

Untranslatable Flavours: Examining the Loss of Culinary and Cultural Nuance in Chinese-to-English Dish Name Translation

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ABSTRACT

As globalisation broadens culinary exposure, accurately translating Chinese food names into English has become crucial in bridging cultural and linguistic gaps for international diners. However, the translation of Chinese dish names into English often entails a significant loss of culinary and cultural nuance, resulting in a diminished representation of the original flavours, techniques, and heritage. This study explores the intricacies and limitations inherent in conveying the essence of Chinese cuisine to English-speaking audiences. The research aims to investigate the extent to which translation fails to capture essential cultural and culinary elements, thereby impacting international diners' understanding and appreciation of Chinese dishes. The primary objectives of this research are to explore how translation strategies such as literal translation, transliteration, and term translation affect the conveyance of culinary and cultural elements, and to evaluate the extent of nuance loss in translation. Methodologically, a corpus of English-translated Chinese dish names was compiled and analysed to examine the linguistic structures, cultural markers, and culinary terms to uncover patterns and identify translation limitations. This study adopts Cultural Translation Theory as its analytical framework to examine how cultural meanings are mediated and transformed across languages, with a focus on the interplay between language, culture, and identity in the context of culinary discourse. The analysis drew on established frameworks in translation studies and cultural semiotics to interpret how language choices influence the perception of the original dishes. By focusing exclusively on comparative analysis, this study provides insights into the complexities of culinary translation, highlighting the challenges of preserving cultural authenticity in cross-linguistic contexts. The study reveals that the translation of Chinese dish names into English is shaped less by cultural fidelity than by pragmatic considerations of clarity, accessibility, and marketability.

Keywords: Chinese dishes; translation; linguistic structures; cultural markers; culinary terms

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has intensified the exchange of global cuisine cultures (Zhang & Fu, 2025). In an increasingly globalised world, food has emerged as a vital conduit for cultural exchange and understanding. Chinese cuisine, celebrated for its rich heritage, intricate techniques, and diverse flavours, is a significant component of this global culinary mosaic. However, as Chinese dishes find their way onto international menus, the task of translating their names into English becomes both a linguistic challenge and a cultural conundrum. Effective translation is essential not only to inform but also to evoke the cultural essence and culinary artistry behind each dish. According to Mission Connect Ltd (2024), a well-translated menu does more than inform; it entices and assures. Yet, this task is fraught with complexities that often lead to a dilution of meaning, resulting in diminished representation and appreciation of the original culinary and cultural richness.

Chinese dish names serve as valuable resources for understanding Chinese culture, as they are rich in cultural background and meaning (Kang, 2013). The translation of Chinese dish names into English frequently involves more than a straightforward linguistic conversion. It necessitates capturing intricate cultural markers, regional culinary traditions, and symbolic meanings embedded in the names. When these nuances are lost or oversimplified, the resulting translations can misrepresent the dish's essence, thereby influencing how international diners perceive and engage with Chinese cuisine. For example, a dish named “白切鸡” (bái qiē jī), which embodies simplicity and regional culinary philosophy, may be reduced to the uninspiring translation “White-Cut Chicken,” failing to convey its cultural significance and the artistry behind its preparation.

Given these challenges, studying the translation strategies employed in works such as *Enjoy Culinary Delights: A Chinese Menu* in English becomes increasingly important. Published by the Foreign Affairs Office of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality, this book represents an official attempt to standardise English translations of Chinese dish names as part of China's broader effort to promote its food culture globally and enhance its soft power. As Beijing aspires to position itself as a "World City," initiatives like this menu book are key to showcasing cultural sophistication through hospitality and linguistic accessibility. However, the effectiveness of such efforts in preserving the richness of Chinese culinary culture has not been sufficiently evaluated in academic research. Therefore, examining the translations found in this text provides a critical opportunity to understand how well they convey the intended cultural and culinary meanings and where they fall short.

This study delves into the intricate challenges of translating Chinese dish names into English by examining the extent to which these translations successfully convey or fail to convey their essential cultural and culinary elements. The primary objectives of this research are to explore how translation strategies such as literal translation, transliteration, and descriptive translation affect the conveyance of culinary and cultural meaning, and to evaluate the extent of nuance loss in the process. Grounded in Cultural Translation Theory, as proposed by Bassnett and Lefevere (1990), the study treats translation not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a culturally situated act shaped by socio-historical contexts. This theoretical framework posits that translation involves navigating complex layers of meaning influenced by history, identity, and symbolism. In the context of Chinese cuisine, where food is deeply rooted in regional traditions, cultural values, and sensory expression, dish name translation requires more than direct lexical conversion; it involves negotiating connotations, culinary heritage, historical references, and aesthetic nuance.

To explore these dynamics, the study analyses *Enjoy Culinary Delights: A Chinese Menu* in English, a government-endorsed publication by the Foreign Affairs Office of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality, as its primary corpus. Through comparative textual analysis and drawing from translation studies and cultural semiotics, the research examines the linguistic structures, culinary terminology, and cultural markers found in both the source and translated texts. The findings reveal an ongoing tension between linguistic accessibility and cultural authenticity, uncovering patterns of simplification, reinterpretation, or omission that ultimately shape how international audiences perceive and engage with Chinese cuisine.

Ultimately, this study aims to fill a gap in both translation scholarship and culinary discourse by offering a theoretically grounded analysis of Chinese-to-English dish name translation. It provides insights into how translation can either preserve or erode cultural nuance and proposes best practices for translators and the food industry to foster more culturally respectful and engaging representations of Chinese culinary heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CHINESE CUISINE AND TRANSLATION OF DISH NAME

Rooted in a rich history over thousands of years, Chinese cuisine's variety and cooking methods are closely associated with regional diversity, climate, and cultural evolution. The eight major regional cuisines - Cantonese/Guangdong, Sichuan, Shandong, Zhejiang, Anhui, Hunan, Fujian/Min and Jiangsu- exemplify the varied flavours and cooking styles across the culinary landscape of China (Chinese Learning, 2023). The vast variety and uniqueness of these cuisines have attracted many foreigners' attention towards the Chinese gastronomic culture, ranging from the selection of ingredients, various cooking techniques, to the naming of symbolic dish names. This has accelerated the need to translate various Chinese dish names into English.

Some Chinese dish names are tied to historical events or myths, which makes direct translations inadequate in conveying their authentic meaning (Zhu et al., 2021). This is largely due to the nature of Chinese culture, which further complicates translation efforts. This implies that the translation of Chinese dish names into English is a complex process that goes beyond mere linguistic conversion, for it involves cultural specificity, historical, and culinary contexts due to the increased cross-cultural interactions and that the linguistic representation of food also plays a critical role in influencing consumer perception and how these dishes are received by non-Chinese speakers (Mu & Liu, 2010), the need for accurate and culturally nuanced translations is of utmost importance in the effort of promoting the cuisines. However, the existing practice of dish name translations often fails to capture the authentic meaning, leading to misunderstandings or diminished appreciation of Chinese cuisine (Kang, 2013). This section examines existing literature

on the translation of Chinese dish names, including translation strategies, theoretical frameworks, cultural semiotics and research gaps.

TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR CHINESE DISH NAMES

Several translation strategies have been explored in the literature, each with advantages and challenges in maintaining accuracy and cultural authenticity. The first common strategy is 'literal translation'. This strategy retains the exact wording of the original dish name. However, it often results in awkward or misleading dish names. For example, 四喜丸子 (*sì xǐ wán zi*) has been literally translated as 'Four Happy Meatballs' (Mu & Liu, 2010), which may sound amusing to English speakers but lacks cultural significance. Another example is 虎皮青椒 (*hǔ pí qīng jiāo*), translated as 'Tiger Skin Green Peppers', and 醉鸡 (*zuì jī*), translated as Drunk Chicken.

For some dishes, the use of a literal translation strategy might be insufficient to illustrate the flavour of the food. To solve this, additional information, such as the dish's ingredients or cooking methods, is included in the translation as a description. This is called the descriptive translation strategy. For instance, 东坡肉 (*dōng pō ròu*) is translated as 'Dongpo Braised Pork' rather than just 'Dongpo pork' (Huo et al., 2020). Another example is 皮蛋瘦肉粥 (*pí dàn shòu ròu zhōu*), which is translated as 'Century egg and lean pork congee', making the dish more accessible to English speakers.

The third strategy is 'Transliteration'. This strategy maintains the Chinese phonetic structure or the language sound of the dish name, which reflects a natural borrowing between Chinese and English. This strategy is mostly adopted in translating dish names from Chinese to English, for the use of the Chinese phonetic system (Pinyin) could highlight the cultural elements implied in the dish names and, at the same time, maintain the source culture's practices (Zhu et al., 2024). Though it is claimed to be able to preserve cultural identity, transliteration can obscure meaning for those unfamiliar with Chinese culinary traditions and the language. One of the examples is 麻婆豆腐 (*má pó dòu fǔ*), which is transliterated as 'Mapo Tofu'. This dish name is not appropriate to be translated literally, as the meaning will change to 'pockmarked woman's bean curd' (Yang, 2017). Another famous dish, 宫保鸡丁 (*gōng bǎo jī dīng*) or in English 'Kung Pao Chicken', is an example of transliteration (Zhuoma, 2023).

Despite the application of these strategies, translating Chinese dish names accurately remains challenging. This is largely due to the cultural richness embedded in food names, which often contain historical references, metaphors, or poetic expressions (Mu & Liu, 2010). As a result, the language style used in naming Chinese dishes contains certain unique cultural features. On this note, when translators lack knowledge of the meanings of the words and the culture and customs associated with a cuisine, the translated outputs will confuse readers. Also, the translation of the names of dishes needs to meet the needs of the reader of the target language.

While the adoption of these translation strategies enhances comprehension and cultural representation, no single method guarantees complete accuracy. For instance, literal translations often fail to convey cultural depth, while transliterations may be unintelligible to non-Chinese speakers. In addition, though descriptive translations help clarify a dish's meaning, it ends up with a lengthy translated English name. Therefore, a balanced approach incorporating multiple strategies is needed to ensure effective and culturally sensitive translation of Chinese dish names into English.

CULTURAL SEMIOTICS IN CULINARY TRANSLATION

Cultural semiotics explores how symbols and meanings are constructed and interpreted within different cultural contexts, influencing the way people perceive language and identity (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). In the context of food, cultural semiotics helps explain how dish names encode meaning beyond their literal contents. These meanings often reflect social, historical, and aesthetic values associated with the targeted culture (Zhang & O'Halloran, 2014).

Food names in Chinese cuisine often serve as semiotic markers which reflect rich cultural values, historical allusions, and both linguistic and aesthetic principles. Semiotics, as discussed by Huo et al. (2020), suggests that the metaphors and symbols embedded in dish names carry significant meaning beyond their literal contents. For instance, poetic or auspicious dish names such as 'Buddha Jumps Over the Wall' (佛跳墙, *fó tiào qiáng*) not only describe the dish but also evoke religious symbolism and cultural stories that are lost when translated literally. Similarly, metaphorical names like 'Dragon Beard Noodles' (龙须面, *lóng xū miàn*) highlight the noodle texture and visual resemblance rather than its ingredients or cooking methods, thus complicating the translation into English (Zhuoma, 2023). Chew et al. (2024) stated that linguistic expressions,

particularly metaphors, offer crucial insights into the cultural values and perceptions of different societies.

Translating Chinese dish names requires an understanding of cultural semiotics to ensure that the translated names retain their authentic meaning and significance. Many Chinese dish names rely on intertextuality with connections to folklore, historical figures, or idiomatic expressions, which are difficult to render into English without losing their cultural essence (Chen, 2022). For instance, 东坡肉 (*dōng pō ròu*), which is named after the Song Dynasty poet Su Dongpo, carries historical significance that is absent in the literal translation ‘Dongpo Pork’. On this note, some scholars argue that transliteration (e.g., ‘Kung Pao Chicken’ for 宫保鸡丁, *gōng bǎo jī dīng*) maintains cultural identity, while others advocate for descriptive translation (e.g., ‘Spicy Diced Chicken with Peanuts’) to improve comprehension (Mu & Liu, 2010). Here, the challenge lies in having a balance between linguistic accessibility and cultural authenticity. Ultimately, cultural semiotics plays a crucial role in the translation process of Chinese dish names.

In summary, the literature highlights the cultural depth of Chinese cuisine, the range of translation strategies commonly employed, and the semiotic richness embedded in dish names. However, much of the existing research has focused either on cataloguing strategies or on describing cultural meanings, with limited attention given to how effectively these translations preserve or communicate the cultural and culinary essence of the original names. This reveals a significant gap: while we know what strategies are used and what meanings are embedded, we do not yet fully understand how well these strategies succeed in safeguarding cultural nuance in cross-cultural contexts. To address this gap, the present study investigates the effectiveness of translation strategies in maintaining or diluting the richness of Chinese culinary culture, thereby offering both theoretical insights and practical implications for culinary translation.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative comparative linguistic analysis to examine the loss of culinary and cultural nuance in the English translations of Chinese dish names. The research design is structured to systematically compare the original Chinese dish names with their English translations, focusing on linguistic, cultural, and semantic dimensions. The study adopts a descriptive and interpretive approach to identify patterns of loss or distortion in meaning, cultural context, and culinary significance.

DATA COLLECTION

This analysis was conducted based on *The English Translation of Chinese Menus* 美食译苑: 中文菜单英文译. The data for this study consists of Chinese dish names and their corresponding English translations. The sources of data were retrieved from an official translation published by the Foreign Affairs Office of the People’s Government of Beijing Municipality.

A purposive sampling method is used to select dish names that are representative of regional Chinese cuisines, such as Chuan Cuisine (Sichuan dishes), Yue Cuisine (Guangdong dishes), and Xiang Cuisine (Hunan dishes) and those that are widely recognised internationally. The sample includes both literal translations and creative adaptations to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The core of the methodology involves a side-by-side comparison of the original Chinese dish names and their English translations. The analysis is conducted in three stages:

- (i) **Literal Translation Analysis:** Identifies how closely the English translation mirrors the original Chinese in terms of word choice and structure.
- (ii) **Cultural Nuance Analysis:** Evaluates the extent to which cultural references, symbolism, and historical context are retained or lost in translation.
- (iii) **Culinary Nuance Analysis:** Assesses whether the translation accurately reflects the dish’s ingredients, preparation methods, and sensory qualities

In this study, the justification of translation strategies used in the English rendering of Chinese dish names is grounded in a comparative analysis between the source and target texts, guided by established frameworks in translation studies. Each dish name is examined to identify the specific strategy employed, such as literal translation, transliteration, term translation, cultural substitution, or omission—based on the classifications proposed by Vinay Aixelá (1996). The analysis considers whether the translation preserves essential cultural and culinary elements, including symbolic meanings, regional references, and cooking techniques, or whether it simplifies or omits these features. The appropriateness of each strategy is further evaluated in relation to the communicative intent of the menu and the expectations of the target audience, particularly in balancing linguistic accessibility with cultural authenticity. For example, a literal translation that preserves the structural form of the source name may be judged less effective if it results in cultural loss or misinterpretation, whereas a culturally adapted term may be justified if it enhances the diner's understanding and engagement. This approach ensures that the assessment of translation strategies is both theoretically informed and contextually relevant, aligning with the broader objective of examining how translation practices impact the transmission of culinary and cultural meaning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Cultural Translation Theory (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990) and Cultural Semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) to examine the loss of culinary and cultural nuance in Chinese-to-English dish name translation.

Cultural Translation Theory views translation as a process of cultural negotiation rather than mere linguistic transfer. It highlights how meanings embedded in one culture are reshaped, simplified, or omitted when adapted for another. Applied to dish names, this perspective allows us to understand why certain cultural elements are lost, for example, the decision to replace metaphorical imagery with plain description is shaped by the target audience's expectations of clarity, readability, and accessibility. Translation choices therefore reflect power relations between source and target cultures, and the balance between cultural preservation (foreignisation) and cultural adaptation (domestication).

Cultural Semiotics, in turn, treats dish names as signs that convey layers of meaning beyond their literal ingredients. A name like 蚂蚁上树 (Ants Climbing a Tree) encodes metaphorical playfulness, visual imagery, and cultural creativity. Similarly, 佛跳墙 (Buddha Jumps Over the Wall) carries historical anecdotes and symbolic values of extravagance. When rendered into English as Vermicelli with Spicy Minced Pork or Stewed Assorted Seafood, these signs are reduced to functional descriptions, stripping away cultural symbolism. Using cultural semiotics, the study analyses what meanings are encoded in the original names (e.g., metaphor, history, ritual, humour) and what is lost or transformed in translation.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Sichuan, Guangdong and Hunan cuisines have been selected as the three most popular Chinese culinary traditions for this study. From each cuisine, four signature dishes were chosen as representative samples, resulting in a total of 13 dishes analysed. The study examines these dishes from three key perspectives:

- (i) The degree to which the English translation mirrors the original Chinese in terms of word choice and structure.
- (ii) The extent to which cultural references and historical context are preserved or lost in translation.
- (iii) The accuracy of the translation in conveying the dish's ingredients, preparation methods, and sensory characteristics.

In addition, the researchers also examine the Chinese dish names that carry symbolic or metaphorical meanings and the loss of cultural nuance in their English translations.

TABLE 1. Translations of Sichuan Dishes

Chinese Dish	English Translation	Translation Strategy	Explanation
麻婆豆腐	Mapo Tofu (Sautéed Tofu in Hot and Spicy Sauce)	Transliteration + Descriptive	The transliteration preserves the original cultural identity of the dish by retaining its Chinese phonetic form, which signals authenticity and uniqueness to international diners. At the same time, the descriptive component provides clarity by explaining the cooking method and flavour profile, making the dish more accessible to those unfamiliar with Chinese cuisine. This dual approach balances cultural preservation with functional communication, ensuring both authenticity and comprehensibility.
宫保鸡丁	Kung Pao Chicken	Transliteration	The translation of 宫保鸡丁 into Kung Pao Chicken uses a transliteration strategy. The term Kung Pao is derived from the romanisation of “宫保” (Gōng Bǎo), which refers to the Qing Dynasty official Ding Baozhen, after whom the dish was named. By retaining the sound of the original Chinese words rather than translating their literal meaning (“Diced Chicken in Gongbao Sauce”), the translation preserves the cultural and historical authenticity of the dish. At the same time, the word Chicken clarifies the main ingredient, making the dish name partially accessible to non-Chinese speakers while maintaining its unique cultural identity.
回锅肉片	Twice-Cooked Pork Slices	Literal Translation	The translation of 回锅肉片 into Twice-Cooked Pork Slices applies a literal translation strategy. Each component of the original name “回锅” (twice-cooked), “肉” (pork), and “片” (slices) is directly rendered into English without alteration. This approach makes the dish name straightforward and easy to understand for non-Chinese speakers by clearly describing the cooking method and main ingredient. However, while the literal translation effectively communicates the dish's preparation style, it does not capture the cultural or regional significance embedded in the original term, thus prioritising clarity over cultural nuance.
蚂蚁上树	Sautéed Vermicelli with Spicy Minced Pork	Descriptive Translation	The translation of 蚂蚁上树 into Sautéed Vermicelli with Spicy Minced Pork uses a descriptive translation strategy. The original name is highly metaphorical, literally meaning “ants climbing a tree,” which vividly describes the appearance of minced pork clinging to vermicelli strands. However, this cultural imagery is omitted in the English version and replaced with a straightforward description of the main ingredients and cooking style. This strategy prioritises clarity and functionality, ensuring that diners understand what the dish contains, but it sacrifices the poetic and imaginative qualities embedded in the original Chinese name.

麻婆豆腐 (MAPO TOFU/ SAUTÉED TOFU IN HOT AND SPICY SAUCE)

“麻婆豆腐” is a Chinese dish with a story behind it. In 1861, during the late Qing Dynasty, a man named Chen Chunfu opened a small, unnamed restaurant in Northern Chengdu. However, the man passed away early on, leaving the restaurant to his wife. The man's wife, who had pockmarks on her face, led her to be known as Mapo (麻婆)(Pockmark Grandmother). The wife's unique tofu dish gained popularity within the small town, making the restaurant and its signature dish widely known. Even after she passed away, their family carried on their legacy, and by the 1920s, the restaurant remained famous for its spicy, numbing, and fragrant tofu. Today, over a century later, “麻婆豆腐” is still cherished as a beloved Sichuan dish.

“麻婆豆腐” is a classic Sichuan dish renowned for its signature málà (麻辣) flavour, a distinct combination of numbing sensations(麻, má) from Sichuan peppercorns and spiciness (辣, là) from chilli peppers. However, the English translations “Mapo Tofu” and “Sautéed Tofu in Hot and Spicy Sauce” fail to fully capture its characteristics. Notably, these translations omit the

numbing sensation, which is an essential element of the dish's flavour profile. Additionally, the cooking method of “麻婆豆腐” is braising the tofu rather than stir-frying it, making the term “sautéed” an inaccurate representation of how the dish is traditionally prepared.

The English translation “Mapo Tofu” retains the phonetic sound but fails to explain the historical origins of the dish. The alternative translation “Sautéed Tofu in Hot and Spicy Sauce” completely erases the Mápó backstory, reducing the dish to just a description of its ingredients and cooking style. The personal connection and cultural storytelling embedded within this dish are completely lost in the translation.

宫保鸡丁 (KUNG PAO CHICKEN)

“宫保鸡丁” is an iconic Sichuan dish that originated with Ding Baozhen, a Qing Dynasty official who served as Governor of Shandong and later Governor-General of Sichuan. A food enthusiast, Ding adapted a Shandong stir-fry chicken recipe into a spicy version during his tenure in Shandong. Later, in Sichuan, he refined it further using local ingredients like chillies and peanuts, creating the classic dish. Its name, Kung Pao Chicken, honours Ding's title “Gongbao” (Palatial Guardian), reflecting his legacy as a culinary innovator. The English translation “Kung Pao Chicken” preserves the phonetic sound of the original name; however, it omits the historical reference, stripping away an essential layer of cultural meaning.

The cooking process of “宫保鸡丁” involves stir-frying diced chicken with peanuts, vegetables, chilli peppers, and Sichuan peppercorns, creating its signature bold and spicy flavours. This dicing style helps the chicken cook quickly and evenly in a hot wok, making it tender and perfect for soaking up the spicy, savoury sauce. The Chinese name highlights both the ingredients and the classic Chinese cooking technique of cutting food into bite-sized shapes for better texture and flavour. However, the English translation fails to specify that the chicken is diced, which is an important part of the dish's texture and cooking technique.

回锅肉片 (TWICE-COOKED PORK SLICES)

The translation of “回锅肉片” into English as “Twice-Cooked Pork Slices” performs moderately well in terms of clarity, but its effectiveness varies depending on the criteria of cultural preservation and culinary accuracy. Starting with the cultural and historical context, the original Chinese name carries implicit cultural meaning and culinary tradition that the translation only partially conveys. “回锅肉” (huí guō ròu) is a classic dish originating from Sichuan cuisine, with deep roots in local cooking customs and family-style meals. It literally means “return-to-the-pot meat,” referring to the unique preparation method where pork is first boiled and then stir-fried with seasonings. This dual-cooking technique is not just a culinary method but a signature style that reflects Sichuanese ingenuity and resourcefulness. While the phrase “Twice-Cooked Pork” captures the idea of the dual-cooking process, it loses the cultural nuance and historical depth embedded in the phrase “回锅,” which has both a literal and idiomatic resonance in Chinese culinary language.

In terms of culinary accuracy, however, the translation fares better. “Twice-Cooked Pork Slices” clearly indicates a two-stage cooking process, boiling followed by stir-frying, and the word “slices” correctly describes the typical presentation of the dish, which usually features thin slices of pork belly. The translation succeeds in offering a literal and functionally informative description of the cooking method. However, it falls short of conveying the full sensory and ingredient profile that characterises this dish. For instance, it does not specify the common use of Sichuan ingredients such as broad bean chilli paste (豆瓣酱), leeks or garlic shoots, and fermented black beans, which are essential to the dish's umami-rich and slightly spicy flavour. Moreover, it omits the fact that the pork belly used is usually simmered to tenderise and then seared for added fragrance and texture—details that are important to understanding the dish's layered taste and mouthfeel.

Overall, “Twice-Cooked Pork Slices” is a reasonably effective translation in terms of clarity and culinary process, but it lacks the cultural richness and sensory specificity that the original name implies to native speakers. To enhance both objectives, a more descriptive alternative such as “Sichuan Twice-Cooked Pork with Chilli Bean Sauce” might be more effective. This would not only retain the essential cooking method but also introduce regional and flavour-specific elements that give the dish its identity, thus bridging the gap between linguistic translation and cultural transmission.

蚂蚁上树 (SAUTÉED VERMICELLI WITH SPICY MINCED PORK)

The English translation "Sautéed Vermicelli with Spicy Minced Pork" undoubtedly highlights the dish's main constituents, but it strips away the vibrant cultural symbolism and poetic metaphor of its Chinese counterpart, “蚂蚁上树” (Mǎyǐ Shàngshù), or “Ants Climbing a Tree.” In Chinese culinary tradition, dish names aren’t just about listing ingredients—they tell stories, evoke imagery, and carry a touch of poetry. The name “蚂蚁上树” playfully conjures an image of minced pork clinging to translucent noodles, akin to ants scaling tree branches. By opting for a literal, ingredient-focused title over this evocative metaphor, the translation sacrifices the whimsical charm and imaginative flair that have cemented the dish’s enduring appeal in Chinese food culture.

“蚂蚁上树” isn’t just sautéed vermicelli with minced pork. It's a dish carefully built on layers of flavours—fermented bean paste, soy sauce, and Sichuan chilli peppers—all coming together to create that bold umami taste with the signature *málà* (numbing and spicy) sensation. The term “spicy” in the translation does not fully reflect this complexity, as it fails to highlight the fermented and aromatic elements that define Sichuan flavours. Furthermore, by omitting the metaphorical name, the translation strips away a key aspect of how traditional Chinese dishes often incorporate storytelling, visual imagination, and cultural symbolism into their identities.

A more culturally sensitive and engaging translation should retain the poetic essence of the name while offering a brief clarification, such as “Ants Climbing a Tree (Sichuan-Style Vermicelli with Spiced Minced Pork)” or “Ants Climbing a Tree (Flavourful Sichuan Vermicelli Stir-Fry)” would better preserve the dish’s linguistic charm while making it accessible to non-Chinese speakers.

TABLE 2. Translations of Guangdong Dishes

Chinese Dish	English Translation	Translation Strategy	Explanation
盐焗鸡	Salty-Baked Chicken	Literal Translation	The translation of 盐焗鸡 into Salty-Baked Chicken uses a literal translation strategy. Each character of the original Chinese name “盐” (salt), 焗 (baked), and “鸡” (chicken) is directly rendered into its English equivalent without modification. This approach ensures that the basic cooking method and main ingredient are conveyed clearly to non-Chinese speakers. However, while the literal translation provides straightforward comprehension, it also risks losing some nuance: “焗” in Cantonese cooking refers to a distinctive Hakka technique of baking chicken in a crust of coarse salt, which imparts unique flavour and texture. The English word baked does not fully capture this culinary specificity, so while the strategy offers clarity, it sacrifices some of the cultural and gastronomic depth embedded in the original term.
咕噜肉	Gulaorou (Sweet and Sour Pork)	Transliteration + Descriptive Translation	The translation of 咕噜肉 into Gulaorou (Sweet and Sour Pork) employs a hybrid strategy, combining transliteration (Gulaorou) with descriptive translation (Sweet and Sour Pork). The transliteration preserves the original phonetic form of the Cantonese/Mandarin pronunciation, signalling authenticity and cultural identity for diners familiar with Chinese cuisine. At the same time, the descriptive translation provides clarity by conveying the flavour profile and main ingredient, making the dish accessible to non-Chinese speakers. This dual approach balances cultural preservation with functional communication, though it still simplifies the dish’s cultural nuance by aligning it with the generic Western notion of “sweet and sour pork,” which may not fully capture the distinct regional style of 咕噜肉.
蜜汁叉烧	BBQ Pork with Honey Sauce	Descriptive Translation	The translation of 蜜汁叉烧 into BBQ Pork with Honey Sauce uses a descriptive translation strategy. Rather than preserving the original phonetic form (char siu), the translation focuses on describing the dish’s key elements. “叉烧” (char siu, a Cantonese style of barbecued pork) is generalised as BBQ pork, and “蜜汁” (honey glaze/sauce) is rendered as with honey sauce. This makes the dish name clear and accessible to international diners by highlighting its flavour and cooking style. However, it sacrifices some cultural authenticity, as char siu conveys a unique Cantonese culinary tradition that the more generic term BBQ pork does not fully capture. Thus, the strategy favours functionality and comprehension over cultural specificity.

白灼虾	Boiled Prawns	Literal Translation	The translation of 白灼虾 into Boiled Prawns applies a literal translation strategy. Each element of the original Chinese name “白” (white/plain), 灼 (blanched/boiled), and “虾” (prawns) is directly rendered into English. This makes the dish easy to understand for non-Chinese diners by describing the cooking method and main ingredient. However, while the literal translation ensures clarity, it loses the culinary nuance of “白灼”, which refers to a delicate Cantonese technique of briefly poaching fresh prawns to highlight their natural sweetness and tenderness. The English word boiled simplifies this process into a generic term, thus omitting the refinement and cultural significance embedded in the original name.
脆皮乳猪	Roasted Crispy Suckling Pig	Literal Translation	The translation of 脆皮乳猪 into Roasted Crispy Suckling Pig uses a literal translation strategy. Each component of the Chinese name “脆皮” (crispy skin), “乳猪” (suckling pig), and the implied cooking method of roasting is rendered directly into English without adaptation. This approach effectively communicates the key features of the dish to non-Chinese speakers by highlighting its texture and main ingredient. However, while it ensures clarity, it also simplifies the cultural nuance, as “脆皮” refers to a very specific Cantonese roasting technique that produces a glass-like crackling skin, which the generic English “crispy” does not fully convey. Thus, the translation is accurate but lacks the depth of culinary tradition embedded in the original term.

盐焗鸡 (SALTY-BAKED CHICKEN)

The translation "Salty-Baked Chicken" does not accurately convey the meaning of “盐焗鸡”. First, the term “Salty-Baked” is awkward and unnatural in English. According to the TrainChinese dictionary, the term “焗” (jú) refers to a specialised cooking method involving boiling foods with the pot lid tightly closed, to steam or to feel suffocated, which in this dish means burying the chicken in a mound of heated coarse salt to create an oven-like effect. This technique locks in moisture while infusing the meat with a rich, deep flavour. The translation “salty-baked” oversimplifies this method and makes it sound like the chicken is merely baked with salt, failing to convey the unique salt-steaming process that defines this dish.

“Salty” is not an accurate descriptor of the dish's taste. “盐焗鸡” is not simply salty but rather has a complex and aromatic flavour resulting from the use of ginger, sand ginger (沙姜), and sometimes five-spice powder, which enhances the taste beyond just saltiness. The chicken itself is often wrapped in parchment paper or lotus leaves before being buried in salt, ensuring that it remains juicy, tender, and subtly infused with the fragrance of spices. By focusing only on salt, the translation diminishes the rich and nuanced flavour profile of the dish.

“盐焗鸡” has strong cultural and regional significance as a famous dish from Guangdong, particularly associated with Hakka cuisine. It is a traditional delicacy with historical roots dating back to the Qing Dynasty, originally developed as a way to preserve and enhance the natural flavours of chicken without excessive seasoning. The current translation makes no reference to this heritage, making it sound like an ordinary salted chicken rather than an iconic Cantonese dish with a unique cooking method and deep historical roots. Perhaps, a better translation could be “Hakka-Style Salt-Baked Chicken” or “Cantonese Salt-Baked Chicken”, and these will retain the authentic cooking technique while providing essential regional and cultural context.

咕噜肉 GULAOROU (SWEET AND SOUR PORK)

Although "Sweet and Sour Pork" effectively describes the dish's flavour profile, it fails to distinguish “咕噜肉” from other variations of sweet and sour pork found across various Chinese cuisines. “咕噜肉” is a Cantonese speciality, distinct from other regional versions due to its light, crispy batter and balance of flavours achieved through a refined blend of vinegar, sugar, and fruit-based elements such as pineapple. By generalising it as "Sweet and Sour Pork", the translation does not capture the unique texture, ingredients, and cooking method that differentiates it from other similar dishes.

The onomatopoeic nature of “咕噜” (Gǔlǔ) is completely lost in this translation. The term “咕噜” mimics the sound of bubbling sauce during cooking, evoking a sense of rich, glossy, and aromatic glaze coating the crispy pork. This playful and sensory aspect of the dish's name is an

integral part of the Cantonese culinary tradition. The names of dishes often incorporate describing characteristics such as the sound, texture and visuals of the dish itself. The English translation fails to convey this appetising imagery, reducing the dish to a mere description of its flavours rather than a name that engages multiple senses.

蜜汁叉烧 (BBQ PORK WITH HONEY SAUCE)

The translation “BBQ Pork” is a broad and somewhat misleading term, as “叉烧” (Chāshāo) refers specifically to a Cantonese-style roasted pork that differs from Western barbecue both in cooking method and flavour profile. Unlike Western BBQ, which typically involves slow smoking or grilling over an open flame, “叉烧” is roasted in an oven or over an open flame with frequent basting, resulting in a glazed, caramelised exterior and tender, flavourful meat. By calling it “BBQ Pork”, the translation creates an inaccurate association with Western barbecue, failing to reflect the unique Chinese roasting technique used in preparing “叉烧”.

Besides, “Honey Sauce” does not fully capture the complexity of “蜜汁” (Mìzhī), which literally means “honey glaze” or “honey-infused sauce”. The term “蜜汁” in this dish refers not only to honey but also to a carefully balanced mix of maltose, soy sauce, hoisin sauce, and Chinese five-spice powder, which contribute to “叉烧”’s signature glossy, reddish appearance and rich, umami-packed sweetness. Simply labelling it as “honey sauce” makes it seem as though honey is the sole flavouring agent, failing to reflect the intricate layering of savoury, sweet, and aromatic elements.

“叉烧” holds significant cultural importance in Cantonese cuisine, being one of the most iconic roast meats (烧味, Siu Mei) and a staple in dim sum restaurants, noodle dishes, and rice platters. The translation does not convey this deep cultural connection, instead making the dish sound like an ordinary Western-style BBQ pork dish with a honey-based sauce. The omission of its Cantonese origins, traditional roasting technique, and signature glaze diminishes the dish’s identity, resulting in a less authentic and less evocative representation of “蜜汁叉烧”.

白灼虾 (BOILED PRAWNS)

When the Chinese dish 白灼虾 (báizhuó xiā) is translated simply as boiled prawns, there is an immediate reduction of both culinary and cultural nuance. In Cantonese cuisine, 白灼 refers to a distinctive method of quick poaching or blanching seafood and vegetables. The prawns are briefly cooked in boiling water—often with aromatics like ginger and scallion—so that they retain their freshness, sweetness, and firm texture. This technique is regarded as a hallmark of Cantonese cooking philosophy, which emphasises simplicity, natural flavours, and respect for the quality of ingredients. The English word boiled, however, does not capture these subtleties; instead, it suggests a more generic and prolonged cooking process, sometimes even associated with plainness or overcooking.

Beyond technique, cultural significance is also lost. The character “白” (white) conveys ideas of purity, simplicity, and elegance, while “灼” (blanching) suggests quick heat that preserves vibrancy. Together, the term encapsulates a uniquely Cantonese aesthetic of restraint and refinement. By rendering the name as boiled prawns, these cultural layers are stripped away, leaving only a utilitarian description of the dish. As a result, international diners may fail to appreciate the sophistication of the cooking method and the cultural values it embodies, instead perceiving it as an ordinary or uninspired preparation.

Moreover, the translation undermines the marketing potential of the dish. In the context of tourism and global gastronomy, names that carry cultural resonance can intrigue and entice diners. A phrase such as Lightly Poached Prawns or Poached Prawns, Cantonese Style would not only clarify the cooking method more accurately but also signal the regional heritage of the dish. Alternatively, a hybrid translation like Báizhuó Prawns (Traditional Cantonese Poaching) could preserve authenticity while making the dish comprehensible to non-Chinese audiences.

脆皮乳猪 (ROASTED CRISPY SUCKLING PIG)

The English translation communicates the core idea (a roast, crispy-skinned, very young pig), but it flattens several layers of meaning attached to both the cooking technique and the cultural context.

Culinarily, “脆皮” is not just “crispy”; it signals a specific Cantonese technique within the siu mei tradition: the skin is pricked, scalded, air-dried, brushed with a maltose/vinegar glaze, and

roasted, often over charcoal until the rind becomes glass-like crackling while the meat stays tender and gelatinous. “Roasted” is a generic term in English and doesn’t cue this meticulous process or the expected texture contrast (shattering skin vs. succulent meat) that Cantonese diners anticipate. Likewise, while “乳猪” is well conveyed by “suckling pig,” many English readers won’t infer the milk-fed tenderness and the tight size/age range that the Chinese term implies.

Culturally, the Chinese name evokes a regional identity (Cantonese/Hokkien-Teochew styles) and a dish tied to rituals and celebration—banquets, weddings, business openings, offerings—where the presentation (often a whole lacquered piglet, sometimes served in courses) carries auspicious symbolism. The plain English label doesn’t signal this ceremonial prestige or regional lineage within Southern Chinese and Southeast Asian Chinese communities.

To preserve more nuance without sacrificing clarity, consider an annotated or regionalised rendering, e.g., “Cantonese Crispy-Skin Roast Suckling Pig (siu mei)”, “Crispy-Skin Roast Suckling Pig, Cantonese Style,” or “Cantonese ‘Siu Mei’ Crispy Roast Suckling Pig.” These options retain the key information while gesturing toward the technique, texture, and cultural provenance that the original name encodes.

TABLE 3. Translations of Hunan Dishes

Chinese Dish	English Translation	Translation Strategy	Explanation
剁椒鱼头	Sautéed Fish Head with Diced Spicy Pepper	Descriptive Translation	The translation of 剁椒鱼头 into Sautéed Fish Head with Diced Spicy Pepper uses a descriptive translation strategy. Instead of transliterating “剁椒” (duòjiāo, a special type of fermented chopped chilli widely used in Hunan cuisine), the translator explains it as diced spicy pepper to make it comprehensible to non-Chinese speakers. Likewise, “鱼头” (fish head) is rendered literally, while sautéed is chosen to describe the cooking method in general culinary terms. This strategy prioritises clarity and accessibility for international audiences but sacrifices some cultural nuance, as the term “剁椒” carries regional culinary significance that “diced spicy pepper” does not fully capture.
全家福	Stewed Assorted Delicacies	Descriptive Translation	The translation of 全家福 into Stewed Assorted Delicacies employs a descriptive translation strategy. The original name literally means “family happiness” or “family reunion blessing,” which carries strong cultural symbolism, as the dish is traditionally eaten during festivals or special occasions to represent prosperity and togetherness. Instead of retaining this cultural meaning, the translation focuses on describing the cooking method (stewed) and the variety of ingredients (assorted delicacies). While this makes the dish understandable to non-Chinese diners in terms of its culinary content, it results in the loss of the cultural connotation of family unity and auspiciousness embedded in the original term.
东安子鸡	Dong'an Vinegar Chicken	Transliteration + Descriptive Translation	The translation of 东安子鸡 into Dong'an Vinegar Chicken employs a hybrid strategy, combining transliteration and descriptive translation. The term Dong'an is transliterated to retain the geographic and cultural origin of the dish, signalling its regional identity. Meanwhile, Vinegar Chicken is a descriptive rendering that highlights the key ingredient and flavour profile for clarity to non-Chinese speakers. This strategy makes the dish more accessible to international audiences while preserving some cultural authenticity, though it does lose nuance, as “子鸡” specifically refers to a young chicken, a detail omitted in the English translation.
腊味合蒸	Steamed Mixed Preserved Meat	Literal Translation	The translation of 腊味合蒸 into Steamed Mixed Preserved Meat applies a literal translation strategy. Each part of the Chinese name “腊味” (preserved or cured meats), 合 (combined/mixed), and “蒸” (steamed) is directly rendered into English, giving a straightforward description of the dish’s preparation and main ingredients. While this makes the dish name clear and accessible to non-Chinese diners, it reduces cultural nuance: “腊味” in Chinese cuisine refers specifically to traditional cured meats such as sausage and cured pork belly, often linked to seasonal practices and regional heritage, which the generic phrase preserved meat does not fully capture.

剁椒鱼头 (SAUTÉED FISH HEAD WITH DICED SPICY PEPPER)

The term “剁椒” (Duòjiāo) refers specifically to fermented chopped chilli peppers, a key ingredient in Hunan cuisine, known for its bold and spicy flavours. By translating it as merely “diced spicy pepper”, the translation ignores the fermentation process, which is essential in developing the dish's deep umami, tangy, and slightly sour taste. This omission diminishes the complexity of the dish, making it seem like a simple spicy stir-fry rather than a renowned speciality of Hunan cuisine.

On the other hand, the translation “Sautéed Fish Head” is misleading because this dish is not sautéed but rather steamed. Steaming allows the fish head to absorb the intense flavours of the fermented chopped chillies, garlic, and soy sauce, while keeping the meat tender and juicy. By using “sautéed”, the translation misrepresents the cooking technique, potentially leading to incorrect expectations among those unfamiliar with the dish. A more accurate description should highlight the steaming process, which is central to the dish's texture and taste.

Moreover, the translation lacks cultural depth by failing to convey the dish's symbolic and regional importance. “剁椒鱼头” is a signature dish of Hunan cuisine and is often associated with prosperity and abundance, as fish head is considered a delicacy in Chinese culinary traditions, frequently served at banquets and celebrations. A more precise and culturally sensitive translation could be “Steamed Fish Head with Hunan Fermented Chilli Peppers” or “Hunan-Style Steamed Fish Head with Duojiao Chilli”, which preserves the regional identity and culinary uniqueness of the dish. Without such refinements, the current translation oversimplifies the dish's rich flavours, cooking techniques, and cultural heritage, making it appear far more generic than its authentic Chinese counterpart.

全家福 (STEWED ASSORTED DELICACIES)

Rendered in English as “Stewed Assorted Delicacies,” the dish 全家福 loses much of its cultural depth and festive symbolism. In Chinese, “全家福” literally means “family happiness” or “family reunion blessing,” evoking themes of reunion, prosperity, and togetherness, especially during important occasions like the Lunar New Year. This strong cultural message is absent in the English translation, which presents the dish as a generic assortment of stewed items, without conveying its traditional role as a celebratory centrepiece for family gatherings.

From a culinary standpoint, the phrase does convey that the dish involves a mix of ingredients prepared through stewing. However, it lacks precision. 全家福 often includes luxurious components like shrimp, meatballs, sea cucumber, tofu, mushrooms, and other premium items chosen for both taste and symbolic meaning. The term “delicacies” is vague and doesn't reflect the carefully curated ingredients or the rich, savoury flavour profile that defines the dish. Similarly, “stewed” is too broad to represent the variety of preparation methods that may be involved.

Overall, while “Stewed Assorted Delicacies” provides a functional description, it underrepresents both the emotional significance and the complexity of the dish. From our point of view, a more evocative alternative, such as “Family Reunion Stew” or “Prosperity Hotpot,” would better express its cultural roots and celebratory essence.

东安子鸡 (DONG'AN VINEGAR CHICKEN)

The translation of “东安子鸡” as “Dong'an Vinegar Chicken” partially succeeds but falls short in conveying the full cultural and culinary essence of the dish. Culturally, the name “东安子鸡” originates from Dong'an County in Hunan Province, and the dish is a regional speciality with a long history. The inclusion of “Dong'an” in the translation preserves the geographic and cultural origin, which is a positive step. However, the term “子鸡” refers specifically to young chicken, prized for its tenderness, and this nuance is lost in the simplified translation.

In terms of culinary accuracy, “Vinegar Chicken” hints at the dish's key flavour element, “rice vinegar”, but oversimplifies the flavour profile. Dong'an Chicken is known for its bright, tangy, and slightly spicy character, achieved through stir-frying young chicken with vinegar, chilli, ginger, and scallions. The translation does not reflect the fresh, aromatic, and slightly peppery layers that define its sensory appeal. Moreover, omitting mention of stir-frying as the cooking method misses a vital aspect of its preparation.

In summary, while "Dong'an Vinegar Chicken" retains basic geographical and flavour cues, it lacks precision in both cultural and culinary representation. A more accurate and evocative translation might be "Dong'an Young Chicken in Spicy Vinegar Sauce", which better captures the dish's regional identity, key ingredients, and sensory experience.

腊味合蒸 (STEAMED MIXED PRESERVED MEAT)

The translation of “腊味合蒸” as “Steamed Mixed Preserved Meat” offers a literal understanding but loses much of the cultural and historical richness. The term “腊味” refers to traditional Chinese cured meats, particularly tied to southern regions like Guangdong and often associated with Lunar New Year customs. “合蒸” implies more than just steaming; it symbolises harmony and family unity. The translation omits these cultural layers, reducing a festive, regionally significant dish to a generic label.

In terms of culinary accuracy, the translation correctly identifies preserved meats and steaming as the core technique. However, it fails to specify the common ingredients like Chinese sausage, cured duck, and pork belly, nor does it convey the unique flavour profiles—sweet, smoky, salty, and aromatic that define the dish. It also overlooks how the steaming process allows flavours to infuse surrounding components, like rice or vegetables.

Overall, while “Steamed Mixed Preserved Meat” is clear, it lacks both cultural depth and sensory detail. A more effective translation might be “Steamed Assortment of Chinese Cured Meats” or “Traditional Southern Chinese Cured Meat Medley” to better reflect its origins and complexity.

SUMMARY OF DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of Chinese-to-English dish name translations reveals a consistent loss of culinary and cultural nuance across multiple strategies, including descriptive translation, transliteration, and literal translation. Descriptive translation, while effective in clarifying ingredients and cooking methods for international audiences, often strips away the poetic imagery and symbolic references inherent in the original names. For instance, metaphorical dish names such as 蚂蚁上树 lose their cultural playfulness when reduced to a functional description like Sautéed Vermicelli with Spicy Minced Pork.

Similarly, transliteration preserves phonetic authenticity but fails to communicate embedded cultural stories. Examples such as Mapo Tofu retain their Chinese sound but obscure the historical and narrative layers tied to their origin, leaving non-Chinese audiences unaware of their cultural significance. Literal translation, on the other hand, provides surface-level accuracy but oversimplifies nuanced culinary practices, as seen in 白灼虾 rendered as Boiled Prawns, which ignores the delicate Cantonese poaching technique implied by 白灼.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that these strategies, though functional for cross-cultural communication, prioritise readability and accessibility at the expense of cultural semiotics. The result is a reduction of Chinese culinary nomenclature to utilitarian descriptors, which risks misrepresenting the sophistication, history, and cultural symbolism embedded in traditional dish names.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the translation of Chinese dish names into English is shaped less by cultural fidelity than by pragmatic considerations of clarity, accessibility, and marketability. Drawing on Cultural Translation Theory, the findings demonstrate that dish name translation operates as a process of cultural negotiation, where translators often prioritise the communicative expectations of English-speaking audiences over the preservation of cultural depth. Viewed through the lens of cultural semiotics, Chinese dish names function as symbolic signs that carry layered meanings, metaphors, historical narratives, aesthetic values, and culinary philosophies that frequently resist seamless transfer into English. The loss of these semiotic codes underscores the tension between accessibility and authenticity in cross-cultural culinary communication.

The analysis identified several recurring translation phenomena. First, literal translation often erases metaphorical and poetic imagery, as in 蚂蚁上树 (“Ants Climbing a Tree”), which becomes the plain Sautéed Vermicelli with Spicy Minced Pork. Second, transliteration preserves phonetic authenticity but neglects cultural stories, as in Mapo Tofu, where the origin tale of the “pockmarked grandmother” is lost to non-Chinese audiences. Third, ingredient-centric translation

oversimplifies complex culinary traditions, exemplified by 东安子鸡 rendered as Dong'an Vinegar Chicken, which reduces a carefully balanced Hunanese flavour profile to a single ingredient. These patterns confirm that strategies intended to enhance comprehension frequently dilute the semiotic richness embedded in Chinese culinary nomenclature.

Theoretically, this study highlights how food translation exemplifies the limits of cultural translatability, supporting semiotic arguments that dish names are cultural texts rather than mere labels. Practically, it underscores the need for more nuanced translation strategies that balance functionality with cultural preservation. As globalisation accelerates, translators, restaurateurs, and cultural promoters must approach Chinese culinary translation not as a purely lexical exercise but as an ethnographic endeavour, one that requires sensitivity to the semiotic layers of language and the cultural values it encodes. By doing so, Chinese cuisine can be presented to global audiences in a way that both informs and inspires, ensuring its cultural essence is appreciated rather than diminished.

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