

A Study on the English Translation Subtitles of Tang Poetry in “Chang An” from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

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ABSTRACT: As domestic animated films experience ongoing growth, an increasing number of these films are reaching international audiences. Subtitle translation emerges as a pivotal component in this global outreach. In line with the principles of three-dimensional transformation within Eco-translatology, translators are tasked with managing the comprehensive ecological context of the translation and making judicious selections in the adaptation of translation. This article examines the subtitle translation of Tang poetry in the domestic animated film “Chang An” through the perspective of three-dimensional transformation. It aims to delve into the translator’s adaptive selections across the dimensions of language, culture, and communication.

KEYWORDS: Eco-translatology; three-dimensional transformation; subtitle translation; English translation of Tang poetry; Chang An

I. INTRODUCTION

“Chang An” is a historical animated film produced by Zhuiguang Animation, making its debut in Chinese Mainland on July 8, 2023. Set against the backdrop of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, the film narrates the aftermath of the Rebellion of An Lushan and Shi Siming, depicting the chaos that engulfed the entire city of Chang’an due to the conflict. Several years after the Rebellion, the Tubo army launched an invasion in the southwest, putting Gao Shi at a disadvantage in the ensuing battle. With Chang’an in a precarious state, Gao Shi, besieged in the city, recounts his life with Li Bai to a eunuch. The film has garnered widespread acclaim since its release, with particular praise directed at the English translation of Tang poetry, resonating positively with a large number of international audiences (Baidu Baike, 2023).

There are a total of 48 classic Tang poems in the film. The film skillfully translated by Linda Jaivin, an Australian sinologist, who was specifically invited by the film company for this translation task. With over 40 years of profound involvement in both Chinese and English cultures, Jaivin has translated many excellent works, including renowned Chinese films such as *Farewell My Concubine*, *Forever Enthralled*, *Hero*, *Ashes of Time*, and *A City of Sadness*.

Eco-translatology’s concept of three-dimensional transformation introduces a fresh outlook for studying the realm of film subtitle translation. In alignment with Eco-translatology, translators are tasked not only with harmonizing the comprehensive ecological context of the translation but also with making adaptive selections across the dimensions of language, culture, and communication. This article seeks to scrutinize the translation of Tang poetry in “Chang An” through the perspective of three-dimensional transformation, delving into the adaptive selections crafted by the translator.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

Eco-translatology, a groundbreaking translation theory introduced by Professor Hu Gengshen from Tsinghua University, draws inspiration from Darwin's theory of adaptation and selection. This innovative approach involves a cross-disciplinary exploration at the intersection of ecology and translation studies. By merging the principles of survival and the selection of the fittest from natural laws with the field of translation, this theory posits that the translation process mirrors the mechanisms of adaptation and selection in nature, believing that translation is adaptation and selection (Hu Gengshen, 2008). The fundamental tenets of Eco-translatology revolve around three interconnected concepts, shaping a dynamic framework of interaction. Firstly, "translation as text-transplantation" emphasizes a perspective centered on the act of "translation". Secondly, "translation as adaptation and selection" directs attention to the role of the "translator" in the process. Lastly, "translation as ecological balance" underscores the significance of the "translation environment" in maintaining equilibrium within the translation process (Hu, 2011).

Eco-translatology introduces a three-dimensional transformation approach to translation, emphasizing the adaptive selection and transformation of language, culture, and communication within the framework of multi-dimensional adaptive selection and selective adaptation (Hu, 2008). This method mandates that translators, grounded in the holistic ecological context of translation, thoroughly contemplate diverse factors and demands throughout the translation process. Subsequently, they are required to make judicious selections in the adaptation during translation. In essence, to enhance the quality of translation, translators are encouraged to pursue multidimensional adaptation and adaptive selection, aiming to achieve multidimensional transformation.

III. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUBTITLE TRANSLATION

Mayor, Kelly, and Gallardo (1988) introduced the concept of "synchronization" as a standard for subtitle translation, asserting that achieving simultaneous transmission of language and written information requires adherence to the "five synchronizations". These encompass time synchronization, space synchronization, content synchronization, language synchronization, and character synchronization. Henrik Gottlieb (1992) proposed a novel classification method, identifying two limiting factors for subtitle translation: formal limitations and multimedia limitations. Formal limitations pertain to spatial and temporal constraints imposed by screen size and reading speed, while multimedia limitations consider the influence of film language on subtitle translation, necessitating a colloquial language alignment with film and television works. Diaz Coinas (1999) further developed the "five synchronizations" of Mayor, Kelly, and Gallardo, refining six limiting factors in subtitle translation--namely time, space, music, visuals, language characteristics, and colloquial language. Li Yunxing (2001) translated and integrated Diaz Coinas's six limiting factors with the specifics of domestic film subtitle translation, distilling three primary constraints: time and space limitations, information function, and cultural factors. Qian Shaochang (2004) additionally summarized five characteristics of film and television language--listening, comprehensiveness, instantaneity, popularity, and no comments.

The most prominent distinction between subtitle translation and written translation lies in the constraints of time and space imposed on the former. In general, subtitles are confined to two lines of text, and their duration typically spans around six seconds. It is essential for subtitles to align with the pace of speech in films and TV shows, with minimal divergence across various media. Consequently, key characteristics of movie subtitle translation include a focus on timeliness, comprehensibility, conciseness, and colloquialism. The synchronized display of subtitles with the characters' speech speed aims to enhance the audiences' engagement with the film's plot. Successful film subtitle translation demands a translator's thorough understanding of the film's narrative direction, as well as a nuanced awareness of slight variations in language customs or cultural nuances between countries. The translator must adeptly grasp the language style and emphasize translation focus based on the movie's genre and thematic elements.

Although the classical poems featured in the film had previously been translated by some famous translators, Jaivin opted to re-translate these poems specifically for the subtitles, considering the unique demands of subtitle translation. Subtitle translation differs from literary translation, where directly incorporating existing translations might preserve their literary quality but could pose challenges for the audiences.

IV. A STUDY ON THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION SUBTITLES OF TANG POETRY IN “CHANG AN” FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THREE-DIMENSIONAL TRANSFORMATION

The concept of “three-dimensional transformation” necessitates translators to engage in adaptive selection and transformation across three dimensions: language, culture, and communication, guided by the principle of “multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection”. Specifically, the adaptive selection in the linguistic dimension involves meticulous consideration of language forms during the translation process. In the cultural dimension, translators need to focus on the cultural systems associated with both the source and target languages. The communicative dimension underscores the importance of adaptive selections in communicative intentions (Hu, 2008).

4.1 Adaptive Selections from the Dimension of Language

The adaptive selection within the language dimension underscores the translators need to make judicious selections regarding language and textual forms during translation (Hu, 2006). In this dimension, adaptive selection primarily pertains to the adaptation and selection of written vocabulary, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices. Translators are required to possess a deep understanding of the linguistic nuances in both the source and target languages, striking a balance within the comprehensive ecological context of the translation. It involves selecting words that align with the language expression habits of the target audiences, ensuring the accuracy of subtitle translation.

Example 1: 天生我材必有用，千金散尽还复来。

Heaven gave me the talent for a reason;

Spend now, riches return in season.

The poem in Example 1 is extracted from the renowned Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai’s “Invitation to Wine” (《将进酒》). Its essence conveys that Heaven has bestowed significant talents upon me, and there must be an opportunity to utilize them. Even if all wealth is spent, it can be replenished. This translation is not only succinct and aligned with the characteristics of subtitle translation but also retains the end-of-sentence rhyme, preserving the phonetic beauty of ancient poetry to a large extent. The phrase “spend now” vividly and concisely captures Li Bai’s bold and unrestrained personality. Additionally, the use of “In season” adheres to ancient usage, signifying “at the right or opportune time”. This translation meets the requirements of “conciseness” and “understandability” in subtitle translation, and constitutes a thoughtful adaptive selection from the perspective of vocabulary within language dimension.

Example 2: 古来圣贤皆寂寞，惟有饮者留其名。

Ancient sages leave no name;

It’s great drinkers who enjoy great fame.

In Example 2, this poem is also drawn from “Invitation to Wine” (《将进酒》), conveying the idea that throughout history, sages have often experienced loneliness, and only those with the ability to appreciate wine can leave behind a commendable legacy. It encapsulates the poet’s deep sense of sorrow, his self-confidence, and serves as an impassioned outcry against the injustices of the world. The translation strategically forms a rhyme with “name” and “fame”, employing an emphatic sentence structure, “it’s... who...”, to articulate the poet’s frustration. The translator adeptly incorporated common grammatical structures from English, succinctly conveying the essence of the original text. This not only aligns with the language expression habits of English audiences but also constitutes a well-thought-out adaptive selection from the perspective of grammatical structures within language dimension.

Example 3: 床前明月光，疑是地上霜。

Moonlight at the foot of my bed;

Appears to me like frost.

The excerpt in Example 3 is sourced from Li Bai’s “Thoughts on a Tranquil Night” (《静夜思》). It not only captures the luminosity of moonlight but also conveys the chilliness of the season, accentuating the poet’s sense of loneliness and desolation while wandering in a foreign land. The use of “like” in the translation

preserves the metaphor present in the original poem. The translator has accurately conveyed the meaning of the original through literal translation, meeting the requirements of “colloquialism” in subtitle translation, while also making adaptive selections from the perspective of rhetorical devices within language dimension.

4.2 Adaptive Selections from the Dimension of Culture

The adaptive selection within the cultural dimension primarily manifests in the degree of cultural information, highlighting the imperative for translators to be attuned to the cultural context of the target language during the translation process (Hu, 2006). Given the cultural disparities among different countries, translators must adeptly navigate the cultural nuances embedded in the source language to seamlessly integrate them into the target language environment. This necessitates a thorough understanding of the cultural landscapes of both the source and target languages, enabling translators to make appropriate selections. The goal is to ensure that the translation not only accurately conveys the original meaning but is also readily accepted by the target audiences.

Example 4: 君不见高堂明镜悲白发，朝如青丝暮成雪。

**Can you see the grief of white hair in the mirrors;
As dawn's black silk turns to evening snow?**

The poem in Example 4 is extracted from Li Bai's “Invitation to Wine”(《将进酒》). The usage of “君不见”, commonly employed in Yuefu poetry as a reminder, is translated literally as “can you see”, staying faithful to the original meaning. The term “高堂”, referring to the main hall of a house, has been omitted in the translation, while “青丝”, signifying soft black hair, is translated as “black silk”. These two lines, a hyperbole within the temporal domain, express lamentation for the brevity of life. They encapsulate the entire life journey from youth to aging, framing it as a progression from “morning” to “evening”, emphasizing the fleeting nature of existence. The use of “the grief of” in the translation more intuitively conveys the poet's emotions. Furthermore, the translator renders “白发” as “white hair”, aligning better with the subsequent mention of “snow” and capturing the poet's mood more effectively than the commonly used “gray hair” in English. In terms of the cultural dimension, the translator has made a more astute adaptive selection.

Example 5: 赵客缟胡绶，吴钩霜雪明。

**Warriors of Zhao with tassels flying;
Curved swords bright as shining snow.**

The poem in Example 5 conveys that the heroes from Zhao donned tassels on their heads and Wu's gleaming curved swords on their waists. This depiction creates a robust and heroic image of a warrior, vividly capturing the essence of their presence. The translator opted for a literal translation approach for the original poem, where “赵客” and “吴钩” are two culturally rich images. To better resonate with the cultural system of the audiences and align with the characteristics of subtitle translation, the translator strategically omitted some details, making adaptive selections from a cultural perspective.

4.3 Adaptive Selections from the Dimension of Communication

The adaptive selection within the communicative dimension underscores the importance of translators accurately and clearly conveying the communicative intentions articulated in the source language during translation. This entails translators giving due attention to the communicative aspect while ensuring the faithful transmission of language information and cultural connotations from the original text (Hu, 2013).

Example 6: 《长安三万里》

Chang An

While the title is not an entire poem, it is extracted from a poem by Chen Zilong from the Ming Dynasty--“梦到长安三万里，海风吹断碣西头”. Considering the communicative dimension, the translator's simplified translation of the film title as “Chang An” proves more effective than a literal translation like “Thirty Thousand Miles of Chang'an”. This concise and direct expression encapsulates the film's essence while ensuring effective communication, aligning seamlessly with the instantaneous nature of subtitle translation.

Example 7: 陈王昔时宴平乐，斗酒十千恣欢谑。

At the table of Prince Chen of old;

Wine flowed like water.

This excerpt, from Example 7, originates from Li Bai's "Invitation to Wine" (《将进酒》). The poet's emotions are steeped in a profound and expansive sense of sorrow. In this translation, the sentence "斗酒十千恣欢谑" is translated as "wine flowed like water", vividly capturing the imagery of abundant and carefree drinking. This not only adheres to the succinct requirements of subtitle translation but also accurately conveys the original meaning. The translator has demonstrated an adept adaptive selection, particularly within the communicative dimension.

Example 8: 忽如一夜春风来，千树万树梨花开。

As if brought by a spring breeze;

Snow blooms on trees like pear blossoms.

This excerpt is derived from "Song of White Snow in Farewell to Secretary Wu Going Back to the Capital" (《白雪歌送武判官归京》). Its essence conveys a sudden sensation, akin to a spring breeze that seemingly emerged overnight, evoking the imagery of countless pear blossoms in bloom. The metaphor here likens accumulated snow on branches to pear blossoms. The translator employs the verb "bloom" to dynamically portray the image of snow gathering on branches, while using the term "like" to convey the implicit metaphor present in the original poem. This approach presents the scene depicted in the original poem with clarity and immediacy for the audiences, which emphasizes the translator's adaptive selections within the communicative dimension.

Example 9: 朝辞白帝彩云间，千里江陵一日还。

Out from Baidi amongst the coloured clouds;

A thousand miles to Jiangling in a day.

This line is extracted from Li Bai's poem "Leaving the White Emperor Town at Dawn" (《早发白帝城》). It vividly portrays a stretch of the Yangtze River, extending from Baidi to Jiangling, where the waters flow swiftly and boats glide as if in flight. The poet's exuberant mood, influenced by a chance encounter with amnesty, harmoniously merges with the grand and vibrant scenery of the river, along with the smooth and graceful navigation along its course. In the translation, the word "朝" was omitted, and the verb "辞" was rendered as the preposition "out". This translation not only aligns with the static characteristics of English (Lian Shuneng, 1993) but also succinctly conveys the essence of the original poem in a straightforward and comprehensible manner. The translator has adeptly made an adaptive selection, particularly from the standpoint of the communicative dimension.

V. CONCLUSION

The significance of subtitle translation in the advancement of Chinese animated films cannot be overstated. However, translators face the challenge of navigating both the constraints of time and space, compelling them to concurrently address the demands of information transmission and subtitle translation. Drawing upon Professor Hu Gengshen's concept of three-dimensional transformation within Eco-translatology, this paper delves into the translation of Tang poetry in "Chang An". The analysis reveals the translator's concerted effort to make adaptive selections across various dimensions throughout the translation process, thereby upholding the overarching ecological balance of the translation. It is hoped that this exploration can offer valuable insights and inspiration for subtitle translation.

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