

A Study on the Audiovisual Translation of Chinese Documentary Subtitles from the Perspective of the Skopos Theory - Taking A Bite of China (Season 4) as Example

Jiarui CHENG

*School of Interpreting and Translation, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China
2021220895@stu.bisu.edu.cn*

Abstract. The “Chinese Culture Going Global” strategy has created an epochal background for the rapid development of Chinese documentaries. This paper takes the documentary A Bite of China (Season 4) as an example case study, employing the skopos theory as its theoretical framework. This study examines how Chinese documentaries facilitate the cultural communication between China and the world and offers assistance for the accurate translation of culture-loaded words within. This research finds out that the affirmation of the translators’ role in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps between China and the world allow for a full and profound exchange among the different cultures. In particular, one powerful manifestation of sufficient cultural exchanges is the accurate translation of culture-loaded words, with the two translation methods: combination of literal and free translation and amplification as feasible tools. This paper provides theoretical and practical support to address the gaps in subtitle translation of Chinese documentaries under the guidance of skopos theory, thus refining the construction and promoting overseas dissemination of Chinese documentaries.

Keywords: Skopos Theory, Chinese Documentary Subtitles, A Bite of China (Season 4), Culture-loaded Words

1. Introduction

A large body of current research on Chinese documentaries adopts the method of multimodal discourse analysis, which involves exploring their imagery and visual elements. Wang and Zheng investigate how the documentary Charming Inner Mongolia constructed the region’s ecological image through the strategic integration of linguistic, visual, and auditory modalities while revealing six core dimensions [1]. Similarly, Priupolina et al. examine China’s role as a major power through an analysis of the visual narratives and role claims presented in the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) political documentary Daguo Waijiao (Major Country Diplomacy, DGWJ) [2].

As a vital component of cultural communication, research on the subtitle translation of Chinese documentaries—particularly Chinese-to-English translation—remains underdeveloped and requires further advancement. It is common that subtitles in films and television works are characterized by a more colloquial nature owing to the presence of a substantial quantity of dialogues. However, the

narrative style of documentary subtitling generally exhibits a greater degree of formality. Consequently, the translation approaches naturally differ. Nevertheless, both must maintain accessibility, ensuring immediate comprehension for the audience. Al-Shlool examines the subtitling strategies in integrating Quranic verses into films that address social, political, and cultural issues in Arab and Islamic contexts [3]. Dewi et al. employ a descriptive qualitative method to analyze subtitling strategies in Netflix's documentary *Our Planet*, identifying eight Gottlieb's strategies, with transfer (71.11%) being the most frequent [4]. Studies like the two above offer valuable insights for translating documentary subtitles. However, they can be optimized if unified theoretical frameworks are applied. In recent years, researches carried out from the perspectives of various theories emerge, many of which utilize the structure of skopos theory. The theory emphasizes the functional relationship between the source and target texts, taking into account readers' and prior knowledge, which may lead to modifications in the target text [5]. A research on documentary subtitle translation concludes that the Skopos theory, in practice, gives translators full initiative, which makes the strategies available to translators in subtitle translation relatively flexible [6]. It can be inferred that despite bilingual skills and comprehension on the source content, professional translators must possess bicultural competence, enabling accurate interpretation of the original subtitles and effective conveyance of meaning in the target language. Furthermore, a key distinction between documentaries and other audiovisual works is that documentaries frequently contain a large number of culture-loaded words. Improper translation of these words can easily lead to cultural misunderstandings among international audiences. In this context, Skopos theory—with its emphasis on purpose-driven communication—may play a particularly constructive role in guiding the translation of documentary subtitles.

This paper aims to provide theoretical and practical experiences for the high-quality Chinese documentary subtitle translation, taking the documentary *A Bite of China* (Season 4) as case studies under the framework of the skopos theory. The following research questions have been answered: 1) how do translators play the linguistic and cultural communication role in documentary subtitles; 2) how can culture-loaded words be properly translated in documentary subtitles.

2. Unique challenges in Chinese documentary subtitling

Despite the fact that a documentary comprises three core components—images, music, and narration—subtitle translation emerges as another indispensable and equally vital element in Chinese documentaries, especially in response to the “Chinese Culture Going Global” strategy. In other words, target language subtitles play a crucial role in helping overseas audiences recognizing the social situation and culture in China. This chapter concludes the distinguishing features of Chinese documentary subtitling and the prevalent non-normative translation phenomena.

2.1. Distinguishing features of Chinese documentary subtitling

This study identifies three distinctive features of subtitles in Chinese documentaries, drawing primarily on the analysis of currently translated Chinese documentaries as well as the research of Shan and Hu and Zhang and Liu [7,8]. These features are as follows: the frequent occurrence of culture-specific terms, the use of four-character idioms, and the adoption of concise, accessible language.

Culture-loaded words refer to vocabulary that carries specific cultural connotations or backgrounds within a language and culture [7]. They may appear in the episode titles, serving as a thread that links together various real stories, such as craftsmanship spirit, patriotism and often in

the subtitles. The pressing requirement for precise translations of culture-loaded words remains to be transforming cultural contexts and reconstructing emotional tension..

Another distinguishing feature of the Chinese documentary subtitling is the application of four-character idioms. As an established form of language, four-character idioms are the results of people's long-term accumulation in social and cultural life. They possess rich and diverse historical and cultural connotation [8]. With concise language, rigor structure and smooth readability, the four-character idioms boast robust expressive capabilities. Therefore, they pose a certain degree of difficulty to guarantee the target-language audiences can undergo the identical visual and auditory effects as that of the Chinese audiences.

The overall style of language in Chinese documentaries is concise and understandable. Since the themes of Chinese documentaries have expanded and the documentaries have displayed lively and vibrant styles in recent years, they have incorporated increasing number of dialogues. Unlike those in previous years which only featured individual monologues like formal interviews, Chinese documentaries now include much conversations among ordinary people to present their authentic daily lives. Therefore, translating these conversations in accurate and concise ways maintain a new demand for subtitle translators.

2.2. Prevalent non-normative translation phenomena

If culture-loaded words or the four-character idioms are mistranslated in film and television works, especially in documentaries, it leads to various levels of cultural misunderstandings. In order to bridge these cultural gaps, this chapter mainly includes the non-normative translations from the perspective of linguistics and culture.

The non-normative translations can be embodied in the distortion of culture-loaded words. For example, the lexical constructions such as “江湖” and “风水” are mainly derived from Chinese culture and cannot be found in the 'corresponding construction types' in English [9]. Thus, it is not accurate enough to simply adapt the literal translation “rivers and lakes” and “wind and water” into relevant contexts. Compared to the literal versions, the method of transliteration combined with paraphrasing remains feasible. When the words with no constructionality like “江湖” first appear in documentary subtitle, they can be translated phonetically with annotations. Then, when they appear again or later, it is acceptable to translate them simply with transliteration like “jianghu” due to the limited word space among subtitles.

The linguistics and cultural non-normative phenomena may also present in the misinterpretation of idioms and rhetorical devices. For instance, if “胸有成竹” is literally translated like “complete confidence in painting bamboo”, target language audiences may be confused and therefore distracted by the cultural gap for the Chinese story of painting bamboo. In order to precisely convey the meaning to the audiences while considering the limited number for English subtitles, “a well-thought-out plan” remains a good choice. This example serves as a reminder that subtitlers should be able to decide which translation method is used flexibly and make choices based on the translation purpose and the context requirements.

In order to overcome the non-normative translation phenomena, subtitlers should be fully aware of the cultural gaps and verify whether the subtitle translation affect the audiences' understandings.

3. Subtitling strategies from the skopos theory perspective

This chapter starts with a brief review of the skopos theory which encompass three key rules: the skopos rule, the coherence rule, and the fidelity rule. Among these, the first holds the core position -

a translational action is determined by its skopos [10]. The coherence rule subordinates to the the skopos rule and the fidelity rule to the coherence rule. This chapter will apply the Chinese and English subtitles of A Bite of China (Season 4) for case studies and therefore provide theoretical and practical support for documentary subtitle translation.

3.1. Cases following the skopos rule

The documentary subtitle translators should first clarify the purpose of their translational act. The purpose of the documentary subtitles is to help audiences gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge in unfamiliar fields [6]. In this paper, the case documentary A Bite of China (Season 4) showcases the various local delicacies and the cultural stories behind them, aiming to enhance the understanding and interest of both domestic and international audiences in Chinese culinary culture. This research will analyze examples in the documentary from the aspects of linguistics and culture separately in order to follow the skopos rule [6].

3.1.1. Linguistic acceptability

Subtitles translators should make clear that there are significant differences in expression habits between Chinese and English. Chinese characters feature their logographic writing system in which each character represents a word or a morpheme and occupies a consistent amount of space - typically that of two characters. By contrast, English primarily employs a phonographic writing system in which the majority of words consist of more than two letters [11]. Subtitle translation requires appropriate adjustments to ensure the understanding of the audiences.

Example 1 (Episode 5, Eat Local)

Source Text (ST): 但大到什么标准/师徒俩/有教科书般的认识

Target Text (TT): But what exactly defines “large”/ Lin and Wang/ have specific criteria for that

The second half of the English subtitle applies free translation for “教科书般的认识”, interpreting it as “specific criteria”. It can be seen that the Chinese narration employs an exaggerated rhetorical device in order to describe the rich experience of the master and apprentice in choosing a perfect goose for cooking. The adopted translation is natural. If it were translated word-for-word as “textbook-like understanding”, the target language audiences might find it confused, questioning where the textbook is due to the different language usage habits between English and Chinese.

Example 2 (Episode 5, Eat Local)

ST: 这间位于商场对面的小店/千金不换

TT: This little shop across from the mall/ is truly a gem

The source text “千金不换” which literally means “beyond any price” aims to highlight the inestimable value of the little shop. In order to convey this meaning effectively and idiomatically, the English subtitler uses “is truly a gem”. One advantage of this translation is its conciseness. In just four words, “is truly a gem” captures the essence of the Chinese idiom, making it easy for the target audience to understand the shop’s unique value of craftsmanship. Another is the colloquialness and directness. “A gem” is a corresponding word that implies something precious and of great worth, just like “千金不换” in Chinese, achieving the same level of comprehension as that of the source text readers. This aligns with the skopos rule as it ensures that the translation serves its intended communicative function in the target language context.

One can see from the examples above that the English subtitlers should always make clear that the main skopos of the documentary audiences is to learn knowledge from unfamiliar fields. Thus

the translators should manage to accurately capture the information the source language text intends to convey and deliver the connotations of the subtitle to the target language audiences.

3.1.2. Cultural acceptability

There are often idioms and expressions with cultural connotations in Chinese documentaries. It is necessary to take into account the cultural background of the target language audience. Translators should aim to bridge the cultural gap between Chinese and English.

Example 3 (Episode 3, Vitalize)

ST: 小店里的一招鲜/所用的食材/是.....

TT: The unique ingredient/ of the shop's specialty/ is.....

“一招鲜” means “specialty”. The idiom in the context refers to the unique tofu-making technique from a local shop owner. This translation should be adapted due to its conciseness and correct commendatory tone. What is more, the complete version of the idiom is “一招鲜, 吃遍天”, meaning having a certain special skill enables one to make a living anywhere. If foreignization is adopted, translating the Chinese subtitle as “one trick pony”, it expresses a negative meaning and obviously contradicts the original Chinese documentary context.

Example 4 (Episode 5, Eat Local)

从二十世纪八十年代起/义乌人/凭着“鸡毛换糖”的商业头脑/开启了国际贸易的/双向奔赴

Since the 1980s/ the people of Yiwu/ have leveraged their entrepreneurial spirit/ embracing international trade/ with open arms

The four-character idiom “鸡毛换糖” literally means “trading chicken feathers for sugar”. This culture-loaded word refers to a barter trading system emerged in the impoverished era of Yiwu, Zhejiang province. Local small traders would exchange cheap items like brown sugar for waste materials from residents' homes, such as chicken feathers. Eventually, it became a symbol of the commercial culture of Yiwu. The English subtitlers of the documentary choose to omit the literal translation and adapt free translation “leverage their entrepreneurial spirit” instead. This approach reduces the comprehension burden on the target language readers and thus enhances the communication effectiveness. In addition, the concise translation also contributes to the building of China's national image.

Subtitle translators can learn from the two examples themed on cultural adaptability that they should be aware of the cultural differences between English and Chinese. One cannot merely focus on the correspondence in content without taking into account the cultural and emotional connotations, or the approach violates the skopos rule.

3.2. Cases following the coherence rule

The coherence rule requires the translation to be internally coherent [10], demanding the target language text to be logical. During the translation process, if the mindset and language of the translators are over similar to the source text, they may lead to phenomena like 'translationese', causing readers to fail to understand the information conveyed by the original text [6].

Example 5 (Episode 3, Vitalize)

ST: 在室外/这种红霉菌的生长/往往被杂菌干扰/而这间非请莫入的/控温小屋/孕育了大量优质菌群/让老周在巧合中/创造一个/微生物永续的/方寸之地

TT: Outdoors/ the growth of the maize silage mold/ is often interfered with by miscellaneous bacteria/ while this temperature-controlled room/ where entry is restricted/ nurtures many high-quality bacterial floras/ allowing Zhou/ to create/ a self-sustaining micro-world/ by coincidence

This bilingual subtitle set demonstrates the skopos theory's coherence rule. The translational shifting “非请莫入” to “entry is restricted” embodies the structural coherence through syntactic reorganization. Chinese tends to favor the active voice over the passive, which is less commonly used, while English frequently employs the passive voice. The translated subtitle in this example used the passive voice logically and naturally. Another thing in this set of subtitles proving the coherence rule is that temporal cohesion is achieved through logical connectors like “while” and “allowing”. They mirror the original's cause-effect relationships despite syntactic differences.

Example 6 (Episode 5 Eat Local)

ST: 她排第四名/差一名就评到沙县那个劳模/差一名就劳模

TT: She came in the fourth/ just missed the title of Shaxian Model Worker by a hair/ she was so close!

The English subtitle “by a hair” vividly depicts the fact that speaker's daughter ranked fourth in electing the title of “Shaxian Model Worker”, a state of extremely small margin with winning the third. Compared to a possible literal translation “by one rank”, “by a hair” is more evocative and idiomatic in English. The effect of expression goes the same in “she was so close!”, which also aligns with the coherence rule. It is worth noting that the appliance of an exclamation mark here conforms to the language custom of English, accurately conveying the intense emotions of the interviewee in the documentary.

The coherence rule requires the translation to be readable and logical. In other words, the TT must be translated in such a way that it makes sense for the TT receivers, given their circumstances, knowledge and needs [10]. In translating the subtitles from Chinese to English, translators can enhance readability and logic of the target language texts by adjusting sentence structures that correspond with English language customs, for instance, reasonably using more connectives.

3.3. Cases following the fidelity rule

The fidelity rule means that “there needs to be a relationship between ST and TT, and the nature of this relationship is determined by the purpose or skopos [10]. The subtitle translators should keep in mind of the fidelity rule by using methods such as literal translation or free translation, domestication or foreignization in a flexible way, so as to achieve the goal of popularizing knowledge to the target language audiences.

3.3.1. Combination of literal and free translation

Literal translation prioritizes the retention of the source text's linguistic form and surface meaning, while free translation focuses on conveying the core semantic and cultural connotations.

Example 7 (Episode 1, Mastery)

ST: 鸡蛋大小的八爪铁钩/挂在一米多长的竹竿上/就是为红钳蟹量身定制的“奇门兵器”

TT: An octopus-like iron hook the size of an egg/ mounted on a bamboo pole over a meter long/ is the custom weapon for hunting/ red-clawed crabs.

“奇门兵器”literally means “divine artillery”. The source text employs an exaggerated rhetorical device, aiming to highlight the uniqueness of this tool. However, if the literal translation is adopted, it will confuse the target audiences by its ambiguity. The official translation gives up on the literal version and simply put it as “custom weapon”, making the translation clear enough to explain the definition and function as a crab-catching tool.

Example 8 (Episode 2, Ordinary Life)

ST: 中国人的生活图景/以菜市场为圆心/这里是一方风土的入口/永远熙熙攘攘/热气腾腾/也是活色生香的朋友圈/安于鸡毛蒜皮家常里短

TT: For Chinese people/ life is centered on the farmers' market/ It is the gateway to local customs/ always hustling and bustling/ with human touch/ It is also a vibrant social hub/ where people immerse themselves /in trivial matters and daily life

The Chinese idiom “鸡毛蒜皮” literally means “chicken feathers and garlic skins”. But the documentary freely applies “trivial matters” as the official English subtitle. This translation accurately captures the meaning of the Chinese four-character idiom, bridging the cultural gap. The same effect happens in the translation for “热气腾腾” and “活色生香”. The two translations, which are “with human touch” and “vibrant” successively, skillfully transform the abstract emotional atmosphere into concrete expressions and successfully depict the lively scenes of people in markets interacting enthusiastically and helping each other.

3.3.2. Amplification

Amplification, a common technique in subtitle translation, refers to the practice of adding necessary explanatory elements (such as annotations, definitions, or contextual hints) to the target text (TT) while retaining the core meaning of the source text (ST).

Example 9 (Episode 3, Vitalize)

ST: 鲁菜里面最难学的/那就是“大翻勺”

TT: In Shandong cuisine, the toughest skill/ is dafanshao (flip the staff in the work)

This translation adopts the method of amplification, a method which combines transliteration and annotation. It enables the target language audiences to understand immediately that “dafanshao” is a unique term in Chinese. Meanwhile, the explanation in the brackets provides a powerful aid for the viewers to learn about an unfamiliar concept in the field of cooking.

Example 10 (Episode 4, Nature's Gift)

ST: 小米喝小米

TT: Xiaomi is eating foxtail millet (notes: Foxtail millet in Chinese is Xiaomi the same as the girl's name)

The Chinese line contains a pun played by the girl character Xiaomi in the documentary. It can be recognized from the English subtitles that, driven by the need for scientific popularization in documentaries rather than by the requirements of literature and art, the subtitle translators gave up pursuing the linguistic interest of the homophonic word “xiaomi” in Chinese. Instead, they adopt the method of literal translation with annotations. This approach reduces the difficulty of translation, enabling the target-language audiences to share the same amused reaction as the Chinese audiences do and consequently capture the image of the girl as being smart and lovely.

Although it is said that the hierarchical order of the rules means that intertextual coherence between ST and TT (Rule 5) is of less importance than intratextual coherence within the TT (Rule 4) [10], subtitlers should not ignore the appliance of the fidelity rule and use translation methods accurately, whether it is the combination of literal and free translation or amplification, in order to achieve the skopos of documentary subtitle translation.

4. Conclusion

Applying the skopos theory to the subtitle translation study of A Bite of China (Season 4), this research holds that the skopos rule, as the prior one among the three, guides the subtitle translators of the documentary to always ensure the purpose of popularizing knowledge for the target language

audiences rather than any other, in specific, guaranteeing the audiences' linguistics acceptability and cultural acceptability. The coherence rule is the second important rule in the whole theory, meaning that the translated texts should be internally coherent. Under the guidance of the first, the English subtitler should be clear that *A Bite of China* (Season 4) is a documentary that showcases Chinese folk cuisine and the daily lives of the common people. Therefore, its language should be simple and easy to understand. When translating, English subtitle translators should ensure that the English subtitles can also achieve a popular and accessible communication effect. The fidelity rule states that there must be coherence between the target language and the source language. In order to guarantee the target language audiences can understand the same meanings as that the source language audiences do, subtitle translators should flexibly adopt translation methods during the translation process so as to achieve the *skopos*. This study verifies the applicability of the *skopos* theory by analyzing 10 specific cases in total from documentaries.

This research only selects 10 model cases from *A Bite of China* (Season 4) for case study. The number remains relatively small and the coverage narrow. Therefore, this study still possesses certain limitations. Future researches should increase the size of the samples and conduct more in-depth investigations. In any cases, as China continues to put forward the "Chinese Culture Going Global" strategy, more high-quality Chinese documentaries will be produced, allowing the world to hear and understand China. The Chinese documentary subtitle translation should also keep pace with the tides, providing quality-ensured versions aiming for further and deeper the cultural communication between China and the world.

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