

JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Exploring Chinese Idiomatic Expressions in Malay Subtitles

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the gap in translating Chinese idiomatic expressions into Malay and explores how such translations impact the quality of subtitles. Despite their cultural and communicative significance, these expressions remain underexplored on global streaming platforms, where linguistic and technical limitations influence translation practices. This study analyses Chinese idiomatic expressions translated into Malay subtitles by categorising the expressions, identifying translation strategies, and assessing quality. A total of 239 expressions from nine Chinese drama series were grouped into five categories: idioms, proverbs, aphorisms, two-part allegorical sayings, and common sayings. Idioms make up the majority of the dataset (83.26%), highlighting the cultural richness of Chinese dialogue. Using Baker's model, paraphrasing is the most common strategy, followed by omission and the use of idioms with similar meanings but different forms. Pedersen's FAR model shows high Acceptability (Rater 1: 98.74%, Rater 2: 98.22%) and Functional Equivalence (Rater 1: 76.05%, Rater 2: 82.22%), while Readability scores are lower (Rater 1: 71.23%, Rater 2: 71.03%) due to timing and reading speed issues. The results suggest that subtitling practices prioritise semantic accuracy and fluency, sometimes sacrificing technical constraints. This study emphasises the importance of balancing meaning retention with readability and suggests combining product-based assessment with viewer reception and multimodal analysis.

Keywords: Baker's translation strategies, idiomatic expressions, Pedersen's FAR model, subtitle analysis, translation quality criticism

Received: 26 February 2026, **Accepted:** 21 June 2026, **Published:** 30 July 2026

1.0 Introduction

The process of translating idiomatic expressions is challenging because they are figurative, and their literal translations are often not found in their respective contexts. For subtitles, the task becomes more complicated because of additional restrictions, such as limited character space, less elapsed time, and the requirement for immediate comprehension. Thus, an important question arises: Can subtitles maintain the same functional equivalence, acceptability, and readability as those in the source language? Previous studies have examined the occurrence of idiomatic expressions in subtitles (e.g., Fadwati, 2021; Kusumastuti, 2019; Manipuspika & Winzami, 2021; Ninsih, 2020; Pangestu et al., 2022; Putri & Wijaya, 2021; Sutrisno et al., 2023). Nevertheless, little work has been done to evaluate the quality of translation. Moreover, although language pairs such as English-Chinese (e.g., Chen & Wang, 2020; Lau et al., 2022; Tee et al., 2022) and English-Malay (e.g., Abdul Halim, 2019, 2020; Batmanathan et al., 2022; Tuan Ibharim & Alimi, 2024) have been widely explored in the context of audiovisual translation (AVT), few studies have been conducted on the Chinese-Malay language pair. Given the linguistic and cultural challenges unique to this language pair, further research is needed.

Consequently, this study investigates the translation of Chinese idiomatic expressions in Malay subtitles on Netflix. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How are Chinese idiomatic expressions in Malay subtitles categorised based on their definitions and functions in the literature?
2. What translation strategies have been applied to Chinese idiomatic expressions in Malay subtitles based on Mona Baker's (2018) idiom translation strategies?
3. What is the translation quality of Chinese idiomatic expressions in Malay subtitles as assessed by Jan Pedersen's (2017) FAR model?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Translation of Idiomatic Expressions

The translation of idiomatic expressions is one of the most challenging issues in translation studies (Baker, 2018; Manipuspika & Winzami, 2021; Ninsih, 2020; Rabia Aksoy, 2023; Sutrisno et al., 2023). They are "culture-bound expressions" (Putri & Wijaya, 2021; Manipuspika & Winzami, 2021), "intralinguistic culture-bound items" (Pedersen, 2007b), or "multi-word expressions" (Citron et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2021) composed of various words with meanings that cannot be easily understood from their literal meanings (Baker, 2018; Nguyen & Herman, 2021). They are often deeply embedded in the culture, history, and literature of the source language.

In AVT, this task becomes more challenging because of subtitle restrictions. Subtitlers do not just translate but also condense the fullness of meaning inherent in culture into a limited number of lines that will be easily read without compromising the clarity and relevance of the text. This task can be daunting, especially with idiomatic expressions, where the subtitler often needs to provide further context to an audience unfamiliar with the source-language culture. Furthermore, it is challenging to convey all meanings within a limited amount of screen time, especially when certain idiomatic expressions require more screen time to convey their full meaning. These factors underscore the importance of carefully selecting strategies to achieve an optimal balance between linguistic accuracy and audience understanding.

Despite extensive research, most AVT studies focus on language pairs such as English-Indonesian (e.g., Kusumastuti, 2019; Manipuspika & Winzami, 2021; Multazim et al., 2019; Ninsih, 2020) and English with European or other languages (e.g., Mahdi & Sahari, 2024; Shhaiber & Haider, 2023). These studies typically examine idiomatic expressions in terms of translation strategies or general outcomes, with limited attention to how multiple dimensions interact in the context of subtitling. Furthermore, their findings were shaped by the linguistic and cultural features of the language pairs, which may not apply to other contexts. Differences in idiomatic density, metaphorical structure, and cultural embeddedness may influence the rendering of idiomatic expressions across languages. In particular, research on Chinese-Malay subtitle translation remains limited, especially studies that examine categorisation, translation strategies, and translation quality using a subtitle-specific model. This study addresses this gap by analysing Chinese idiomatic expressions in Malay subtitles from three perspectives.

2.2 Categorisation of Chinese Idiomatic Expressions

One key challenge in translating idiomatic expressions is their accurate identification (Baker, 2018; Ninsih, 2020; Rabia Aksoy, 2023). In some cases, figurative features make it easier to identify idiomatic expressions. However, others that closely resemble ordinary language may go unnoticed, increasing the risk of literal translation when their figurative meanings are not recognised. One solution is to categorise idiomatic expressions based on their structural, functional, or cultural characteristics. This facilitates more appropriate translation decisions and helps determine suitable strategies.

Previous studies have proposed various classification frameworks based on the nature, origin, and usage of idiomatic expressions in different contexts (e.g., Banwo, 2019; Chen & Chen, 2020; He, 2023; Kang & Yang, 2022; S. Wang, 2020; Y. Wang, 2021; Wu, 2022). The following classifications were synthesised from the prior literature:

1. Idioms (chéng yǔ 成语)

Most Chinese idioms have a four-character structure (Kang & Yang, 2022; S. Wang, 2020; Y. Wang, 2021). This compact and rhythmic form enables complex meanings to be expressed concisely. They can be recognised by their fixed structure and limited flexibility, as their components cannot be easily altered or substituted (S. Wang, 2020).

2. Proverbs (yàn yǔ 谚语)

Proverbs are "fixed phrases circulating among the people, reflecting profound truths in simple and popular language" (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2016, p. 1513). They are commonly regarded as expressions of wisdom, moral lessons, and observations of human behaviour and social tendencies (Banwo, 2019; S. Wang, 2020; Wu, 2022). They are typically complete sentences that can stand alone and be independently understood.

3. Aphorisms (gé yán 格言)

Aphorisms are "words that have admonition and have educative value" (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2016, p. 440). They are typically succinct, self-reflective, and often originate from authoritative figures, classical literature or religious texts. Their purpose is to prompt reflection and inculcate moral qualities such as self-control, perseverance, and integrity.

4. Two-part Allegorical Sayings (xiē hòu yǔ 歇后语)

Two-part allegorical sayings are characterised by a structure consisting of a riddle-like introductory segment followed by an explanatory second part (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2016, p. 1448). The introductory segment functions as a metaphorical clue, whereas the second conveys the intended meaning. In actual use, speakers may produce only the first segment, requiring the hearer to infer the full meaning from the context. This highlights the importance of shared cultural knowledge and contextual cues in the interpretation process of the model.

5. Common Sayings (sú yǔ 俗语)

Common sayings are colloquial, flexible in structure, and easy to understand. Their structure is dynamic and can be extended by adding words (Wang, 2021). Unlike other expressions, common sayings do not contain classical allusions and are often filled with emotional, sarcastic, or humorous undertones. Common sayings are accepted when used in a community.

Although these classifications provide a useful framework for understanding Chinese idiomatic expressions, their implications for translation remain unexplored. In particular, structural differences across categories, such as the fixed and condensed form of idioms versus the flexible nature of common sayings, may lead to different translation challenges and strategies. However, limited research has examined how these categories influence translation strategies and quality in subtitling contexts, especially in Chinese-Malay translation. This highlights the need to systematically classify idiomatic expressions as a basis for analysing translation strategies and quality.

2.3 Baker's (2018) Translation Strategies of Idioms

Baker (2018) proposed six strategies that can be applied to translate idiomatic expressions:

1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form

Applying a corresponding idiom with the same meaning and similar lexical units in the target language. For example, the idiom “一石二鸟” (one stone, two birds) shares the same meaning and key lexical elements as its English equivalent, “kill two birds with one stone.”

2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form

Employing an equivalent idiom in the target language that conveys a similar meaning to the source idiom but uses different lexical choices or metaphors. For instance, “一石二鸟” (one stone, two birds) corresponds in meaning to the Malay idiom “*sekali tepuk dua nyamuk mati*” (one clap, two mosquitoes die), as both express the idea of accomplishing two outcomes through a single action, despite differences in metaphor and wording.

3. Borrowing the source language idiom

Occasionally, idiomatic expressions can be borrowed directly from the source language, especially if they are culturally important or have been frequently used in the target culture. For instance, “game over” has gained global recognition and is widely used metaphorically in many languages to refer to hopeless situations.

4. Translation by paraphrase

Paraphrasing is a common strategy employed by translators when they find no equivalent idiom in the target language to represent the intended meaning. The result is a non-idiomatic expression that emphasises semantic accuracy over aesthetic value. Although the translation may not hold much cultural or rhetorical value, it clarifies the context and prevents misinterpretation.

5. Translation by omission of a play on idiom

This involves translating the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression while omitting its figurative, cultural, or playful elements, such as puns or homophonic words, especially when they cannot be appropriately translated because of structural or cultural differences.

6. Translation by omission of the entire idiom

This method is used when an equivalent translation is not possible or when a literal translation would disrupt the natural flow of the target text. In cases where the omission of the expression does not affect the progression of the narrative, the translator may choose to omit the idiomatic expression.

Baker’s (2018) model has been frequently used to analyse subtitling practices in studies on English-Indonesian language pairs (e.g., Manipuspika & Winzami, 2021; Murtajib & Wahyuningsih, 2024; Ninsih, 2020; Putri & Wijaya, 2021; Sutrisno et al., 2023; Tambunan, 2023). Paraphrasing is consistently identified as the most frequently used strategy because it addresses cultural differences and maintains comprehension (Manipuspika & Winzami, 2021). This preference is influenced by subtitling constraints, such as limited on-screen space, audience expectations, and cross-cultural differences in idiom use (Fitria & Djauhari, 2025). The multimodal nature of audiovisual content, including dialogue, images, gestures, and music, shapes the rendering of idiomatic expressions in subtitles (Asterina & Ali, 2022).

However, most studies focus on identifying dominant strategies rather than examining variations across idiom categories or their effects on translation quality. Research on Chinese-Malay subtitle translation remains limited, raising the question of whether similar patterns, such as the predominance of paraphrasing, persist in this language pair. Therefore, this study explores the translation of Chinese idiomatic expressions in Malay subtitles in relation to categorisation, strategy use and translation quality.

2.4 Assessing Subtitle Quality

As audiovisual content grows and reaches global audiences, subtitles play an important role in enhancing accessibility (Brendel & Vela, 2022). Therefore, ensuring subtitle quality is important, as it affects audience perception and the viewing experience. Subtitle quality can be assessed from linguistic and technical perspectives, including timing, segmentation, and readability (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2020; Karakanta et al., 2019).

Several approaches have been formulated to objectively measure the quality of subtitles. For instance, the NER (Romero-Fresco & Martínez, 2015) and NTR (Romero-Fresco & Pöschhacker, 2017) models

are used to measure the quality of live subtitling, whereas the FAR (Pedersen, 2017) and CIA (Künzli, 2020) models are used for pre-prepared subtitles.

Despite the availability of subtitle-specific models, many studies on idiomatic expressions still rely on general translation quality frameworks, such as Larson (1984) and Nababan et al. (2012) (e.g., Fadwati et al., 2021; Kusumastuti, 2019; Ninsih, 2020; Ramadhani et al., 2024). Although these models assess meaning, acceptability, and readability, they are not designed specifically for subtitling and may overlook viewer-oriented factors and technical constraints such as time and space. In addition, translation quality is often evaluated at a general level, with limited focus on idiomatic expressions.

In this context, Pedersen's (2017) FAR model offers a more suitable framework for assessing the quality of subtitles. However, its application to idiomatic expressions, particularly in less-studied language pairs such as Chinese-Malay, remains limited, highlighting a clear research gap and the need for empirical investigation.

2.5 Pedersen's (2017) FAR Model

The FAR model highlights three primary criteria: functional equivalence, acceptability, and readability, each of which consists of subcategories (see Table 1).

Table 1

FAR Model Sub-Aspects and Corresponding Penalty Scores

Dimensions	Sub-Aspects	Error Types/Penalty Scores
Functional Equivalence	Semantic Stylistic	Minor (0.5), Standard (1) Serious (2)
Acceptability	Grammar Spelling Idiomatycity	Minor (0.25) Standard (0.5) Serious (1)
Readability	Segmentation and Spotting Punctuation and Graphics Reading Speed and Line Length	

Source: Pedersen (2017)

The FAR model uses a three-tier penalty system to measure subtitle errors. It is based on the “contract of illusion” (Pedersen, 2007a), in which viewers perceive subtitles as the original dialogue. Thus, inconsistencies between subtitles and dialogues are seen as errors because they disrupt the illusion and distract viewers.

This model has been widely applied in general subtitle quality assessments (e.g., Hagström & Pedersen, 2022; Koglin et al., 2022; Ludera et al., 2024; Pedersen, 2018; Ukušová & Zahorák, 2021; Uslu Korkmaz & Okyayuz, 2024). It has also been used to evaluate specific linguistic features such as culture-specific references (e.g., Abdelaal, 2019; Alaa & Al Sawi, 2023), taboo language (e.g., Abdelaal & Al Sarhani, 2021), and emotional expressions (e.g., Sanatifar & Ghamsarian, 2023). These studies demonstrate the model's applicability in assessing various aspects of the quality of subtitles.

However, its application to idiomatic expressions is limited. Idiomatic expressions present distinct challenges that may not be fully captured by general error categories. In addition, existing studies rarely examine how translation strategies influence the types and severity of errors identified in the FAR model. This indicates a gap in understanding how the FAR model can be applied to evaluate idiomatic expression translation in the context of subtitling.

3.0 Methods

This descriptive qualitative research explores the process of rendering Chinese idiomatic expressions in Malay subtitles in three stages: idiom categorisation, translation strategy identification, and quality assessment.

Nine Chinese drama series available on Netflix were used as research material. The drama series was purposefully selected based on the following criteria.

1. Availability of Malay subtitles to maintain consistency with the research focus on translation from Chinese to Malay.
2. Recent broadcast dates (2019-2024), with data collection up to July 2024, reflect recent subtitling practices.
3. The drama series' popularity among Malaysian viewers makes the selected material representative of the content commonly consumed in Malaysia.

The popularity of the drama series was assessed using Google Trends by analysing interest in the keyword "Chinese drama" in Malaysia from 2019 to 2024. This tool provides data based on location and time. The selected drama series were further validated through viewer recommendations on Reddit, Quora, and Lemon8, in line with the trends identified.

To obtain a representative sample, random sampling was used, selecting three episodes from each series with the "RAND()" function in Microsoft Excel, resulting in 27 episodes. All Chinese idiomatic expressions were manually entered into Microsoft Excel with their corresponding Malay subtitles and English translations. Content analysis was employed to identify the nature of each idiomatic expression by classifying them into five categories: idioms, proverbs, aphorisms, two-part allegorical sayings, and common sayings, based on their definitions and functions.

Subsequently, the Malay translation strategies employed for the Chinese idiomatic expressions were determined using Baker's (2018) model, which systematically describes the six translation strategies employed in the process: (1) using an idiom of similar meaning and similar form, (2) using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form, (3) using the source language idiom, (4) translation by paraphrase, (5) translation by omission of a play on an idiom, and (6) translation by omission of the entire idiom. A comparative textual analysis of the source and target texts was conducted to determine the translation strategies used. Finally, the frequencies were computed to determine whether there was any pattern in the use of translation strategies concerning the type of idiom.

Finally, the quality of the translation was measured using standardised criteria based on descriptions of errors and corresponding penalty scores in the FAR model, along with Netflix guidelines on subtitling.

1. Functional Equivalence

a. Semantic Errors

- Minor Errors (0.5): Lexical and terminological errors that do not impact the storyline.
- Standard Errors (1): Errors that change the subtitle's meaning but do not significantly impede the understanding of the viewer, including partial translation, mistranslation, or loss of key information.
- Serious Errors (2): Errors that render subtitles unintelligible or make it difficult for the viewer to understand the storyline through a series of subtitles.

b. Stylistic Errors

- Minor Errors (0.25): Minor errors in style or tone that do not substantially affect understanding.
- Standard Errors (0.5): Errors that disrupt the tone or mood, making the subtitles look unnatural or inappropriate.
- Serious Errors (1): Errors that substantially disrupt the overall flow or tone of the movie and affect multiple subtitles or scenes.

2. Acceptability

a. Grammar Errors

- Minor Errors (0.25): Those that are not important for understanding but may annoy linguistic purists.
- Standard Errors (0.5): Moderate errors that are between minor and serious errors.
- Serious Errors (1): Those that impair understanding.

b. Spelling Errors

- Minor Errors (0.25): Spelling errors that have little effect on understanding.
- Standard Errors (0.5): Errors that alter the meaning of words.
- Serious Errors (1): Errors that make words unreadable.

c. Idiomaticity Errors

- Minor Errors (0.25): Slight awkwardness of expression that sounds odd but does not affect understanding.
- Standard Errors (0.5): Noticeable awkwardness or confusion that distracts the audience or requires additional cognitive effort to understand the speaker.
- Serious Errors (1): Errors that significantly alter the meaning or make the expression unintelligible, resulting in a loss of the message.

3. Readability

a. Segmentation Errors

- Minor Errors (0.25): The semantic or syntactic break is incorrect.
- Standard Errors (0.5): Errors occur between two consecutive subtitles.
- Serious Errors (1): Not applicable, as segmentation errors are not considered serious according to Pedersen (2017).

b. Spotting Errors

- Minor Errors (0.25): Synchronisation between subtitles and dialogue is off by less than a second.
- Standard Errors (0.5): Synchronisation is off by at least a second.
- Serious Errors (1): Synchronisation is off by more than an utterance.

c. Punctuation and Graphics Errors

- Minor Errors (0.25): Misuse of commas, periods, ellipses, or quotation marks, or missing punctuation.
- Standard Errors (0.5): Misuse of dashes or italics.
- Serious Errors (1): Noticeable punctuation errors that detract from viewer immersion.

d. Line Length Errors

- Minor Errors (0.25): Line length is more than 42 characters per line (cpl).
- Standard Errors (0.5): Line length is more than 50 cpl.
- Serious Errors (1): Line length is more than 60 cpl.

e. Reading Speed Errors

- Minor Errors (0.25): Reading speed above 17 characters per second (cps).
- Standard Errors (0.5): Reading speed above 22.1 cps.
- Serious Errors (1): Reading speed above 25 cps.

The initial evaluation was conducted by the researcher (Rater 1), a native Chinese speaker with good knowledge of Malay and more than two years' experience in translation and subtitling. The same corpus was then evaluated by Rater 2, a native Malay speaker with a good command of Chinese and a third-year linguistics student. Rater 2 was suitable for the study as they aimed to evaluate the subtitles from the perspective of an informed target-language speaker with adequate linguistic competence and cultural knowledge. Rater 2 was trained to use the FAR model before the subtitle evaluation was conducted. Any differences in the results were discussed and addressed. The differences between the two raters' results in terms of the error and approval rates did not exceed 10%, which is the reliability standard set by Jan Pedersen (personal communication, August 26, 2024) in a personal online discussion. The results are presented in terms of several parameters: the number of errors, error score, error rate, and approval rate to provide an overview of the translation quality.

4.0 Results

4.1 Categorisation of Chinese Idiomatic Expressions

A total of 239 Chinese idiomatic expressions were found in the dataset, with the frequency and percentage distributions of each category shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage Distribution by Category

Category	Sum	Percentage
Idioms	199	83.26%
Proverbs	9	3.77%
Aphorisms	2	0.84%
Two-part Allegorical Sayings	1	0.42%
Common Sayings	28	11.72%
Total	239	100%

The results showed that most expressions belonged to the category of Chinese idioms, with 199 (83.26 %) occurrences. Most Chinese idioms in the corpus are four-character expressions that require knowledge of their sources in classical literature, history, or philosophical works to fully understand their meanings. They can be used in different narrative contexts, including emotional dialogues, reflective monologues, and scenes of conflict or resolution.

The second-most-used expressions belonged to the category of common sayings, with 28 (11.72%) occurrences. The structure of the sayings is fixed but flexible enough to accommodate the insertion of extra words without changing their essential meanings. For example, “扣帽子” (put a hat on) can change to “扣这么大帽子” (put such a big hat on), referring to the act of falsely accusing someone of a crime.

Proverbs ranked third, with nine instances (3.77%). They are usually employed to communicate experiences and/or offer moral guidance. The use of proverbs in the subtitles provides guidance or insight into the dialogue. For example, “好马不吃回头草” (a good horse does not eat the grass behind it) refers to the idea of being sensible and not repeating past mistakes or engaging with past situations.

Aphorisms appeared twice (0.84%) in the data set. They are employed to offer refined guidance on ethics and morals. For example, “发乎情，止于礼” (arises from emotion but stops at propriety) refers to the Confucian value of finding harmony between human emotion and propriety. This aphorism promotes natural human emotions (情), but within the context of propriety (礼), which refers to moral and ritualistic decorum.

The two-part allegorical saying had the lowest frequency, with only one instance (0.42%): “竹篮子打水” (drawing water with a bamboo basket). The complete form of this expression is “竹篮子打水——一场空” (drawing water with a bamboo basket—ends in nothing), which metaphorically conveys the idea that all efforts are ultimately futile.

The results indicate that Chinese idioms dominate the dialogue and serve as the primary means of conveying meaning, whereas other types of saying’s function as supplementary elements.

4.2 Translation Strategies of Chinese Idiomatic Expressions

Table 3 presents the frequency of the translation strategies across the five idiomatic expression categories.

Table 3

Translation Strategies for Chinese Idiomatic Expressions by Category

Category	Translation Strategy	Frequency
Idioms	Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form	5
	Translation by paraphrase	174
	Translation by omission of entire idiom	20
	Total:	199
Proverbs	Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form	1
	Translation by paraphrase	8
	Total:	9
Aphorisms	Translation by paraphrase	2
	Total:	2
Two-part Allegorical Sayings	Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form	1
	Total:	1
Common Sayings	Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form	1
	Translation by paraphrase	25
	Translation by omission of the entire idiom	2
	Total:	28

The most popular translation strategy found in the dataset was paraphrasing, with a total count of 209. This strategy is used to rephrase the meaning of idiomatic expressions in simpler or more appropriate words in the target language. The most popular use of the translation strategy was for translating idioms (174) and common sayings (25). This suggests that subtitlers prioritise audience comprehension over preserving the original, lexical, or stylistic form.

The strategy of using an idiom with a similar meaning but a different form was used in eight instances, drawn from idioms (5), proverbs (1), two-part allegorical sayings (1), and common sayings (1). This strategy maintains the figurative effect by replacing the original expression with a Malay equivalent of similar meaning but in a different form.

The omission of the entire idiom occurs in 22 instances, primarily in idioms (20) and common sayings (2). This strategy is applied when the idiom is not essential to the plot, and the expression is removed entirely from the subtitle. While omission improves readability, it results in a loss of the expressive richness of the original idiom.

Notably, the strategies of using an idiom of similar meaning and form, borrowing the source-language idiom, and omitting the idiom's wordplay were not observed in the present study. This may be due to the limited equivalence between Chinese and Malay idioms, the risk of incomprehension when borrowing Chinese expressions, and the difficulty in reproducing wordplay in subtitles.

4.3 Quality Assessment of the Malay Subtitles

The total errors, error scores, error rates, and approval rates are presented in Table 4, following Hagström and Pedersen (2022). The results show that the approval rate for acceptability was very high (98.74% and 98.22%), followed by Functional Equivalence (76.05% and 82.22%), while readability recorded the lowest rates (71.23% and 71.03%).

Table 4

Number of Errors, Error Scores, Error Rates, and Approval Rates for Functional Equivalence, Acceptability, and Readability

Rater 1			Rater 2		
	Number of Errors	Error Scores		Number of Errors	Error Scores
Functional Equivalence			Functional Equivalence		
Semantic Subtotal	60	56	Semantic Subtotal	46	40.5
Minor	8	4	Minor	11	5.5
Standard	52	52	Standard	35	35
Serious	0	0	Serious	0	0
Stylistic Subtotal	4	1.25	Stylistic Subtotal	6	2
Minor	3	0.75	Minor	4	1
Standard	1	0.5	Standard	2	1
Serious	0	0	Serious	0	0
Functional Equivalence Subtotal	64	57.25	Functional Equivalence Subtotal	52	42.5
Error Rate: 23.95%			Error Rate: 17.78%		
Approval Rate: 76.05%			Approval Rate: 82.22%		
Acceptability			Acceptability		
Grammar Subtotal	5	1.25	Grammar Subtotal	7	2.75
Minor	5	1.25	Minor	5	1.25
Standard	0	0	Standard	1	0.5
Serious	0	0	Serious	1	1
Spelling Subtotal	0	0	Spelling Subtotal	0	0
Minor	0	0	Minor	0	0
Standard	0	0	Standard	0	0
Serious	0	0	Serious	0	0
Idiomatycity Subtotal	5	1.75	Idiomatycity Subtotal	4	1.5
Minor	3	0.75	Minor	2	0.5
Standard	2	1	Standard	2	1
Serious	0	0	Serious	0	0
Acceptability Subtotal	10	3	Acceptability Subtotal	11	4.25
Error Rate: 1.26%			Error Rate: 1.78%		
Approval Rate: 98.74%			Approval Rate: 98.22%		

Table 4 (continued)

Rater 1			Rater 2		
	Number of Errors	Error Scores		Number of Errors	Error Scores
Readability			Readability		
Segmentation and Spotting Subtotal	11	3.25	Segmentation and Spotting Subtotal	11	3
Minor	9	2.25	Minor	10	2.5
Standard	2	1	Standard	1	0.5
Serious	0	0	Serious	0	0
Punctuation and Graphics Subtotal	3	0.75	Punctuation and Graphics Subtotal	3	1.5
Minor	3	0.75	Minor	2	0.5
Standard	0	0	Standard	0	0
Serious	0	0	Serious	1	1
Reading Speed and Line Length Subtotal	122	64.75	Reading Speed and Line Length Subtotal	122	64.75
Minor	63	15.75	Minor	63	15.75
Standard	20	10	Standard	20	10
Serious	39	39	Serious	39	39
Readability Subtotal	136	68.75	Readability Subtotal	136	69.25
Error Rate: 28.77%			Error Rate: 28.97%		
Approval Rate: 71.23%			Approval Rate: 71.03%		

Minor errors were observed in the Functional Equivalence category. For example, in the phrase “可怜的魏徵啊，一副直肠子” (Poor Wei Zheng, such a straightforward person), the Chinese idiom “直肠子” (straight intestine) refers to someone who is frank and outspoken. It is translated as “*naif*” (naive), introducing a slight semantic shift at the lexical level. Although this rendering does not precisely capture the intended trait, the deviation does not affect the plot progression.

A stylistic error can be observed in the translation of 你也说是万一，何必杞人忧天呢？ (You said it is just a ‘what if,’ so why worry unnecessarily?). The idiom “杞人忧天” (the people of Qi worrying about the sky) originates from a Chinese fable and conveys the meaning of unnecessary or unfounded worry. However, it is rendered as “*Jangan cari masalah*” (do not look for trouble), which carries a cautionary or warning tone. While the source text expresses a more consolatory stance, the target text adopts a more commanding tone, resulting in a stylistic mismatch.

In the Acceptability dimension, the subtitles demonstrated high orthographic accuracy, with no spelling errors. However, minor issues related to grammar and idiomaticity were identified. For example, in the line “自然是要恭喜陛下得偿所愿，可是真正的尘埃落定，还要待到明日” (Of course, we must congratulate Your Majesty on fulfilling your wish, but the true dust settling will have to wait until tomorrow), the idiomatic expression “尘埃落定” (dust settling), which conveys the sense of a matter being conclusively resolved, is omitted in the Malay subtitles and rendered as “*Tapi kita hanya akan tahu esok*” (But we will only know tomorrow). Although the sentence remains understandable, the omission leads to a loss of idiomatic meaning, making the message less precise and slightly vaguer.

Another example of a minor idiomaticity error can be observed in the translation of “苦肉计啊?” (Pulling the sympathy card, huh?) as “*Kamu guna permainan emosi, ya?*” (Are you playing an emotional game?). The expression “苦肉计” originates from a classical Chinese military strategy, referring to an act of self-inflicted suffering intended to deceive others and gain sympathy. As there is no direct equivalent in Malay, the translator paraphrases. Although the core meaning is conveyed, the phrase “*permainan emosi*” (emotional game) is not fully idiomatic in Malay and may sound somewhat unnatural to native speakers.

In the Readability dimension, the analysis shows that the dataset was free of segmentation and line-length errors, indicating general compliance with Netflix’s Malay subtitling guidelines. The spotting errors were minimal, typically involving delays of less than one second or at least one second, which were classified as minor and standard, respectively. Punctuation errors were also limited, mainly involving missing commas and periods, which slightly affected readability. A total of 122 reading speed errors were identified, where the characters-per-second (CPS) rate exceeded the recommended limit. According to the FAR model, these errors are categorised as minor, standard, and serious. It should be noted that the subtitle timing was measured manually rather than using specialised software to calculate the CPS values. Although the calculations were carefully conducted, the results may not be entirely precise. Future studies may consider using tools such as Subtitle Edit and Aegisub for more accurate measurements.

5.0 Discussion

This study addresses the problem of how Chinese idiomatic expressions are rendered into Malay subtitles under audiovisual constraints and why certain strategies are prioritised. The results indicated that four-character idioms were the most popular in the dataset, thus validating the claims by Liu et al. (2019), Liu and Su (2021), and Corderi Novoa (2025) that most Chinese idiomatic expressions are composed of four characters. The dominance of four-character idioms may stem from the fact that Chinese drama often employs succinct expressions rich in cultural context, drawn from classical or historical references. Common sayings were the second most popular category in the dataset. Although proverbs, aphorisms, and two-part allegorical expressions were not as common, they contributed to linguistic diversity.

The results revealed that paraphrasing is the most frequently employed strategy, consistent with previous studies on subtitle translation (e.g., Manipuspika & Winzami, 2021; Murtajib & Wahyuningsih, 2024; Ninsih, 2020; Putri & Wijaya, 2021; Sutrisno et al., 2023; Tambunan, 2023). This may be attributed to its suitability for subtitling, where meaning is prioritised over form because of constraints such as brevity, clarity, and limited on-screen time (Abdelaal & Al Sarhani, 2021). By examining these patterns, this study highlights the subtitlers’ tendency to prioritise viewer comprehension and processing ease over formal equivalence. Although research on Chinese-Malay subtitle translation remains limited, this study contributes to the broader literature on translating Chinese idiomatic expressions into Malay, particularly within streaming platforms such as Netflix, where technical and temporal constraints strongly shape translation choices.

Although some studies (e.g., Manipuspika & Winzami, 2021; Ninsih, 2020; Putri & Wijaya, 2021; Sutrisno et al., 2023; Tambunan, 2023) reported the use of idioms with similar meanings and forms, this strategy was not observed in the present study. This absence highlights the difficulty of achieving idiomatic equivalence across linguistically and culturally distant languages such as Chinese and Malay. Instead, a small number of instances involved idioms with similar meanings but different forms, likely intended to enhance familiarity among Malay viewers. Additionally, omission emerged as the second most frequently used strategy, consistent with findings of Putri and Wijaya (2021), who ranked it second in their comparison of fansubs and official subtitles, and Ninsih (2020), who identified it as the most frequent strategy. Similar patterns were reported by Manipuspika and Winzami (2021) and Sutrisno et al. (2023). These findings suggest that subtitlers make selective reductions when idiomatic expressions do not contribute directly to narrative progression, reflecting a functional approach that prioritises clarity and efficiency.

Furthermore, borrowing the source-language idiom appears to be rare in previous studies, reported only by Murtajb and Wahyuningsih (2024) and Putri and Wijaya (2021). In the present dataset, as well as in other studies (e.g., Ninsih, 2020; Sutrisno et al., 2023), this strategy is not observed, likely due to the cultural and linguistic specificity of idioms, which limits their intelligibility when they are left untranslated. Notably, no instances of idiom-based wordplay were identified in this study, a phenomenon that has received limited attention in existing research. This highlights a gap in the literature, as the treatment of wordplay and creative language use in subtitles remains underexplored. This may be because subtitlers tend to avoid complex figurative expressions that affect readability and audience comprehension.

The quality assessment indicated generally good translation, with subtitles conforming to Malay language norms and no spelling errors. The issues were limited to minor grammatical and idiomatic problems. This contrasts with Ukušová and Zahorák (2021) and Ludera et al. (2024), where unnatural language use was not the most frequent error. Idiomaticity issues may stem from limited cultural knowledge (Al-Shareef & Ashuja'a, 2024) or "translationese" (Pedersen, 2018). In the present dataset, some literal translations produce slightly unnatural but still comprehensible expressions. These findings highlight the importance of balancing accuracy and naturalness in subtitle translations.

The analysis of the Functional Equivalence dimension indicated that semantic errors were the most frequent. This finding aligns with those of Ukušová and Zahorák (2021), Al-Shareef and Ashuja'a (2024), and Ludera et al. (2024), who also reported a lack of semantic equivalence in translations. The errors in the present dataset mainly stem from shifts in meaning and the omission of idiomatic expressions relevant to the plot, as noted by Al-Shareef and Ashuja'a (2024). This highlights the central challenge identified in this study, the difficulty of preserving meaning while adhering to subtitling constraints.

The highest number of errors occurred in the readability dimension, with reading speed errors being the most frequent, followed by spotting, segmentation, and punctuation issues. Owing to technical constraints, Netflix subtitle files were not electronically accessible, similar to Hagström and Pedersen (2022), in which only visible readability errors could be recorded. The findings of this study align with those of Koglin et al. (2022) and Pedersen (2018), who noted that subtitlers often reproduce dialogues too closely without sufficient condensation, resulting in high reading speeds. Errors were also observed in cases of overlapping dialogues and improper timing. Although less frequent, punctuation errors such as missing commas and full stops can disrupt comprehension by forcing viewers to reread (Pedersen, 2017, p. 72). These findings highlight the need for stricter control of reading speed and further investigation into subtitle production workflows across platforms to enhance overall quality.

6.0 Conclusion

This study investigates the translation of Chinese idiomatic expressions into Malay subtitles on Netflix by classifying idiomatic expressions, identifying translation strategies, and assessing translation quality. The classification framework proves effective in categorising different types of idiomatic expressions, although distinguishing their functions sometimes requires careful consideration of context. This highlights the importance of contextual analyses in identifying specific expression patterns. Baker's (2018) model is useful for identifying translation strategies; however, this study suggests the inclusion of "literal translation" as a separate category, as proposed by Tambunan (2023), given its frequent use and distinction from other strategies. Pedersen's (2017) FAR model is also effective in assessing translation quality, although its general error descriptions may need to be adapted to better capture specific linguistic features in line with in-house requirements.

In addressing the research questions, the findings show that Chinese idioms are the most frequently used type of idiomatic expression in the drama series, highlighting their role in conveying characters' emotions and cultural meanings. Baker's (2018) model indicates that paraphrasing is the most commonly used translation strategy in Malay subtitles, likely because of its adaptability when direct equivalents are unavailable or culturally unsuitable. Pedersen's (2017) FAR model revealed a high approval rate in the "Acceptability" dimension, indicating that the subtitles are generally natural and grammatically appropriate in Malay. Although semantic errors are present, they may be attributed to

subtitling constraints that require concise translations within a limited time and space. Greater attention should be paid to the technical aspects of reading speed, as some subtitles may be too long for viewers to process within the allocated display time.

This study has important implications for AVT, particularly in the subtitling of idiomatic expressions. This shows that subtitlers tend to prioritise comprehension, naturalness, and processing ease, highlighting the need for practical guidelines that address contextual appropriateness, cultural transfer, and accessibility within the constraints of subtitles. The findings also suggest that existing translation quality assessment models may require adaptation to better capture the linguistic and technical challenges of idiomatic translation, especially in linguistically distant language pairs such as Chinese and Malay. In this regard, an adapted framework that integrates functional, linguistic, and technical dimensions, supported by in-house guidelines, offers a more effective evaluation approach.

However, this study is limited by its focus on product-based analysis without incorporating viewer reception data, which restricts insights into how audiences perceive and process subtitles. The dataset was also confined to selected Chinese drama series on Netflix, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. In addition, the assessment relied on two trained raters without expert validation, which may have affected the robustness of the evaluation. The analysis was conducted manually due to restricted access to subtitle files, potentially reducing the precision in measuring technical aspects such as reading speed and spotting. Future research should incorporate viewer-based methods to examine comprehension and engagement, expand datasets across different genres and platforms, and involve expert evaluators to strengthen reliability. The use of specialised subtitle software (e.g., Subtitle Edit or Aegisub) is also recommended to support a more systematic and accurate analysis.

Acknowledgement

We would like to extend our appreciation to Associate Professor Jan Pedersen for kindly sharing his knowledge of subtitling and translation studies and for allowing us to use the FAR model developed in his research as an essential tool for analysing the data. We would also like to express our appreciation to Rater Two for helping with the inter-rater reliability check.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Author Contribution Statement

TTY: Literature Search, Conceptualisation, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; AA: Literature Search Support, Methodological Guidance, Writing – Review and Editing.

Funding

This study was supported by the Bantuan Khas Penyelidikan (BKP Special) grant provided by Universiti Malaya (project code BKP094-2024-ECRG).

Ethics Statement

This research did not require IRB approval because it did not involve human participants and used publicly available secondary data with no personally identifiable information.

Data Access Statement

Research data supporting this publication are available upon request to the corresponding author.

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