

A Comparison of the English Subtitles of The Wandering Earth Series from the Perspective of Sociological Translation Studies

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Abstract: As a social practice activity affected by many social and cultural factors, the subjective initiative of social roles, accumulated capital and habits will affect the dissemination of translation products. In 1972, Holmes proposed to promote function-oriented descriptive translation research, and explore the phenomenon of translation within the framework of sociology. Sociological translation studies construct a system based on the core three elements of Bourdieu's sociological theory—capital, field, and habit, and explore the different roles played by actors in social practice. The popularity of the 2019 and 2023 Spring Festival movie series “The Wandering Earth” had aroused people’s attention to Chinese science fiction movies. This movie series is based on the short novel of the same name published in 2000 by Liu Cixin, a new generation of Chinese science fiction novelists. The films were translated into English and released in overseas theaters. This article will take the subtitle translation of the series as the starting point from the perspective of sociological translation studies, take culture and market as the two general directions, and explore the changes and reasons for the subtitle translation of The Wandering Earth I and II. This study finds that the subtitle quality of the Wandering Earth series of movies has improved significantly. The change is mainly related to China's cultural self-confidence, cultural export policy support and market attraction in recent years. The sociological perspective of this study compensates for the theoretical singularity of most subtitle translation studies, and improves the objectivity of the research mechanism, which can promote the diversification of other translation studies. At the same time, it also helps more films improve their own translation quality, achieve a win-win situation of going abroad and achieving commercial value and cultural output.

Keywords: The Wandering Earth, sociological translation studies, culture exchange, marketing

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the continuous development of the world economy and the constant increase of cross-cultural exchange activities, movie culture has become a product with communicational and commercial advantages. Movie plays an important role in people's daily life, since through watching movies, people can not only relax and appreciate the ultimate audio-visual experiences, but also

deepen their understanding of the values and cultural concepts carried by the movies. Foreign movies, for most audience, act as a bridge for inter-cultural communication. The film plays its role as a commercial product which makes human enjoy entertainment and disseminate culture at the same time [1]. Therefore, subtitle translation plays an important role in movies. Film subtitle translation is an important part of enhancing communication capacity as a link between different cultures. The film is composed of dynamic pictures, background music, subtitles and other elements. It is a multi-modal carrier that contains the specific cultural background of the film producer from all aspects and is affected by the values and pursuit concepts in the social and cultural background. Hence, an analysis of film subtitle translation from the perspective of social translation can more comprehensively expose the meanings and views behind the scenes, achieve the consistency and integrity of film subtitle translation, and point out the shortcomings while exploring the reasons and effects of film subtitle translation optimization. Such a study also contributes on the ideas for future film and television translation optimization.

This paper uses “*The Wandering Earth*” series as an example. *The Wandering Earth* is China's first sci-fi hardcore film that is set against the background of human beings fleeing the solar system in search of a new home due to an upcoming crisis of sun aging that will lead to the destruction of the earth [2]. *The Wandering Earth I & II* have been released overseas and have won the love of foreign audiences. *The Wandering Earth* is rare in that it takes Chinese values as the core to go global, which is different from the typical individualism and heroism in American films that have a high market share, and the research on Chinese and English subtitle translation of the film is more novel and unique.

2. Sociological Translation Studies

Back in 1972, James Holmes proposed an initial idea of “social translation” and raised the question of the social context of translation, but his ideas have not been taken seriously. Gerald Parks, who also published a paper titled “Towards a Sociology of Translation”, proposed questions such as “What is translation?” “Which language or culture does the translation take place between?”. He brings sociology into the study of translation based on Bourdieu’s theory of symbolism and its categories. Daniel Simeoni, in his paper “The Privotal Status of the Translator’s Habitus”, draws on Bourdieu’s category of “habits”. Since Holmes proposed the construction of “social translation studies” in “The Name and Reality of Translation Studies”, sociological theories have begun to enter translation studies. Since then, people such as Spivak, Tuli, Habermas, and others have applied sociological theories in translation studies [3].

In his studies of language in society, Bourdieu is often seen as a macrosociological theorist whose main contribution lies in the theorizing of social action and the fields of structure, symbolic power relations and capital, as well as habit. Bourdieu's concepts of “habit”, “field” and “capital” have contributed greatly to the theorization of the interaction between institutions and structures in translation studies. Within the framework of Bourdieu’s theory, translators with their own habits and capital compete in the field of power relations and carry out translation practice [4]. Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the relationship between institutions and structures has proven helpful in addressing the reproducible or transformative potential of translation behavior in specific historical and socio-cultural contexts, the specific impact of translators and the complex networks in which they operate on translation activities.

3. Comparison and Analysis

The comparison and analytical research on the subtitle translation of *The Wandering Earth I and II* will start from the original text, and conduct a more profound study of the changes in the subtitle

translation of *The Wandering Earth*, exploring and the reasons for these changes from the perspective of social translation.

3.1. Comparison from the Text

The style of the original scripts, the featuring characterization and the difficulty of the subtitles caused by the different background of the stories of *The Wandering Earth I* and *II* all affect the accuracy, authenticity and literariness of the subtitle translation. Overall, the script lines of *The Wandering Earth I* (henceforth *I*) are more nuanced than those of *The Wandering Earth II* (henceforth *II*), which is due to the large distinction in the story background of the plot in the two movies. The story of *I* is based on the rescue of a crisis that broke out under the “wandering state” of the earth, and the atmosphere is in a high state of tension, and the characters’ conversations are appeared more streamlined and compact; *II* tells a story of human beings’ transition from the end of golden age of human which is called “Ante-solar Era (前太阳时代)” to “The Braking Era (刹车时代)” of the Wandering Earth Project. As the atmosphere throughout the whole film is not a tense one, the expression of the characters will be relatively relaxed, and the sentence length is longer and contents are rich. Moreover, the character classes and careers in *I* are relatively few than those in *II*. The dialogues in *I* are mainly between the rescuers, while for the characters in *II*, the classes and occupations are refined. Characters with different professions also have to be distinguished professional through their lines. *The Wandering Earth II* is more difficult to be translated and produced than *I* in many aspects, but in terms of the audience's viewing experience, *II* outplays *I*. This is because the translation quality of the subtitles of *II* has been improved to be more natural and more deeply linked with the image of the characters and the background of the story, which brings the audience a stronger immersive feelings. For example, the translation of “爸爸” in *I* and *II* are different. The character 刘启(Liu Qi) said “爸爸，木星上有一只眼睛。(Dad, there is an eye on Jupiter)” in *I* and the character 图丫丫(Tu Yaya) said “爸爸你那里好黑啊。(Daddy, it’s so dark over there.)” in *II*. It is obvious that the first one is blunt. “Dad” does not correspond to the English speaking children calling their parents unconsciously, so changing it to “Daddy” will achieve more vivid effects.

In addition, most of the subtitle translations of *The Wandering Earth I* only relay the surface word meanings of the sentence, but when conveying some emotional content such as humor, or the translation of people's names and nicknames, it does not convey the original meanings well, and even hinders the audience’s understanding [5]. For example, “刘启(Liu Qi)” is also called “户口(Hu Kou)”. “户口(Hu Kou)” here is to separate the two parts of the character “启” of the Chinese “户” and “口” as a nickname, which is a wordplay that has no particular meaning and it shows a typical way for Chinese people to give someone they have a close relationship a nickname. In the plot dialogue, the younger sister 韩朵朵(Han Duoduo) called her brother by his nickname because the relationship between the two is very close, on the other hand, it also shows that the younger sister treats her big brother a little bit of rude in Chinese culture that traditional Chinese families emphasize respect for generations. The translator transliterates “户口” as “Hu Kou”, which not only does not convey the inner cultural meaning, but is also easily confused the audience. Especially this appears at the beginning of the movie, the audience is not familiar with the character, Liu Qi’s name is sometimes “Liu Qi”, sometimes “Hu Kou”. It is not conducive to the audience's correspondence with this character, and will produce a sense of separation, which will also give a more negative impact on the audience's viewing experience. The audience does not understand the meaning of “Hu Kou”, naturally they cannot understand why Liu Qi said to Han Duoduo “别老户口户口的叫，叫哥。

(Stop calling me Hu Kou Hu Kou, where are your manners? Call me brother.)”. And in this sentence, although the translation has supplemented “Where are your manners?” to explain the

original text of “别老户口户口的叫 (Stop calling me Hu Kou Hu Kou)”, but the translation of “Stop calling me Hu Kou Hu Kou” is not good, since there is no need to bring out “Hu Kou” twice to re-express the meaning. Moreover, the English translation of “叫哥 (Call me brother.)” is a typical Chinese-English expression, and the author believes that if it is changed to “I’m your brother” is better. A translation of “Stop calling me Hu Kou. Where are your manners? I’m your brother.” will be more in line with the inner meaning and the mood of the character saying this sentence. More similar problems are found in *The Wandering Earth I*, which will not be listed in details in this study.

In *The Wandering Earth II*, the translation team obviously has a deeper understanding of some Chinese culture-loaded expressions, humorous usages and emotional connotations, and indeed some expressions that belong to Chinese society and culture are not easy to translate, but they have rendered them as much as possible, like “今人不见古时月，今月曾经照古人。(People don't see the Moon of yore, yet our Moon once shone on the ancients.)” Even some puns are well handled, which can arrange a scene in the script to achieve a witty effect, such as the following dialogue: “我被锁定了。甩不掉啊！(I’m targeted. Can't shake them off!)” “诺夫，赶紧摇人！(Nov, shake them off!)” “我正摇着呢！(Working on it!)” The English translation here includes a repetition of “shake them off”, but only the first one is the semantic equivalence of the original text. The first one refers to shaking off the enemy tracked behind, while the second one is actually a misunderstanding of Zhang Peng and Nov’s cross-language communication through the mistake made by artificial intelligence simultaneous interpretation in “摇人(which really means get help)”. The artificial intelligence interpretation only translates the literal meaning of “摇”(“shake”), so it causes this humorous scene where the dialogue between two people is not on the same page.

At the level of script text, the quality of subtitle translation in *The Wandering Earth II* has improved compared to that in *The Wandering Earth I*.

3.2. Analysis from the Sociological Translation Studies

Bourdieu Social Translation has three core elements: field, capital, and habit. The three do not exist independently, but interact to influence translation products. In *The Wandering Earth I and II*, the cultural field and capital market subtly affect the translator’s habits, slowly adjust and eventually reflect in the subtitle translation, and the translator’s habits also bring the culture of the translator’s society into commercial films which show Chinese culture and ideas to the world when they act as commercial products.

3.2.1. Culture and Ideology Output

The Success of *The Wandering Earth I* encouraged the crew to launch *The Wandering Earth II*. Behind this is cultural confidence. The improved quality of subtitles in *The Wandering Earth II* shows that China pays more attention to the export of its own culture in cross-cultural communication activities. Hoping that their own culture and ideas will be disseminated, they have strengthened their attention to subtitle translation in the bilingual version, not only to translate the surface meaning, but also to express the humanistic feelings of China [6].

The Wandering Earth series continues the tradition of science fiction film creation, positioning the protagonist as earthlings. It is based on this global self-positioning that the film amplifies the unique feelings of home and country of Chinese culture to the pattern and vision of all mankind. Director Frant Gwo mentioned in his interpretation of the film: Taking the earth to wander is a very big, very magnificent core. It’s a very Chinese decision: even if there is such a big crisis, human must take the earth and their home together on their way to escape [7].

In the uncertain situation of some major disasters, what the mass can do as individuals is to accompany. In Confucianism, there is a saying that “仁者，与天地万物为一(Benevolent people see all things as one.)”, so when the earth faces destruction, it is also a crisis of human survival, which makes human beings and the earth a community of destiny, and this is inherent in China. It is consistently inherited in the Confucian spirit. Taking the earth to wandering in the space is not only a romance, but also a conscious commitment and the presentation and growth of Chinese values and Chinese spirit in the contemporary world. Spanning 2,500 years and 100 generations, “taking the earth to wander” also reflects the responsibility and righteousness in Chinese people’s veins, which is “do not abandon, do not give up” in the film as the line “危难当前，唯有责任。(In times of crisis, duty above all.)” emphasized. Director Frant Gwo once said: “In the past, foreign science fiction movies generally sent spaceships to other planets to explore the possibility of survival when facing a crisis that will be the end of the world. But our proposition is to take the earth with us to explore.[7]” Although the main characters of the film are Chinese, the film does not deliberately emphasize the protagonist’s Chinese background, nor binds traditional Chinese cultural symbols with characters, but puts individual characters with Chinese backgrounds in the collectivist scenario of all mankind saving the earth [8]. To a certain extent, the film dilutes the differences in region, ethnicity, nationality and so on, and first positions all characters as “earthlings”. Everyone pays attention to the fate of the earth and human beings, and thus successfully builds a discourse system of “a community with a shared future for mankind” [9], just like the character Zhou Zhezhi(周喆直) said in the film: “我相信人类的勇气可以跨越时间，跨越每一个历史，当下和未来；我相信我们的人一定可以完成任务，无论虚实，不计存亡；我相信会再次看到蓝天，鲜花挂满枝头。(I believe the courage of mankind transcends time. It transcends the past, present, and future. I believe our people will definitely accomplish the mission, real or virtual, at all costs. I believe the reunion under the blue sky, when the blossoms hang from every bough.)” All of these Chinese ideas and propositions are produced in China’s unique cultural field. China’s cultural field not only guides the direction of the film, but also enhances the acceptance of China’s cultural connotation by the outside world. And the subtitles in the film conveys this Chinese spirit and Chinese proposition to the outside world, so in *The Wandering Earth II*, the improvement of subtitle translation quality has also become an inevitability in the Chinese cultural field.

3.2.2. Commercial Purpose

As the first domestic sci-fi movie of China, *The Wandering Earth I* has exceeded 7 million in overseas markets. Although it is only equivalent to more than 40 million yuan, it is incomparable with the domestic box office, but at least it has been proved to have achieved some output. Four years later, *The Wandering Earth II* finally has a bigger breakthrough and will become the first film in recent years to exceed ten million dollars at the overseas box office. *The Wandering Earth II* landed in the North American market at the same time. At March 1 2023, it has approached the \$5 million mark, and North America has become the largest overseas market. In particular, the film has made a breakthrough in word of mouth, with 78% on ROTTEN TOMATOES in North America with 97% audience score, which means that the film can be seen as fully recognized by ordinary audiences. To some extent, domestic films have conquered Hollywood by the way Hollywood film does. A commercial film is focus on the word “commercial”, and the quality of subtitle translation is an important part of its success in overseas markets. *The Wandering Earth I* successfully opened overseas markets and made Chinese science fiction films hope to go to a wider outside world, so the success of *The Wandering Earth I* also laid the foundation for the improvement of *The Wandering Earth II*’s subtitle translation.

There has always been a large gap between Chinese films and international films, which has led to the fact that Chinese films do not overly pursue the international market. It is difficult for translated films to occupy an ideal share in the international market, and it is difficult to become active in the viewing experience of the target language audiences. Therefore, over time, Chinese films have no awareness to improve their translation quality to attract more overseas copyright agents to carry out overseas publicity and marketing activities. The successful opening of overseas markets on *The Wandering Earth I* forced Chinese producers to consider overseas business operation habits and field social capital, which also affects the subtitle translation of the film. The composition of the translation team has also been adjusted, selecting translators who are more familiar with the English-speaking cultural scene, and whose translator habits tend to make translation products more acceptable to overseas audiences than those of translators who have been in the Chinese literature or film and television drama industry for a long time.

4. Significance

The improvement of the translation quality of *The Wandering Earth* series reflects the adjustment of the general direction of cultural output in recent years. In the past, domestic Chinese to English generally preferred a translation-centric translation strategy, pursuing to translate the original text in a way that was easier for foreign readers to understand, but this method was not conducive to cultural export. Now they prefer to tell the own stories of Chinese in foreign languages, using more source-centric translation strategies to export Chinese culture along with ideas [10].

The Wandering Earth series of films, which are still being filmed, have successfully entered the Western film and television market, and the existing overall network has not stopped [11]. This series is attracting more audiences, practitioners and distributors by mutual attraction and communication with other venues, which will continue to promote the series of films to become an “active presence” in the purpose audiences. Moreover, once the Russian version of *The Wandering Earth II* is released, more translations in different languages will continue to expand the capital of the work in the world cultural scene. Audiences who know more about the film will involuntarily pay attention to other works of the original author of the work, so it will also have a cascade impact on the world literary field.

5. Conclusion

Based on social translation studies, the comparative analysis of subtitle translation on *The Wandering Earth I and II* does not focus on analyzing the quality of translations, but more on discovering the reasons behind the transformation of translation quality. Translation is an important part of cross-cultural communication activities, so no translation can be separated from cultural factors, and the research of translators and translation products from the perspective of social translation studies is concerned with the correlation and impact between multiple social factors and human behavior in the place or platform of communication using culture as a place or platform. The subtitle translation of *The Wandering Earth* series breaks through the shackles of status and culture and integrates with world culture, which is not only the product of the strategic adjustment of the general direction of China's cultural export, but also the embodiment of cultural self-confidence and the necessary demand for economic activities. Although the subtitle translation of the series has improved considerably, there are still shortcomings that can negatively affect cross-cultural communication. The habits, capital and field that Chinese film translation needs can help more films (not only Chinese films) become international and realize cultural exchanges and exchanges with other countries. Also breaking the marginalization of seeing translation as a tool, and make translation an effective means to promote economic and cultural exchanges.

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