs prioritize the conversion of cultural imagery, pop songs favor colloquial expression, and film soundtracks emphasize the restoration of situational emotion. Across genres, the team consistently employs strategies such as splitting long sentences, adapting end-rhymes, and simplifying redundant expressions. The study highlights the theoretical, practical, cultural, and campus-educational value of these translations, identifies limitations concerning translator competence, cultural depth, literary scope, and dissemination channels, and proposes corresponding recommendations, offering a reference for student participation in cross-cultural communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Music has become an increasingly important vehicle for conveying national sentiment and cultural values amid the deepening of China's "going global" cultural strategy. Chinese popular music, or C-pop, not only carries the collective memory of young Chinese people but also serves as a significant channel for exporting China's cultural soft power. However, language barriers continue to hinder the international dissemination of Chinese songs, whose lyrics are densely packed with vivid imagery, rhythmic patterns, and culturally specific references that do not always translate directly. The challenge of song translation lies precisely in achieving linguistic conversion and cultural transmission simultaneously—producing English versions that preserve the original artistic mood while remaining natural, rhythmically apt, and singable.

This challenge has made cross-linguistic song communication a focal point of growing scholarly interest, yet it also exposes a notable gap in translation studies. Most existing research concentrates on literary and technical translation, whereas studies on popular song translation remain limited and scattered. Furthermore, the available literature largely examines the work of professional commercial translators, paying little attention to non-professional teams composed of campus students. Such student groups, motivated not by commercial gain but by emotional resonance and the desire to engage young audiences, often develop distinctive and creative translation practices that have rarely been systematically investigated.

MelodyC2E, a student-run translation team at Shanghai International Studies University, provides a paradigmatic example of this model. The team publishes English translations and cover versions of Chinese songs on new media platforms and, over the years, has produced a substantial corpus spanning Chinese-style songs, pop songs, and film and television soundtracks. Its translations have been widely appreciated for striking a balance between fidelity to the original lyrics and suitability for singing, achieved through strategies such as free translation and rhythmic adjustment. Despite the team's impact, however, there has been little systematic academic research on MelodyC2E's translation strategies, and the cultural logic underlying its practice remains insufficiently understood.

Against this background, the present study addresses two central questions: first, what translation strategies are most effective for Chinese song translation when guided by the theory of functional equivalence; and second, how translated songs can be made more singable. By examining the translation practice of MelodyC2E, the study aims to contribute to the under-researched field of non-professional song translation, to enrich existing understanding of C-pop translation, and to offer both theoretical and practical guidance for youth-led cultural communication. Theoretically, the study extends the application of functionalist translation theory into the domain of song translation, where musical and cultural requirements coexist; practically, it yields a set of transferable strategies for translators, musicians, and student teams engaged in the international dissemination of Chinese music.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on song translation both abroad and at home, identifying the gap that this study addresses. Section 3 sets out the theoretical foundation, elaborating the development and applicability of functional equivalence theory and describing the three-level analytical framework and the qualitative case study method. Section 4 presents the results, offering a systematic analysis of MelodyC2E's translation strategies at the lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels and summarizing the common characteristics and strategic differences across the three song genres. Section 5 discusses the values and limitations of the team's practice, and Section 6 concludes the study, summarizes its theoretical and practical implications, and proposes directions for future research and practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Song translation has long been recognized as a demanding activity that must reconcile fidelity to the source text with musical and performative constraints. Graham (1989) offered an early reconsideration of recital song translation, arguing that translators must attend not only to verbal meaning but also to the performance context in which a song will be heard. Low (2003, 2008) approached the translation of poetic and rhyming songs from a functional perspective, contending that translators should preserve the original's poetic and musical quality while ensuring naturalness, and that flexibility in rhyme scheme is essential to producing singable translations. Franzon (2008) systematically theorized the concept of "singability," defining it as the match between music and words across prosodic, poetic, and semantic layers, and stressed that effective song translation requires working through all three layers simultaneously. Minors (2012) likewise emphasized the need for a unified approach in which music, text, and translation are considered together, while Low (2013) distinguished between translation and adaptation, showing that versions of a song can range from close rendering to creative adaptation depending on purpose. More recently, computational research has begun to inform the field: Guo et al.

(2022) constructed an automatic song translation system for tonal languages such as Mandarin that aligns tonal features with melody while preserving meaning, and Ye et al. (2024) sought to improve translation quality without sacrificing singability, addressing the tendency of existing systems to privilege singability at the expense of accuracy.

Within Chinese academia, song translation has attracted growing attention. Xue Fan's (2002) *Exploration and Practice of Song Translation* is widely regarded as the first full-length study of the subject in China. Liao (2010), discussing Xue Fan's "three requirements" for song translation, emphasized that translators must command language, literature, and music simultaneously. Hu (2007) clarified the conceptual distinction between "song translation" (*yi pei*) and "lyrics translation," arguing that the former is a broader and more specific term encompassing both textual and musical adaptation. Functionalist approaches, particularly Skopos theory, have been widely applied: Chen and He (2009) proposed six standards for song translation—singability, audibility, and situational, emotional, stylistic, and semantic adaptability—while Lv (2011) demonstrated the operation of the Skopos rule and the loyalty principle in practice. At the cultural level, Lu (2009) analyzed the cultural differences between Chinese and Western vocal music and the need to balance lexical, rhythmic, phonetic, and cultural equivalence, and Li (2021) examined the cultural comprehension problems in lyric translation from a cross-cultural communication perspective. Anwar (2020) identified six techniques used by students translating English songs, and Li (2018) proposed a "Pyramid of Singability" framework for Chinese–English pop song translation. Recent reviews by Fang (2020), Sun and Yuan (2023), and Deng (2016) collectively chart the growth of the field while noting persistent imbalances—such as the unequal attention paid to different language directions and song genres, and the predominance of text-focused approaches. More recently, interdisciplinary perspectives have gained ground: Yang (2012) approached song translation as a triadic transformation of musical, linguistic, and punctuational signs, and Cao (2025) reviewed Qin's (2024) historical study of Chinese and foreign song translation (1949–2019), calling for a deeper integration of historical and musicological approaches into translation studies.

Taken together, the existing literature shows that song translation is a multidimensional undertaking in which linguistic accuracy, emotional impact, poetic form, and cultural fit must be balanced. Nevertheless, two gaps remain evident. First, studies of non-professional, student-led song translation teams are scarce, with most research concentrating on professional or commercial translation. Second, although functionalist theories have been invoked, their detailed application to the concrete strategies of a student team across multiple song genres has not been systematically undertaken. A further methodological challenge is noted by Deng (2016), who observes that Chinese song translation research has relied heavily on text-focused approaches and that international exchange and research methods lag behind, calling for expanded methods and closer dialogue with Western scholarship. The present study addresses these gaps by examining MelodyC2E through the lens of functional equivalence.

3. FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Functional Equivalence Theory

Eugene A. Nida's functional equivalence theory is among the most influential frameworks in modern translation studies. Emerging from Nida's work on Bible translation, the theory shifted scholarly attention from formal correspondence to the response of the target audience. Initially formulated as "dynamic equivalence," the concept holds that a translation is successful when the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language (Nida & Taber, 1969). Nida argued that, because every language possesses a distinct structure and cultural background, slavish adherence to the form of the original produces awkward or unintelligible translations; instead, the translator should follow a three-step process of analysis, transfer, and restructuring (Nida, 1964). The theory emerged as a deliberate break with the philological, formalist tradition that dominated translation in the early twentieth century, in which translators were expected to reproduce the source text's grammar and wording as closely as possible; Nida redirected attention

from the formal features of a text to the response it produces in its audience, thereby reframing translation as an act of communication rather than of formal correspondence.

Nida later replaced “dynamic equivalence” with “functional equivalence” to avert the misunderstanding that “dynamic” licenses arbitrary interpretation, and to emphasize the communicative functions of the text—informative, expressive, imperative, performative, and aesthetic—within the target culture (Nida & de Waard, 1986). He further conceptualized equivalence as a spectrum ranging from a minimal level, below which a translation is unacceptable, to a maximal level that is rarely attainable in practice (Nida, 1993). This graduated conception is particularly useful for song translation, where a text must satisfy linguistic, poetic, and musical demands at once, and where translators must decide which functions to prioritize when, for example, word-for-word accuracy conflicts with singability.

Functional equivalence aligns closely with the requirements of song translation in three respects. First, it provides a core standard for conveying emotion, which is the essence of song lyrics. Second, it establishes a basis for cultural adaptation, since culturally specific images and allusions must be adjusted to the target audience's frame of reference. Third, it guides the adaptation of linguistic structure, particularly the shift from Chinese parataxis to English hypotaxis. The concept of the “horizon of expectations,” drawn from reception aesthetics (Jauss, 1982; Iser, 1978), further enriches the framework by underscoring the need to align translations with the cognitive and cultural expectations of target audiences.

Reception aesthetics deepens this framework in ways that are directly relevant to song translation. Jauss (1982) observed that readers bring their own life experience and cultural background to any text, and that successful communication occurs when a text matches these pre-existing expectations. For MelodyC2E, achieving functional equivalence therefore means aligning translations with the horizons of English audiences, whose preferences run toward concise language, explicit emotion, and familiar cultural imagery. When the team renders an expression such as “旅行的意义” (the meaning of travel) as the single word “Travel” rather than the literal “The Meaning of Travel,” it is not merely following a conventional rule but seeking the closest natural expression that will make English listeners feel approximately what Chinese listeners feel. Iser (1978) offered a complementary concept, that of “uncertain points”—blanks in a text that readers must fill in for themselves—which suggests that a translator should leave just enough space for the audience to participate while keeping the core meaning accessible. MelodyC2E's handling of cultural imagery typically strikes this balance, retaining the emotional resonance of an image while ensuring that listeners can follow it. Aesthetic considerations, finally, also shape reception: as Chen (2014) argued, song translation should preserve beauty in sound, form, and meaning, and these aesthetic choices influence how an audience receives a translation.

Over the decades since its formulation, functional equivalence has become a cornerstone of translation studies, praised for its practical usefulness while also criticized for its origins in Bible translation and for a perceived tendency toward cultural adaptation or hidden religious assumptions. Its focus on the receiving audience opened the door for later developments, most notably Hans Vermeer's Skopos theory, which carries the concern with translation purpose still further (Vermeer, 1989). What matters most for the present study is that functional equivalence offers a genuinely useful lens for multimodal works such as songs. A song's lyrics are not words on a page but part of a larger artistic package that includes melody, rhythm, tone, and performance, so they carry more functions than mere meaning: they must be easy to sing, evoke particular feelings, and fit a specific musical and cultural setting. Nida's insistence that translation choices should aim at a similar response among target-language receptors provides a clear and flexible rule for negotiating the interplay of language, poetry, and music that makes song translation so demanding.

3.2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study method. Following the framework of functional equivalence, an analytical scheme was constructed around four dimensions—lexical, syntactic, cultural (discourse), and rhythmic—drawing on Low's (2003, 2008) Pentathlon Principle and Li's (2018) Pyramid of Singability. A purposive sample of nine representative songs was selected from MelodyC2E's corpus, covering three genres: Chinese-style songs (Big Fish, Fireworks Easily Cold, and Chilly), pop songs (Encounter, Red Bean, and Wind Rises), and film and television soundtracks (Light Chaser, Little Lucky, and Youth). The selection followed three criteria: genre representativeness, audience popularity, and the availability of fully documented translations. A comparative textual analysis was then conducted between the original Chinese lyrics and their English translations, focusing on word choice and imagery at the lexical level, sentence restructuring and parataxis–hypotaxis shifts at the syntactic level, culturally loaded expressions and allusions at the cultural level, and syllable count, rhyme scheme, and singability at the rhythmic level.

To guide the analysis, a three-level framework links translation purpose, strategic implementation, and effect evaluation. At the level of purpose guidance, MelodyC2E's dual purpose—musical adaptation as the primary aim and cultural dissemination as the secondary aim—determines which equivalent aspects must be preserved and which may be adjusted when the two conflict. At the level of strategic implementation, each of the four dimensions is assessed by asking whether a given choice enhances or weakens the equivalence of reader response. At the level of effect evaluation, the framework judges whether a strategy actually achieves equivalence on the basis of audience reception, tying strategic analysis to observable communicative results (cf. Tang, 2022).

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Overview of MelodyC2E's Translation Practice

The translation practice of MelodyC2E is inseparable from its identity as a campus student team and its dual translation goals, and it is marked by five distinctive practical features that set it apart from professional translation teams and reflect the particularity of a non-professional student group. The most distinctive feature of the team is the non-professionalism of its translators: all members are students from various majors at Shanghai International Studies University, including English, translation, journalism, and music, without systematic professional translation training. They nonetheless possess a solid English foundation and a strong interest in Chinese songs and cross-cultural communication. Unlike professional translators focused solely on linguistic conversion, the team members combine basic translation ability with musical aesthetic sensibility—some having received formal musical training—which enables them to grasp the musical adaptation requirements of song translation. This “language plus music” advantage allows them to break through literal-minded translation and to adjust strategies flexibly according to the interplay of lyrics and melody, realizing the organic unity of linguistic expression, musical adaptation, and cultural transmission.

The team's translated works span multiple Chinese song genres, reflecting its aim of promoting the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese songs broadly. Chinese-style songs are rich in traditional cultural connotations and poetic expression; pop songs are linguistically simple and emotionally direct; and film and television soundtracks are closely tied to narrative and strong in situational feeling. This diversity both enriches the team's practice and demands that its strategies be adjusted to the characteristics of each genre. At the core of the team's practice is the duality of its translation purposes: the primary purpose is musical adaptation—ensuring that translated lyrics conform to the rhythm, rhyme, intonation, and singing needs of the original—while the secondary purpose is cultural communication, namely conveying Chinese cultural meaning and emotional tone to English-speaking listeners under the premise of singability. This dual purpose governs every stage of the team's work and determines its choice and implementation of translation strategies.

Finally, the team's dissemination channels are highly consistent with the information habits of young audiences. It relies chiefly on domestic new media platforms popular among students, such as Bilibili, NetEase Cloud Music, and WeChat official accounts, where it releases translated lyrics together with cover videos, lyric videos, and cultural interpretation content. This combination of translation and cover performance makes the dissemination form vivid and diverse, and the team further interacts with audiences through comments and private messages, learning from their feedback and continuously refining both its translation strategies and its presentation. The result is a youthful dissemination model that not only improves the reach of the team's work but also brings the cross-cultural communication of Chinese songs into line with the characteristics of the new media era.

4.2 Translation Strategies

Drawing on functional equivalence theory, the analysis is organized around three linguistic dimensions—lexical, syntactic, and discourse—rather than by genre, reflecting Nida's formulation that “translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style” (Nida & Taber, 1969). Illustrative examples are drawn from *Big Fish* (Chinese-style), *Encounter* (pop), and *Light Chaser* (film and television soundtrack).

4.2.1 Dynamic Equivalence at the Lexical Level

At the lexical level, dynamic equivalence manifests primarily in the choice of words that seek the closest natural equivalent in the target language rather than rigid word-for-word correspondence. MelodyC2E's translations consistently demonstrate this priority through three principal lexical strategies: personification and concrete imagery substitution, colloquial lexical substitution, and emotional supplementation through adjective and adverb addition.

The first strategy, personification and concrete imagery substitution, is particularly prominent in Chinese-style songs, where abstract cultural images abound. Rather than preserve an opaque or oppressive literal rendering, the translator replaces it with a concrete, emotionally resonant image familiar to Western audiences.

Example 1 — personification of “淹没” (submerge) as “kiss” — *Big Fish*

Original: 海浪无声将夜幕深深淹没

Translation: The waves kiss the night in silence

Example 2 — concretizing “梦境的缝隙” (the crevice of dreams) as “thin veil” — *Big Fish*

Original: 大鱼在梦境的缝隙里游过

Translation: A big fish swims through the dream's thin veil

In Example 1 the verb “淹没” is rendered not as the literal “drown,” which carries an oppressive connotation in English, but as the personified “kiss,” restoring the original's gentle, tender quality. In Example 2 the abstract “梦境的缝隙” becomes the concrete “thin veil,” which retains the hazy, semi-transparent dreamscape. Both cases demonstrate that lexical equivalence in culturally loaded contexts demands creative reconstruction rather than literal transfer.

The second strategy, colloquial lexical substitution, is most evident in pop songs, where linguistic simplicity and directness are defining features. The translator replaces stiff literal equivalents with the natural, everyday wording that Western listeners expect.

Example 3 — rendering “离开” (leave) as “fade away” — *Encounter*

Original: 听见 冬天的离开

Translation: I hear the winter fade away

Example 4 — rendering “某年某月” (a certain year and month) as “on a random day” — Encounter

Original: 我在某年某月 醒过来

Translation: I wake up on a random day

In Example 3 “离开” becomes “fade away,” restoring the tenderness of winter's gradual, quiet ending that a literal “leave” would fail to convey; in Example 4 “某年某月” becomes the colloquial “on a random day” rather than a stiff literal equivalent. These choices reflect the translator's commitment to the closest natural equivalent in the target-language environment, ensuring that the translation reads naturally and evokes an emotional response comparable to that of the original.

The third strategy, emotional supplementation through adjective and adverb addition, appears across genres. Where the original leaves an emotion implicit, the translator adds a single word that makes it explicit.

Example 5 — addition of “pale” — Big Fish

Original: 凝望你 沉睡的轮廓

Translation: Watching your sleeping face, pale

Example 6 — addition of “right” — Light Chaser

Original: 我可以跟在你身后

Translation: I can walk right behind your back

In Example 5 the adjective “pale” restores the tenderness and compassion implicit in the Chinese line; in Example 6 the adverb “right” strengthens the sense of silent, hesitant following that characterizes the secret admirer's guardianship. These additions do not distort the original meaning; rather, they make explicit what is implicit in the source text. Collectively, these lexical strategies show how MelodyC2E's word-level choices are consistently oriented toward producing in English listeners an emotional and aesthetic experience comparable to that of Chinese audiences.

4.2.2 Dynamic Equivalence at the Syntactic Level

At the syntactic level, dynamic equivalence requires restructuring sentences to conform to the natural patterns of English while preserving communicative function. MelodyC2E addresses this requirement through three principal syntactic strategies: sentence fragmentation and syllable matching, conversion from parataxis to hypotaxis, and antithetical short sentence construction.

The first and most pervasive strategy is sentence fragmentation and syllable matching, a technique necessitated by the typological differences between Chinese and English. Long Chinese lines are split into shorter English clauses whose syllable counts match the melodic beats of the original.

Example 1 — splitting a long line into two symmetrical clauses — Big Fish

Original: 海浪无声将夜幕深深淹没 / 漫过天空尽头的角落

Translation: The waves kiss the night in silence / And reach the far end of the sky

Example 2 — fragmentation aligned to melodic stress and the breathing pause — Light Chaser

Original: 我可以跟在你身后 / 像影子追着光梦游

Translation: I can walk right behind your back / Like a shadow chases the light, half-awake

Example 3 — matching the pauses of monosyllabic verbs — Encounter

Original: 我想 我等 我期待

Translation: I hope, I wait, I anticipate

In Example 1 the syllable counts of the two English clauses match the melodic beats of the original; in Example 2 the stress of “chases the light” aligns with the melodic stress and “half-awake” fits the breathing pause; and in Example 3 the rhythm of the three verb phrases matches the pauses of the Chinese monosyllabic verbs, resolving the difficulty of singing Chinese monosyllables in English.

The second strategy is the conversion from Chinese parataxis to English hypotaxis. Chinese lyrics typically rely on semantic coherence and contextual inference to link clauses, whereas English requires explicit grammatical markers of logical relationships, which MelodyC2E consistently supplies.

Example 4 — addition of the subject “We” — Big Fish

Original: 看海天一色 听风起雨落

Translation: We see the sea and sky as one / We hear the wind rise, rain fall down

Example 5 — addition of the concessive conjunction “But” — Encounter

Original: 未来却不能因此安排

Translation: But the future won't be shaped by fate

The added subject “We” in Example 4 and the concessive conjunction “But” in Example 5 convert paratactic Chinese clauses into logically connected English sentences, ensuring that English listeners perceive the same logical relationships as Chinese listeners without disrupting the aural flow.

The third strategy is antithetical short sentence construction, particularly prominent in the translation of film soundtracks where emotional tension requires structural support.

Example 6 — antithetical rendering of “owning and losing at the same time” — Light Chaser

Original: 边拥有边失去着

Translation: We hold it close, yet let it go

The two antithetical short clauses in Example 6 capture the intertwined sweetness and regret of simultaneous possession and loss, and the parallel structure reinforces the semantic contrast. Taken together, these syntactic strategies ensure that MelodyC2E's translations read and sing naturally in English while preserving—and in some cases enhancing—the communicative and emotional functions of the original lyrics.

4.2.3 Dynamic Equivalence at the Discourse Level

At the discourse level, dynamic equivalence concerns how the translation functions as a coherent whole within its broader communicative and cultural context. The first strategy is cultural mediation of imagery, which addresses culturally specific expressions that carry rich connotations for Chinese audiences but may be opaque to English listeners. In *Big Fish*, the classical expression “执子手,” drawn from ancient poetry, is rendered as the concise “Hand in hand.” This choice neither awkwardly literalizes the original nor flattens it with a culturally incongruent Western equivalent; instead, it preserves the connotation of companionship while conforming to the natural cadence of English lyrics, enabling English listeners to grasp both the semantic meaning and the emotional weight of the expression.

The second strategy is scenario restoration through contextual consistency, paramount in film soundtrack translation where lyrics derive their full meaning from integration with the visual narrative.

In *Light Chaser*, “跟在你身后” (walk behind you) becomes “walk right behind your back,” strengthening the sense of silent, hesitant following; “路口” is translated as “crossroad” rather than “intersection” because “crossroad” carries greater emotional weight and fits the youthful campus atmosphere; and the addition of “I won't go” reinforces the persistence of waiting indefinitely. In each case, the translator prioritizes contextual meaning—how the lyric functions within the narrative world—over verbatim rendering.

The third strategy is emotional supplementation for discourse coherence. Song lyrics often express emotions implicitly, relying on the cumulative effect of imagery and musical atmosphere. In *Light Chaser*, “梦游” (sleepwalk) is translated as “half-awake” rather than the literal “sleepwalk,” conveying the trance and caution of unrequited love—the feeling of moving through a dream, present yet distant. In *Encounter*, the addition of “for me” in “someone waits for me” clarifies the personal relevance of the waiting, ensuring that the discourse-level emotional trajectory is clear to English listeners. These discourse-level strategies demonstrate that achieving functional equivalence requires more than isolated lexical or syntactic adjustments; it demands a holistic approach that considers how each element contributes to the overall communicative and cultural function of the translated song.

Table 1: Lyric Comparison of Big Fish (《大鱼》)

Original Chinese Lyrics	English Translation
海浪无声将夜幕深深淹没 漫过天空尽头的角落	The waves kiss the night in silence And reach the far end of the sky
大鱼在梦境的缝隙里游过 凝望你 沉睡的轮廓	A big fish swims through the dream's thin veil Watching your sleeping face, pale
看海天一色 听风起雨落 执子手 吹散苍茅茅烟波	We see the sea and sky as one We hear the wind rise, rain fall down Hand in hand, we chase the mist away

Table 2: Lyric Comparison of Encounter (《遇见》)

Original Chinese Lyrics	English Translation
听见 冬天的离开 我在某年某月 醒过来	I hear the winter fade away I wake up on a random day
我想 我等 我期待 未来却不能因此安排	I hope, I wait, I anticipate But the future won't be shaped by fate
阴天 傍晚 车窗外 未来有一个人在等待	A cloudy day, the evening glow Outside the window, someone waits for me

Table 3: Lyric Comparison of Light Chaser (《追光者》)

Original Chinese Lyrics	English Translation
我可以跟在你身后 像影子追着光梦游	I can walk right behind your back Like a shadow chases the light, half-awake
我可以等在这路口 不管你会不会经过	I can wait right here at the crossroad Whether you pass by or not, I won't go

有的爱像阳光倾落 边拥有边失去着	Some love is like the sun's bright glow We hold it close, yet let it go
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4.3 Common Characteristics and Strategic Differences

The analysis reveals that MelodyC2E's strategies form a coherent, layered system. At the lexical level, dynamic equivalence is pursued through personification, colloquial substitution, and emotional supplementation; at the syntactic level, through sentence fragmentation, parataxis-to-hypotaxis conversion, and antithetical construction; and at the discourse level, through cultural mediation, contextual consistency, and emotional supplementation for coherence. Across the three genres, the team consistently prioritizes the emotional resonance and understanding of the English audience over literal correspondence, treats singability as the key to equivalence, and uniformly employs rhythmic strategies such as splitting sentences and adjusting rhymes while simplifying redundant or culturally opaque expressions. At the same time, the team adjusts its strategic priorities according to genre, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of Translation Strategy Priorities Across Song Types

Work Type	Strategy Priority	Key Strategic Adjustments	Core Objectives
Chinese-style	Cultural transmission $\approx$ Musical adaptation > Literal fidelity	Focus on localized conversion of Chinese imagery to reduce cultural barriers while retaining poetic expression; optimize long Chinese sentences and four-character phrases for rhythmic adaptation.	Achieve a balance of “poetic retention + cultural communication + singability”
Pop	Musical adaptation > Emotional equivalence > Cultural transmission	Focus on colloquial lexical substitution, simplify sentence structures and function words; accurately match rhythm and rhyme to fit the straightforward characteristics of pop songs.	Achieve a balance of “emotional transmission + brisk singability”
Film and Television Soundtrack	Scenario restoration $\approx$ Emotional equivalence > Musical adaptation	Focus on the embodied translation of scenarios to fit film and television plots; supplement complex emotions and strengthen emotional tension with antithetical short sentences; adapt to slow rhythms.	Achieve a balance of “scenario restoration + emotional transmission + singability”

For Chinese-style songs, where culturally specific images and classical allusions abound, the localization of cultural imagery takes precedence, together with the rhythmic adjustment of four-character phrases and antithetical couplets. For pop songs, characterized by simple language and distinct emotion, colloquial lexical substitution and the accurate matching of syllables and stress patterns to the fast tempo are emphasized. For film and television soundtracks, whose lyrics are inseparable from their narrative background, the restoration of specific scenes through concretization, the supplementation of complex emotions, and the use of short sentences to match melodic and emotional arcs are prioritized. These differences demonstrate that functional equivalence is not a rigid formula but a flexible principle whose application must be tailored to the communicative function and aesthetic constraints of each text.

The multi-level analysis further clarifies the applicability of functional equivalence to the specialized domain of song translation. Functional equivalence in this context cannot be reduced to any single linguistic dimension: a translation that achieves lexical naturalness but fails prosodically will not produce an equivalent sung experience, while a rhythmically perfect but culturally opaque translation will not evoke the intended emotional response. MelodyC2E's practice implicitly operates according to a hierarchy of equivalence priorities that varies across genres but consistently places aural effect and

reader response above formal correspondence. This aligns with Nida's own prioritization framework, which holds that contextual consistency takes precedence over verbal consistency and that, for texts intended for oral performance, aural effect takes precedence over visual effect. Dynamic equivalence, when applied to song translation, must therefore be understood as operating across semantic, prosodic, cultural, and emotional dimensions simultaneously; it is their convergence in the target listener's experience, rather than equivalence in any single dimension, that ultimately determines communicative success.

5. VALUES AND LIMITATIONS

5.1 Values

MelodyC2E's practice holds fourfold value. Theoretically, it enriches the under-studied field of non-professional song translation by offering a typical case that expands the research horizon for song translation and cross-cultural music exchange, and it provides fresh empirical support for the application of functional equivalence theory to song translation. Practically, it offers student teams and amateur translators a set of concrete, transferable techniques—the partial conversion of cultural images, the adjustment of sentences to fit rhythm, and the deliberate supplementation of emotional content—that directly address the recurring conflict between musical adaptation and literal fidelity. In striking a middle ground between the literal-mindedness of traditional translation and the cultural oversimplification of commercial translation, MelodyC2E demonstrates how Chinese songs can be sung smoothly in English while conveying cultural meaning. The team's practice also integrates insights from reception aesthetics, particularly the notion of the horizon of expectations, so that song translation research is no longer confined to the traditional source-text/target-text binary but attends to the actual reception of the target audience.

At the cultural level, the team's work embodies a form of cultural communication that is both confident and accessible: it preserves the distinctive cultural essence of Chinese songs while adapting to the linguistic habits and aesthetic preferences of English listeners, in accordance with the principle of “cultural preservation with understanding as the premise.” The team's dissemination model has generated a strong response among young audiences at home and abroad, positioning young people as active cultural ambassadors. Finally, at the campus level, the project integrates translation, music, and cultural exchange, enriching campus cultural life and reflecting the comprehensive quality and social responsibility of contemporary university students, who employ their linguistic advantages and musical interests for cross-cultural communication rather than for utilitarian purposes.

The educational value of the team's practice is equally significant. For foreign language teaching, MelodyC2E supplies vivid, authentic material for translation and cross-cultural communication courses, encouraging students to apply their language skills to real cultural exchange rather than to classroom exercises alone. More broadly, the team's work exemplifies a “bottom-up” form of cultural diplomacy: it takes pride in the images and poetic expressions of its own culture while striving to make those elements comprehensible and resonant for global audiences. Promoted through new media platforms, this grassroots, youth-led model is a valuable complement to official and institutional efforts, showing how the enthusiasm, creativity, and linguistic ability of young people can build bridges of cross-cultural understanding one song at a time.

5.2 Limitations

Despite these values, MelodyC2E is ultimately a non-professional team, and its practice is subject to several limitations. The most fundamental is the non-professionalism of its translators: the lack of systematic translation training occasionally results in imprecise word choice, oversimplified sentence structures, and a textbook-level understanding of Western culture that can lead to cultural misunderstanding. A related limitation is the superficiality of cultural communication: when translating songs rich in cultural allusions, the team often resorts to simplification to lower the threshold of

understanding, inadvertently sacrificing deeper cultural content, so that English listeners grasp the literal meaning but not the underlying value system and mode of thought.

The range of translated genres is also relatively narrow, confined mainly to Chinese-style songs, urban pop, and film soundtracks, with little exploration of traditional folk songs, opera adaptations, or ethnic minority music—genres that are important carriers of traditional culture. Finally, the team's dissemination channels remain predominantly domestic, concentrated on platforms such as Bilibili, NetEase Cloud Music, and WeChat, with a weak presence on overseas platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram; this, together with the reliance on spare-time volunteer work and the lack of stable funding, limits the team's reach among English-speaking audiences. Moreover, the dissemination content relies heavily on translated lyrics and cover videos, with little in-depth interpretation of cultural connotations, so that most English listeners do not grasp the cultural background behind a translated song, which further reduces the effectiveness of communication.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the song translation practice of MelodyC2E, a non-professional student team at Shanghai International Studies University, within the framework of Nida's functional equivalence theory. The findings show that the team's practice is fundamentally oriented toward reader-response equivalence, prioritizing the singability of the translated lyrics as the principal prerequisite for achieving a comparable aesthetic and emotional experience among target audiences. Across Chinese-style songs, pop songs, and film and television soundtracks, the team employs a consistent set of strategies—splitting long Chinese sentences into shorter English clauses, adjusting rhymes to match the original melody, and simplifying redundant or culturally opaque expressions—while tailoring its strategic priorities to the characteristics of each genre. The study contributes to the under-explored field of non-professional song translation, demonstrates the applicability of functional equivalence to multimodal translation, and offers a replicable model for student teams and educators engaged in cross-cultural music communication. Future research should adopt more empirical methods to test the actual reception of translated songs among English audiences, undertake comparative studies of multiple translation teams, and extend the analysis to a wider range of music genres, so as to deepen our understanding of how Chinese songs can be effectively and meaningfully transmitted across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The genre-specific adjustments observed in the study all point to a single core theoretical understanding: functional equivalence is a flexible, context-sensitive principle whose application is governed by the communicative function and aesthetic constraints of each text. For Chinese-style songs, dense with culturally specific images and classical allusions, priority is given to the localized conversion of cultural imagery and to the rhythmic adjustment of four-character phrases and antithetical couplets. For pop songs, characterized by simple language and distinct emotion, colloquial lexical substitution and the precise matching of syllable counts and stress patterns to a fast tempo are emphasized. For film and television soundtracks, whose lyrics are inseparable from their narrative background, the focus falls on restoring specific scenes through concretization, supplementing complex emotions, and using short sentences to follow the melodic and emotional arcs of the plot.

Several directions for future research and practice follow from these findings. Empirically, reception studies are urgently needed to complement the present textual analysis: future work could combine quantitative analysis of interaction indicators on overseas platforms such as YouTube and TikTok with qualitative analysis of audience comments and focus-group interviews, thereby revealing how English listeners actually respond to translated Chinese songs. Comparative case studies that include multiple translation teams—student-led projects, professional translators, and amateur communities—would test the transferability of the strategies identified here and clarify the distinctive features and relative merits of different translator types. The scope of analysis should also be widened to cover genres more closely tied to tradition and locality, such as folk songs, opera adaptations, and ethnic minority music. For

practice, three recommendations are offered. First, teams should continue to strengthen translator competence through regular seminars and collaboration with professional translators, musicologists, and cultural experts. Second, for lyrics dense in cultural allusions, a strategy of “translation plus annotation,” with brief explanations attached to the lyrics or embedded in video subtitles, can convey deeper cultural meaning without impairing singability. Third, teams should actively diversify their dissemination channels by building a stronger presence on international social media and music streaming platforms, thereby maximizing the cross-cultural influence of their work.

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