

An Exploration of Chinese-English Translation of Subtitles From the Perspective of Skopos Theory—A Case Study of *Empresses in the Palace*

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Based on Skopos Theory, this paper examines the English versions of the subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace* from fidelity, coherence, and skopos rules and discusses the translation strategies and methods adopted by the translators. It is found that translators adopt domestication as the primary strategy while foreignization as the secondary strategy. Translation methods employed are free translation, literal translation, transliteration, omission, and word-by-word translation, which are beneficial for the standardization and development of subtitle translation, as well as for the dissemination and communication of Chinese film and television culture.

Keywords: Skopos Theory, subtitle translation, *Empresses in the Palace*

Introduction

The television drama *Empresses in the Palace* made its debut in 2011, captivating audiences in China, Southeast Asia, Japan, and South Korea. In 2015, its English version was released on the video streaming platform Netflix, marking the first domestic TV drama to be featured on mainstream foreign media. As such, investigating the subtitle translation strategies employed in this drama is of paramount significance in advancing the promotion of Chinese film and television culture and facilitating cross-cultural exchange. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Skopos Theory, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of the subtitle translation strategies utilized for poetry, idioms, and proper nouns in *Empresses in the Palace* from fidelity, coherence, and skopos rules. This paper aims to offer valuable insights and references for the translation and standardization of subtitles within similar genres.

An Overview of Research on Subtitle Translation

Research on subtitle translation began earlier in Western countries than in China. The golden age of Western research on subtitle translation dates back to the 1990s, following its emergence in the 1950s. In 1982, Christopher Titford published *Subtitling: Constraints on Translation*, which highlighted the limitations that translators face when translating for film and television. In 1992, Swedish translator Ivarsson (1992) published the first book on subtitle translation, which discussed the technical developments in film and television translation

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and broke through the descriptive research paradigm by examining subtitle translation strategies from a new technological perspective.

In China, relevant research began in the late 1990s, focusing mainly on English-to-Chinese translation. There has been relatively little research on Chinese-to-English subtitle translation. Professor Zhang Chunbai (1998) argued that due to the immediacy and popularization of subtitle language, translators should not only consider the language proficiency, but also the limitations of subtitle length, screen size, and cultural differences. He also emphasized the importance of adhering to the principle of dynamic equivalence while maintaining the original flavor of the text. Professor Qian Shaochang (2000) identified five characteristics of film language—listening, integration, immediacy, popularization, and lack of annotation—which distinguish it from written language. These characteristics highlight the unique requirements of subtitle translation.

Unlike traditional text translation, subtitle translation is characterized by the temporal and spatial limitations, as well as the informational and cultural constraints. Therefore, it is necessary to provide the most relevant information in a limited time and space (Li, 2001). Specifically, translators must consider screen size, subtitle length, and number of lines when dealing with spatial constraints. Regarding temporal constraints, translators must consider the duration of audio or video playback and the time needed for audiences to read the subtitles. As a medium of cultural exchange, subtitle translation should not only ensure the accuracy of information but also be concise and easily understood.

Furthermore, subtitle translation is not only a linguistic transformation, but also restricted by cultural conversion. On the one hand, poetic language and proper nouns come from the essence of ancient civilization and culture. On the other hand, different languages and cultures have gaps and irreplaceable elements. The acceptability and readability of subtitles in cross-cultural contexts are crucial. Therefore, attention must be paid to the relationship between the source and target culture, accurately conveying cultural information, and reducing cultural gaps.

A Study on the Subtitle Translation of *Empresses in the Palace*

The broadcast of *Empresses in the Palace* has sparked lively discussions, with numerous research papers exploring its translation from various perspectives. A search on the CNKI database using relevant keywords resulted in 74 related articles, of which 28 are focused on subtitle translation. These articles primarily examine subtitle translation from different theoretical perspectives, such as relevance theory, functional theory, contextual theory, Lefevere's translation criticism theory, and communicative translation theory. However, there are only four articles related to Skopos Theory, indicating that researches in related fields are relatively underdeveloped.

Specifically, seven articles explore the language characteristics and translation strategies of *Empresses in the Palace* from a cross-cultural communication perspective, and investigate effective ways to promote cross-cultural communication. Based on its overseas viewership and the changes in its transmission text, Luo An (2016) evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of the communication of *Empresses in the Palace*, and summarizes the methods for the overseas dissemination of film and television dramas. Liu Xiaohui and Zhang Liang (2017) analyzed its translation purposes and strategies, and summarize the cultural and linguistic differences between China and the United States from the perspectives of translation and editing. Liang Kun (2018) took its overseas dissemination as an example to highlight the differences between China and the West in aesthetic taste, cultural background, and high and low context, analyzes the resulting communication issues, and offers relevant countermeasures. Some scholars also examine its subtitle translation from a linguistic or translation theoretical

perspective. For example, Chou Jie (2016) analyzed the translation ethics of its subtitles from the perspective of ecological ethics, and explores the advantages and disadvantages of its translation methods by focusing on the value goals, ethical appeals, and practical strategies of the translators.

In summary, subtitle translation plays a significant role in promoting and developing Chinese culture, and *Empresses in the Palace* serves as a vivid example for translators to study it. Currently, many scholars have summarized the subtitle translation of film and television dramas, but few have classified and analyzed them according to the three rules of Skopos Theory, indicating that there is still much work to be done in the future.

Skopos Theory and Its Three Rules

The Skopos Theory, proposed by the German translation theorist Hans Vermeer, is a theoretical framework based on the theory of action and originates from the functionalist translation school in Germany. It is a core component of functionalist theory. Reiss and Vermeer (2014) believed that translation is a human communication activity with a clear purpose and the ability to achieve cross-cultural communication. He believes that translators can choose appropriate translation strategies to achieve their goals, and summarizes three rules that should be followed during translation practice: coherence, fidelity, and skopos rules.

The coherence rule refers to the requirement that the translated text must conform to the standards of intratextual coherence and be in line with the linguistic and cultural environment of the target language readers, and make sense in the target language culture and communication context (W. H. Zhong & Y. Zhong, 1999). The fidelity rule requires the translated text to be faithful to the original, which refers to the consistency of intertextual coherence between the source language and the target language. This rule mainly focuses on the relationship between the participants involved in the translation process, such as the translator, the original author, the client, and the target readers. The skopos rule is the dominant rule and means that the translation behavior should be determined by the translation purpose, which will generate a series of translation requirements. During the translation process, in order to achieve the expected purpose, the translator should consider the linguistic and cultural environment of the target language, adopt appropriate translation strategies, and convey information in an acceptable way, to achieve communicative goals.

Furthermore, the fidelity rule is subordinate to the coherence rule, and both fidelity and coherence rules are subordinate to the skopos rule. Translators can choose appropriate translation strategies based on different expected purposes, but they should always adhere to these three rules. If these three rules cannot be balanced simultaneously, the skopos rule should take the lead, and arbitrary actions should be avoided.

Case Study on Subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace* From the Perspective of Skopos Theory

The purpose of subtitles is to convey both linguistic and cultural information to the target audience, facilitating their understanding of the storyline, main themes, and cultural connotations. Given the linguistic features and primary objectives of subtitles, subtitle translation should strive to be concise and easily understood. Against this backdrop, this section takes the English subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace* released by LeTV in 2015 as a research object, and analyzes its translation strategies and methods based on the three rules of Skopos Theory.

The Application of Fidelity Rule in the Subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace*

The dialogue in *Empresses in the Palace* contains many classical poems, but Western audiences lack understanding of Chinese poetry, and it is difficult to discern implicit expressions and understand the emotions

and imagery. To cater to the cultural background and viewing habits of Western audiences, the American version removed many of the more difficult-to-understand poems, leaving behind only those that required little background knowledge. In addition, since the subtitles lack the contextual language, rhyming is less important, and more attention is paid to the connection between the poems and the plot and characters. For example:

ST: 年年岁岁花相似, 岁岁年年人不同。

TT: Each year and every year, the blossoms return anew. Each year and every year, the bloom of youth does not.

The original poem takes the falling petals as a starting point, and uses the sharp contrast between the “花相似” and the “人不同” to express the philosophy of life: Flowers may thrive or wither at any given time, just as youth can quickly pass us by.

In this sentence, “花” is translated as “blossoms” rather than “flowers”. Because “flower” often refers to the state of blooming, while “blossoms” implies the most beautiful moment of blooming. “人” is not translated as “people”, but as “the bloom of youth” corresponding to the previous sentence, meaning “beautiful women like flowers”. This references the brief blooming period of concubines’ beauty and aligns with the main theme of the drama which emphasizes the uncertain fortunes of palace life. In addition, the translation of “年年岁岁” and “岁岁年年” is the same, which increases the rhythm of the translation while reducing the time needed for the audience to read and understand it. The phrase “花相似” is freely translated as “花重开”, which not only conveys the original meaning but also forms a contrast with the phrase “does not (return anew)”, thus fitting the rhetorical device used in the original poem.

In summary, the translation of this sentence not only conveys the surface meaning of the original poem but also aligns with its deeper implications, reflecting Zhen Huan’s psychological activities. Moreover, under the fidelity rule, it cleverly maintains the consistency of language characteristics while retaining the form and rhythm of the original poem, which suits the immediacy and popularization of subtitles.

The Application of Coherence Rule in the Subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace*

There are many four-character idioms with profound meanings that sometimes require annotations for explanation. However, due to the constraints of time and space, the translator needs to convey the corresponding connotations using concise and condensed language, thus requiring the removal of information that is not in line with the aesthetic orientation and expression style of the target language audience. For example:

ST: 使太后在九泉之下安息。

TT: It will also allow the Empress Dowager to rest in peace.

The number “九” is the largest single digit number, and the ancients often used it to represent the meanings of “many”, “large”, and “extreme”. For example, “九州方圆” refers to “the vast expanse of China”, “九五至尊” refers to “the highest honor”, and “九九八十一难” refers to “numerous and difficult challenges”. The ancients believed that the heavens had nine layers, and the earth was divided into nine levels. “九泉之下” refers to “the deep and bottomless underworld, indicating the realm of the afterlife”. In Chinese mythology, the underworld governs the cycle of life and death, while in Western mythology, only those who have committed heinous crimes are believed to be punished in hell after death. Therefore, considering the different understandings of the boundary between life and death between the East and the West, this sentence does not directly translate “under the underground”.

Furthermore, “rest in peace” is often used to express respect, prayer, and mourning for the deceased, which is consistent with the meaning of “安息” in the original text and fits the cultural context of Western audiences.

In summary, to conform to the cultural background and linguistic habits of the target language audience and to condense the language of subtitles, this sentence uses the omission method to retain only the effective linguistic component of “安息”. This not only conforms to the coherence rule, helping the audience understand and accept the original meaning, but also meets the immediacy and popularization of subtitles, breaking free from temporal and spatial limitations and ensuring the conciseness of the translation.

The Application of Skopos Rule in the Subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace*

Due to the differences in social development, values, political characteristics, and customs and cultures between Chinese and Western societies, culture-loaded words contain the connotations of different social cultures and reflect the cultural customs and language habits of specific ethnic groups. When translating complex social hierarchies and titles, it is not only necessary to accurately convey the Chinese connotations, but also to convey the Chinese effects, in order to promote cultural dissemination and exchange.

In ancient Chinese feudal society, the system of ranks and titles was strict, and the rules and regulations for the imperial harem were clear and precise, with a wide variety of titles for concubines and imperial consorts. In contrast, the Western system of rank and title was relatively simple. The British royal family is not usually polygamous and does not have many titles. Therefore, the translation of some titles may lead to a vague understanding, which requires further discussion. For example, “熹贵妃” was translated as “Noble Consort Xi” because “consort” refers to the spouse of a ruler, and “queen consort” is commonly used in the West to refer to the Chinese empress.

It is not difficult to see that ancient court titles have created a lexical gap in English. In order to overcome the cultural differences, the translator adopts the strategy of domestication, selecting transliterated names that are in line with the target audience’s knowledge background. However, the complex and varied titles of imperial consorts and concubines have only been distinguished according to their high or low status in their corresponding translations, resulting in confusion in expression, which does not conform to historical reality and may cause misunderstanding for Western audiences.

The names and titles of main characters are crucial to understanding the plot. Therefore, in translation, not only must there be relevant knowledge background, but also efforts must be made to master Western cultural language and make reasonable use of Western customary titles, to enable viewers to remember the characters and clarify the plot. For names and titles that do not have corresponding translation, transliteration methods should be used and annotated, to preserve the connotations of Chinese national culture to the greatest extent and help viewers truly understand Chinese court culture.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes the subtitle translation of *Empresses in the Palace* and explores the translation strategies and methods to comply with the characteristics and limitations of subtitle. Specifically, in order to meet the aesthetic demands of the target audience and achieve the goal of cross-cultural communication, translators should first take the Skopos Theory as the theoretical guidance, familiarize themselves with the genre and content of the drama, and clarify the director’s intention and the audience’s expectations. Secondly, translators should consider the five characteristics of subtitles and their temporal and spatial features, adopt domestication as the primary

strategy while foreignization as the secondary strategy, make the subtitles not only have good acceptability but also have better adequacy, and flexibly use methods, such as free translation, literal translation, transliteration, omission, and word-by-word translation, so that the target audience and the source language audience can enjoy the same viewing experience, and promote the exchange and dissemination of Chinese film and television culture.

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