

# A Study of Animation Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory—A Case Study of Chinese-English Translation of Chinese Animation

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With the prosperous development of global film and television industry, the importance of subtitle translation is becoming more and more prominent. From the perspective of translation pragmatics, this paper explores the subtitle translation strategies and methods of the Chinese animation “Yao-Chinese folktales” as an example. It is found that the translators tend to adopt the naturalisation translation strategy based on the purpose of communication, and highlight the coherence of the translated text by omitting the translation based on the principle of coherence among the three principles of the theory of translation. At the same time, a small amount of phonetic translation is also used in the translation, which is faithful to the original text and disseminates Chinese culture.

*Keywords:* skopos, subtitle translatuion, omission, transliteration

## Research Background

In recent years, as international cultural exchanges have intensified, both domestic and international audiences have had increased opportunities to appreciate films and television productions from other countries. This process involves not only the exchange of cinematic works but also a cultural dialogue that transcends national boundaries, with films and television serving as the medium. Subtitling plays an important role in this dialogue. An excellent subtitle translation not only overcomes communication barriers between cultures and enhances the audience’s viewing experience, but also facilitates the global dissemination of Chinese culture.

As an essential branch of audiovisual translation, now subtitle translation has attracted extensive scholarly attention, with researchers examining its characteristics, challenges, and corresponding strategies from various perspectives. For instance, Xue Rui (2016) posits that subtitle translation is characterized by its transient linguistic presence, colloquial style, and widespread accessibility; Xing Yue (2022) summarizes the difficulties of subtitle translation from the multimodal and cultural levels; Cao Yixin (2017) summarizes, reflects and prospects the research methods of subtitle translation in the Internet age; Gambier (2018) explores subtitle translation from the perspective of reception.

From the perspective of Skopos theory, this paper further examines the strategies and methods of subtitle translation by analyzing the animation *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, which premiered in China in 2023.

### Subtitle Translation Principles Based on Skopos Theory

Developed in the 1970s, German functionalist Skopos is primarily embodied in Katharina Reiss's text type and translation criticism theory, Hans Vermeer's Skopos theory, and Christiane Nord's function-plus-loyalty model. Reiss (1981, 2004) delineates three text functions: the informative function, which conveys information through language; the expressive function, which articulates emotions; and the operative function, which influences the recipient. In his book *Translation Criticism: The Potentials and Limitations*, he introduced the functional category into translation criticism, emphasizing that the functional features of the translated text should be given priority in translation practice.

Vermeer, a student of Reiss, further developed and expanded this theory and put forward Skopos Theory, which liberated translation studies from the shackles of the traditional source-centered theory. Vermeer (1987) proposed that translation must follow a series of principles, namely Skopos Rule, Coherence Rule and Fidelity Rule. According to Vermeer (1987), the first principle of translation is that "the translation is determined by its purpose". This means that the purpose of translation may vary according to various factors, so translators should choose appropriate translation strategies according to different translation purposes.

Within the framework of functionalist translation theory, Nord (2014) innovatively incorporates the ethical dimension of "loyalty" to counteract potential extremisms in translation practice. "Loyalty" means that the translator should maintain a high degree of loyalty to all the participants involved in the translation task, including the author of the original text, the reader of the target text and the initiator of the translation.

This loyalty urges the translator to actively seek understanding and harmony among all parties in the process of translation, thus ensuring the smooth progress of the whole translation activity.

Subtitles refer to the display of non-video content such as dialogue in TV, film and stage works in the form of text, and also refer to the post-processing text of film and television works. At present, with the rapid development of film and television industry in the world, more and more Hollywood blockbusters and foreign blockbusters have been introduced into China, and at the same time, excellent Chinese films have become an efficient carrier of "going out" of Chinese culture. In this context, film subtitle translation has become the key, good film subtitle translation can improve the quality of the film, more conducive to the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture. However, subtitle translation is not so simple. Subtitle translation is a kind of audio-visual translation, and there are many constraints in the process of translation.

Audio-visual translation is not only restricted by different languages and cultures, but also by time, space, sound, pictures (such as the opening and closing of the characters' mouths, movements and expressions, the order of objects, etc.), dubbing actors, the body language of the characters in the play and the way of narration (Zhang Juan, 2021). High-demand and well-made works of art need to overcome these constraints in order to achieve the purpose of cultural dissemination. At this juncture, the translator assumes a pivotal role in the translation process. The subtitle translation of film and television works can be divided into two levels: one is the interaction between the translator and the author, and the other is the interaction between the translator and the audience. In subtitle translation, translators typically operate with a clear communicative objective; they

must convey the original work's information succinctly within spatial and temporal constraints, while also considering the cultural context of the target audience and reflecting the original work's values. Skopos theory plays an important role in the practice of subtitle translation.

### **A Brief Introduction to the Cartoon “Yao-Chinese Folktales”**

The animated film *Yao-Chinese Folktales* is an anthology of Chinese fantasy short films co-produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio and Bilibili to commemorate the centennial of Chinese animation, and it was broadcast on Bilibili in 2023. The film is composed of eight independent stories: “Nobody”, “Goose mountain”, “Forest”, “Country Bus Takes Wang Haier and Immortal”, “Lesser Fullness of Grain”, “Birds and Fish”, “Canteen” and “Jade Rabbit”. These stories come from Chinese folk and are rooted in Chinese traditional culture. Each episode is set in an ancient Chinese legend. By presenting vivid pictures and interesting stories, it has attracted a large number of viewers. The score of Douban is as high as 9.6, which also reflects the charm of traditional Chinese culture.

Moreover, the official subtitle team's translation of the cartoon is notably ingenious, showcasing a distinctive translation style. Given that the cartoon is rooted in traditional Chinese folk stories, its subtitles are imbued with numerous culturally specific elements. Taking into account the cultural differences between China and Western audiences, the subtitle team has rendered these culturally specific elements in a manner that retains their distinct Chinese characteristics. At the same time, the language style is more concise and colloquial, which is convenient for the audience to quickly understand the plot.

### **Discussion of Subtitle Translation Strategies and Methods for *Yao-Chinese Folktales***

This paper takes the first episode “Nobody” and the second episode “Goose mountain” as the research object, and explores the strategies and methods of subtitle translation.

#### **Domestication Strategy Based on Communication Purpose**

Vermeer (1987) introduced his Skopos theory by asserting that “translation is a human act. Every action is purposive, and in translation, the intended purpose determines the methodology. In other words, the desired outcome shapes the approach” (Vermeer, 1987, pp. 25-33). Among the three principles of Skopos, the Skopos rule is paramount, necessitating that translators select appropriate strategies in accordance with the specific translation objectives. One of the purposes of subtitle translation of Chinese cartoons is to spread the excellent traditional Chinese culture. The English subtitles of “Nobody” and “Goose mountain” show that they tend to adopt the domestication translation strategy, explaining the Chinese culture-loaded words appearing in the subtitles to foreign audiences through free translation, so as to help them improve their viewing experience and understand Chinese culture.

Example (1) 多喝水别上火。

Translation: Drink water frequently to avoid illness.

Example (1) is what the pig mother said to the little pig when he went back to visit the pig mother in the first episode. Because the little pig often coughed and needed to drink water when he was a child, the mother pig would let him take the gourd bottle all the time. But when she checked the gourd bottle of the little pig demon this time, the mother pig found that there was no water in the gourd bottle, so she nagged the little pig to

let him drink more water and avoid “上火”, which showed the mother pig’s concern and love for the child. The word “上火” belongs to the loaded words of Chinese culture. In this context, “上火” is related to the imbalance of Yin and Yang of the human body in traditional Chinese medicine. The pig’s mother told him to drink more water, that is, to let him pay attention to his body. In addition, “上火” can also express anger in Chinese, and translators will misinterpret the original meaning of the subtitles if the sentence was translate into “Drink plenty of water and don’t get angry”. Therefore, the translator translates it into “Drink water frequently to avoid illness”. This adopts the translation strategy of domestication, and uses the translation method of free translation, which is closer to the reader and makes the audience clearly understand the original meaning of the subtitles. At the same time, it also conforms to the purpose principle of disseminating Chinese culture.

Example (2) 懒驴上磨屎尿多。

Translation: Drop away at critical moment.

Example (2) is what the coach bear said to the little pig when he was lying in ambush near the hillside and preparing to capture the Tang Monk alive in the first episode, because at this time they were ready to lie in ambush. And the Tang Monk and his party would soon arrive near the hillside, if there was no accident, they would fall into the trap set by the monsters. But at this time the little pig said to coach bear that he wanted to pee. So coach bear was very impatient and said to him this sentence. When translating this sentence, the translator needs to understand Chinese culture. This is a Chinese proverb. The surface meaning is that a lazy donkey shits and urinates a lot before pulling the mill. It is a metaphor for people who dawdle before doing things and find excuses to waste time. If the translator translates it into the surface meaning, it may lead to the audience who do not understand Chinese culture can not understand what Coach bear wants to express, thus misunderstanding the direction of the plot. Therefore, the translator translates it into “Drop away at critical moment”, which conforms to the principle of purpose and enables the audience to clearly understand the original meaning of the subtitles.

### **Ellipsis Based on the Principle of Coherence**

Vermeer (2001), when expounding the principle of coherence, emphasizes that the translation must maintain Intratextual coherence, that is, the translation should be understandable and acceptable in the target cultural context. In film translation, subtitle translation is fleeting. In order to convey effective information to the audience in a limited time, the translator has to simplify the translation of lengthy sentences (Xue Rui, 2016). In the subtitle translation of this film, the translator adopts the translation method of omission to make the translation more concise and convenient for the audience to understand.

Example (3) 说是一百个唐僧都跑不掉。

Translation: Which can never let any prey escape, including Tang Monk?

Example (3) is what the little pig said to the crow in the first episode when the little pig was washing the pot and chatting with the crow. He praised that the trap set by the king was so powerful that a hundred Tang monks could not escape. The translator uses the method of omission here, omitting the translation of the specific number of “one hundred”, replacing it with any, and adding prey to explain that no prey will run away, which also reflects that the trap laid by the king is very hidden and powerful. This treatment makes the whole subtitle look more concise and smooth, with clear meaning and coherence.

Example (4) 你俩去磨刀磨兵器。

Translation: You two! Go to sharpen the weapons!

Example (5) 你俩,看你俩这秃样儿。 .

Translation: You — Look at you!

Example (4) is what Coach Xiong said when he ordered his subordinates to do things more carefully on the penultimate day of the Tang Monk's coming in the first episode. Example (5) is Coach bear's description of the appearance of the little pig and the crow. When translating “磨刀磨兵器”, the translator translates it into “Go to sharpen the weapons”, because sharpening knives and weapons is equal to sharpening weapons, the translator directly replaces them with weapons, which makes the translation look more concise and clear, saves subtitle space and facilitates the audience's understanding. At the same time, the translator also omits the translation of “秃” and directly translates the original sentence into “You — Look at you”, so that the audience can shift their eyes from the subtitles to the animation, so as to see the bald appearance of the pig, which not only saves the subtitles space, but also enriches the visual effect of the audience.

Example (6) 你和她说了很多话,她给你讲山里,你给她讲山外。

Translation: You talked a lot, your stories, her stories.

The original sentence of Example (6) is the interpretation given by the author when the peddler meets his sweetheart, the swan girl, in the second episode. They chatted together, the peddler told her stories outside the mountains, and she told the peddler stories in the mountains. The translation of this sentence is very concise. The translator translates “讲山外” and “讲山里” as your stories and her stories, which have the same antithesis effect as the original text in structure. By omitting the original text, the translator makes the translation more concise and easy to understand, so as to facilitate the understanding of the audience and increase the coherence of the full text.

### **Faithfulness-based Transliteration**

Vermeer (2001) emphasizes that the translation must maintain intertextual coherence with the source text, and the translator needs to be strictly faithful to the information content of the source text and its calling function to ensure that the accuracy and functionality of the translation are fully reflected. That is to say, the translator should keep the original text in the process of translation. But this kind of faithfulness is not the correspondence word by word and sentence by sentence, the faithfulness within the framework of the translation function is the direct information equivalence and calling function equivalence between the translation and the original text. This principle of faithfulness is not absolute, in some cases, the translator needs to make some changes to the original text to achieve the purpose of translation, but this is not unfaithful to the original text, but a way to achieve faithfulness in a special context. In this film, the translator transliterates some words and sentences, which is faithful to the original information function as well as the calling function.

Example (7) 《中国奇谭》

Translation: Yao-Chinese Folktales

Example (8) 大王洞

Translation: Da Wang cave

Example (7) is the English translation of *Yao-Chinese Folktales*. The translator adds a word with Chinese cultural characteristics in front of it—Yao. There is no word that can completely replace “demon” in English. If it is translated into monster, readers may misinterpret its meaning, because monster is used to describe an ugly and terrible devil in English, while “yao” in Chinese culture is good and bad, beautiful and ugly. At the same time, the whole story is centered on the yao, and the translator adds the transliteration of “yao”, which is not only functionally faithful to the original text and disseminates Chinese culture, but also implies the theme of the story, which is more convenient for the audience to understand the story.

In Example (8), “大王洞” is the name of the cave where the King of the Little Pig lives in the first episode. The translator uses the transliteration method to translate it into Da Wang cave. Although the English audience does not understand the meaning of Da Wang, this does not affect their understanding of cave.

### Conclusion

Through a detailed analysis of the subtitle translation of the first and second episodes of the Chinese cartoon series, it is found that the translation of the cartoon series has a clear communication purpose, and the translator tends to adopt the domestication translation strategy; the translator will give priority to the principle of coherence in the three principles of Skopos Theory, and make the translation more concise and understandable through the translation method of omission; At the same time, the translator also uses a small amount of transliteration to make the translation faithful to the original text and effectively disseminate Chinese culture.

It should be noted that the omission method leads to the loss of some humorous expressions and specific cultural concepts in the translation, but it is a slight flaw. On the whole, the subtitle translation of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* is of high quality, introducing English readers to an oriental story world full of Chinese culture and philosophy and full of Chinese imagination.

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