

Subtitle Translation of Animated Films Through the Lens of Three-Dimensional Transformation in Eco-Translatology: A Case Study of Ne Zha II

Yixin Zhang

*School of Foreign Languages, Chengdu University of Technology, Chengdu, China
810992886@qq.com*

Abstract. In the current globalized and informatized era, cinematic works have emerged as a significant medium for disseminating Chinese culture. *Ne Zha II*, rooted in traditional Chinese mythology yet innovatively reconstructed with modern linguistic adaptations and humorous elements, has achieved international success as the first Asian film to rank among the global top-five box office earners and the global box office champion for animated films. This study investigates the subtitle translation strategies of this cinematic phenomenon through the theoretical framework of Eco-Translatology. By analyzing linguistic disparities between source and target texts, and applying the principles of 'selective adaptation' and 'adaptive selection', the research proposes multidimensional translation approaches across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. The findings aim to enhance the cross-cultural efficacy of Chinese cinematic texts and empower international audiences' comprehension of Chinese mytho-cultural codes, thereby strengthening the global outreach and cultural influence of China's film industry, advancing the "Going Global" agenda for China's animation industry.

Keywords: Eco-Translatology, Chinese Animated Films, Subtitle Translation, Cross-Cultural Communication, "Going Global" Strategy

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese animated films have achieved remarkable progress in implementing the "Going Global" Strategy. From *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* to *Ne Zha I: Birth of the Demon Child* and its sequel *Ne Zha II*, these mythologically rooted yet linguistically modernized productions demonstrate growing cultural influence. As of March 2025, *Ne Zha II* has grossed 15.019 billion RMB (including presales), equivalent to US\$2.1 billion, ranking fifth in global box office history—making it the first Asian film and non-Hollywood production to break the Western monopoly on this chart. Nevertheless, compared to Euro-American animations, Chinese animated films face persistent challenges in international reception. The deeper their cultural embeddedness in Chinese mythology (as exemplified by the *Ne Zha* series), the greater the linguistic and cultural barriers in translation emerge.

The field of Eco-Translatology research has seen extensive advancements within the realm of domestic academia. Conducting a CNKI search under the "Eco-Translatology" category resulted in more than 5,000 scholarly articles, with prominent Chinese periodicals dedicating specific sections

to this theoretical framework. In this context, the field of subtitling research has accelerated. Zhu scrutinized the live-action movie *Mr. Six*, suggesting three-dimensional tactics—verbal, cultural, and communicative—rooted in the concepts of "selective adaptation" and "adaptive selection" to close ecological gaps between source and target [1]. In a like manner, Mi scrutinized the animated film *Chang'an*, promoting a multidimensional balance within the limitations of spatial and temporal subtitling to maintain the dynamism of source-text in the intended ecosystems [2]. While both researches highlight the importance of ecological equilibrium in translational settings, present studies mainly concentrate on live-action movies (e.g., *Green Book*, *Farewell My Concubine*) and Western animations (e.g., *Avatar*, *Kung Fu Panda*), while systematically neglecting domestically produced Chinese animations.

In contrast, the field of Western subtitling, sparked by Caillé's influential research on translational limitations, has developed strong theoretical models, thanks to the efforts of Ivarsson, Chaume, and Taylor [3]. Significantly, Wu utilized Eco-Translatology in Disney's *The Lion King*, highlighting the importance of ecological balance for enhanced cross-cultural effectiveness [4]. Dominant studies in the West often use Nida's concept of functional equivalence (e.g., Hu's examination of *Friends*) or Skopos' theory (e.g., Zhao's analysis of *Avatar*), notably omitting Eco-Translatological research on Chinese animated movies.

The research bridges the theoretical and practical void by examining the subtitling of *Ne Zha II* via the tri-dimensional transformation in Eco-Translatology. The objective is to: develop translation tactics tailored to mythospecifics, harmonizing linguistic genuineness, cultural applicability, and the purpose of communication; boost the worldwide spread of Chinese film stories; offer innovative viewpoints for the cross-cultural facilitation of Sinospheric cultural outputs. These results aim to enhance global understanding of Chinese mythological and cultural norms, thus promoting the "Going Global" initiative in China's animation sector.

2. Material and method

2.1. Theoretical foundation: Eco-Translatological perspective

Emerging from global ecological intellectual trends and traditional Chinese ecological wisdom, Eco-Translatology constitutes an interdisciplinary paradigm that investigates translation through ecological lenses. Evolved from the Adaptation-Selection Theory of Translation, it systematically interprets translational phenomena via three core mechanisms: (1) Translation Principle: Multi-dimensional selective adaptation and adaptive selection. (2) Operational Methodology: Tri-dimensional transformation across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. (3) Evaluation Criteria: Integration of dimensional conversion efficacy, target-audience reception, and translator competence. The theory posits that optimal translations achieve the highest "degree of holistic adaptation and selection" by dynamically balancing these parameters [5].

2.2. Characteristics of animated film subtitle translation

Subtitle translation refers to the translation activity of converting the original language in film and television works into written form and presenting it to the audience in the form of subtitles. Its purpose is to help the audience understand the content in different languages in film and television works, overcome language barriers, and enable the audience to better appreciate and understand elements such as the plot, dialogue, and cultural background of the film. In films like *Ne Zha II*, subtitle translation presents the following characteristics:

2.2.1. Conciseness

The length of subtitle translation is strictly limited by space and time (typically 2 lines × 35 characters in Chinese; 6-8 words/sec in English). Factors such as the size of the screen and the duration of the characters' dialogue all affect the length of the subtitles. Subtitles that are too long or too short are not conducive to presenting the film content clearly and smoothly. Therefore, subtitle translation should be clear and concise. It is advisable to choose common words, simple words, and short words; and the sentence patterns should be simple and straightforward, avoiding complexity and verbosity [6].

2.2.2. Colloquialism

Catering primarily to juvenile audiences with developing cognitive capacities, animated subtitles demand vernacular accessibility. *Ne Zha II* exemplifies this through its strategic use of Sichuan dialectal features and conversational registers that resonate with youth demographics.

2.2.3. Cultural transmissibility

The film, rooted in Chinese mythological traditions, incorporates culturally specific elements such as the sacred Lotus —a Taoist symbol of spiritual purity. Translating these culture necessitates not merely linguistic fidelity but more critically, the strategic mediation of cross-cultural semiotics.

2.3. Three-dimensional transformation strategies in subtitle translation of *Ne Zha*

Eco-Translatology posits translation as a dynamic process of adaptive selection and selective adaptation, requiring translators to preserve and transform the source text's linguistic, cultural, and communicative ecosystems while ensuring its viability within the target ecosystem [7].

2.3.1. Adaptive transformation from the linguistic dimension

This dimension involves "the translator's adaptive selection and transformation of linguistic forms across multiple levels" [8], necessitating equilibrium between source and target translational ecosystems to ensure fluency, accuracy, and cultural resonance. The film constructs a Taoist cosmological hierarchy centered on the Chan Sect, depicting celestial battles between immortals and demons. Dialogue blends religious lexicon (e.g., mystic incantations) with situational humor and urgency. Translators prioritized semantic fidelity and readability for such linguistically hybrid content.

Example 1:

Swift and uplift

The source phrase is derived from Qin-Han administrative documents, including official decrees requiring immediate compliance with the law and giving the text authoritative directness. Goal Render employs consonant rhythms to enhance the sense of urgency of rhythm, summing up the acceleration of time ("swift") and metaphysical empowerment ("uplift") in succinct terms. This translation strategy reflects the vigor and exigency of Ne Zhe's magic to save Chentang Pass.

2.3.2. Adaptive transformation from the cultural dimension

This aspect pertains to "the translator's emphasis on transferring bicultural meanings and hermeneutic mediation throughout the translation procedure" [9]. It is essential for translators to understand that the process of translation goes beyond simple linguistic rearrangement, necessitating a comprehensive adjustment to the cultural context of the original language and the

balancing of semiotic similarities across cultures. Overlooking these cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings among the intended groups.

Ne Zha II illustrates this tactic through his pre-battle doggerel, a rhymed soliloquy that merges naive honesty with steadfast resolve to defeat demons. In the translation, iambic pentameter and heroic couplets are used, while the English version of this doggerel utilizes these two forms of couplets for its translation.

Example 2:

I am Nezha, the Third Prince bold!

I slay the demons, I write in thyme untold.

Today I come to rid the evil's breath.

You wicked fiends, prepare for death.

In the iambic pentameter format, each line is segmented into five rhythmic feet (e.g., I am | Nezha | the Third | Prince | bold), with each foot containing a syllable without stress succeeded by one with stress. Known as the heroic couplet, this poetic style includes consecutive lines of paired end-rhymes like bold/untold and breath/death. The use of iambic pentameter in the translation conforms to the rhythmic norms of English poetry, thus increasing the audience's openness to the verse's prosodic style. Ne Zha's doggerel gains a unique rhythmic yet culturally significant rhythm in English, thanks to the deliberate arrangement of syllabic stress patterns. This method attains a twofold accuracy: maintaining the semantic integrity of the original text's argumentative resolution and childlike directness, while strictly following Anglophone rhythmic standards. This fine-tuned adaptation represents a shift across cultural dimensions, merging the oral tradition of humorous folk verse with Western heroic poetry to enhance the cross-cultural interpretability of Chinese mythological stories.

2.3.3. Adaptive transformation from communicative dimension

The approach involves the translator tactically guiding bilingual communication intents throughout the translation phase" [1]. Translators need to focus not just on linguistic and cultural transfer, but also on functional similarity in pragmatic impacts to match the communicative objectives of the original text. Tan proclaims, "Messages that do not serve their intended communicative roles become pointless" [10]. Consequently, translators are tasked with addressing differences in language and culture by aligning their outputs with the demographics of the audience, the genres of the film, and archetypes of characters, thus enhancing intercultural openness. *Ne Zha II* employs unique translation techniques for the same source dialogues throughout its theatrical debut and trailers.

Example 3:

Theatrical Version:

Giving off a righteous vibe

Trailer Version:

He is all about righteousness

In the dramatic version, Ao Bing and Nezha share the same physical form, and Nezha's appearance Ao Bing's demeanor-politeness and integrity. The phrase "giving off" denotes "emitting" or "releasing," while "vibe" refers to "atmosphere" or "aura." This translation not only conveys the inner quality of "righteousness" but also vividly depicts an outward radiant atmosphere that can be felt by those around the character. Through the dynamic audio-visual interplay, let the audience intuitively feel the righteous breath projected by the character, so as to convey the character's traits more effectively. This approach ensures that the audience swiftly comprehends the message of the character during the movie, enhancing accessibility and narrative immersion.

In the trailer, Ne Zha is described as "embodying righteousness" with deliberate humour. Originally destined to incarnate as a spiritual pearl, through a cosmic mishap to become a Orb of evil, resulting behavior contrasts starkly with the reincarnation of Ao Bing, the true Spirit Pearl. Ne Zha's mischievous and irreverent persona deliberately creates inconsistencies when labeled "righteous." The direct translation of "meaning" captures the core concept (the virtue embodied) succinctly in the context of advocacy with time constraints that require to be emphasized. This lexical minimalism, juxtaposed with Ne Zha's carefree visual portrayal, allows the audience to immediately recognize the ironic duality of the characters and the subtitles' humorous undertones. The strategic incongruence between the solemnity of the text and the lightness of the vision effectively excites audience's interest and affinity for the characters in a limited exposure durations.

3. Conclusion

As an intuitive and vivid art form, animated films serve as an important means of cross-cultural communication. With the growing influence of domestic Chinese animated films in the international market, high-quality subtitle translation enables these films to break through language barriers and becomes one of the key factors for their successful dissemination overseas. Translators should be aware that subtitle translation is not merely a conversion of languages but also a transmission of cultural information. It is necessary to ensure the visual and auditory experience of the audience while watching the film. At the same time, translators need to consider accurately conveying the meanings of Chinese lines as well as the cultural elements embedded in them, allowing the audience to smoothly understand the language information in the film without affecting the overall viewing experience. This will enhance the dissemination power and influence of Chinese film culture and enable Chinese animated films to better "go global".

References

- [1] Zhu, J. Y. (2017). A Study on Subtitle Translation of Chinese Films "Going Global" from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology: A Case Study of Mr. Six. *Publishing Perspective*, (21), 78-80+95. DOI: 10.16491/j.cnki.cn45-1216/g2.2017.0700
- [2] Mi, L. R. (2024). The Expression of Chinese Cultural Elements in Subtitle Translation of Domestic Animated Films from an Eco-Translatology Perspective: A Case Study of Chang'an. *Ancient and Modern Literary Creation*, (47), 103-106. DOI: 10.20024/j.cnki.CN42-1911/I.2024.47.027
- [3] Caillé, P.F. (1960) *Cinéma et traduction: Le traducteur devant l'Ecran*. *Babel*, 3, 103-109. <https://doi.org/10.1075/babel.6.3.01cai>
- [4] Wu, H. F. (2025). A Study on the Subtitle Translation of The Lion King from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology. *Modern Linguistics*, 13(3), 489-495. DOI: 10.12677/ml.2025.133290
- [5] Hu, G. S. (2008). An Interpretation of Eco-Translatology. *Chinese Translators Journal*, 29(6), 11-15+92.
- [6] Li, Y. X. (2001). Strategies for Subtitle Translation. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (7).
- [7] Hu, G. S. (2011). Research Focus and Theoretical Perspectives of Eco-Translatology. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (2).
- [8] Hu, G. S. (2004). *Translation as Adaptation and Selection*. Wuhan: Hubei Education Press.
- [9] Hu, G. S. (Tsinghua University, Beijing 100084). *Viewing Translation Theory Through Terminology: An Overview of Translation as Adaptation and Selection*.
- [10] Tan, Z. X. (1989). Nida and his translation theory. *Foreign Languages (Journal of Shanghai International Studies University)*, (5), 30-37+51.