

A Study on Subtitle Translation Strategies of Documentaries from the Perspective of Eco-translatology: A Case Study of *A Bite of China* Season Two

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Abstract: Documentary subtitle translation plays an important role in cultural communication. This study takes the second season of *A Bite of China* as a case study to explore the subtitle translation strategies of documentaries from the perspective of eco-translatology. It is found that language dimension transformation needs a balance between simplifying language and preserving information. Cultural dimension transfer conveys cultural connotation through the combination of transliteration, literal translation and annotation. The change of communicative dimension requires flexible adjustment of expression according to the context and the needs of the audience. This study not only provides scientific theoretical support for documentary subtitle translation, but also provides a beneficial exploration for the application and development of ecological transliteration in the field of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Eco-translatology; Documentary subtitle translation; Three-dimensional conversions; *A Bite of China*

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1. Introduction

In the wave of globalization, documentaries, as significant carriers of cultural dissemination, have increasingly prominent cross-cultural communication value. Subtitle translation, as a crucial link in bringing documentaries to the international stage, not only undertakes the task of language conversion but also serves as a bridge for cultural transmission. However, traditional translation theories often focus excessively on linguistic conversion, neglecting the complex ecological environment in which translation activities occur, encompassing factors such as cultural background, audience needs, and pragmatic context.

The emergence of Eco-translatology offers a brand-new perspective for subtitle translation research. Proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen, Eco-translatology emphasizes that translation is “the translator's selection activity to adapt to the translational eco-environment” and clearly puts forward the translation concept of “translator-centeredness”. As a documentary with extensive international influence, *A Bite of China* showcases the profundity and breadth of Chinese food culture from a unique perspective, becoming an important vehicle for promoting Chinese culture globally.

This study takes the second season of *A Bite of China* as a case study to explore documentary subtitle translation strategies from the perspective of Eco-translatology. By analyzing the specific practices of its subtitle translation, it aims to reveal the characteristics and patterns of linguistic adaptation, cultural adaptation, and pragmatic adaptation, intending to provide beneficial guidance for documentary subtitle translation practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Eco-translatology Research

Eco-translatology is an original Chinese translation theory first proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen of Tsinghua University in 2001. Professor Hu Gengshen introduced the concepts of “adaptation” and “selection” from Darwin's theory of evolution into translation studies, proposing the core viewpoint that “translation is adaptation and selection”. This theory not only focuses on linguistic conversion but also emphasizes the dynamic balance of multiple dimensions such as culture and communication, forming core theoretical frameworks like the “three-dimensional transformation method”.

Li Hua (2017) focused on the subtitle translation of tea culture films, exploring the application of Eco-translatology in this area. The study pointed out that subtitle translation for tea culture films faces problems such

as rigid language expression and narrow perspectives on cultural transformation. Through Eco-translatology's "three-dimensional transformation method", the study proposed specific translation strategies, emphasizing that translators should make adaptive selections and transformations from the three dimensions to improve subtitle translation quality.

Shang Jing (2017), using the English translation of public signs in Hebei Province tourist attractions as a case study, explored the application of Eco-translatology in public sign translation. Through specific case analysis, the study proposed strategies to improve the quality of public sign translation, emphasizing that translators need to pay attention to the linguistic accuracy, cultural connotations, and communicative intent of public signs.

Liu Jia (2018) explored the ethical issues in translating ethnic classics from the perspective of Eco-translatology. In translating ethnic classics, translators need to enhance their own competence, fulfill translator responsibilities, and adopt appropriate translation strategies to achieve a balance between the original text's ecology and the target text's ecology. The study also suggested strengthening multilingual translation and publication to promote the diversity and symbiosis of ethnic classics.

Sun Lin and Han Caihong (2021) studied the English translation strategies of culture-loaded words in the science fiction novel *Folding Beijing*. By analyzing the translation effects of four types of culture-loaded words, ecological, material, social, and linguistic in *Folding Beijing*, this research demonstrated the value of Eco-translatology in literary translation, providing useful insights for translating culture-loaded words.

Chen Yantong (2022) interpreted Yu Guangzhong's phenomenon of literary retranslation from the perspective of Eco-translatology, analyzing his retranslation practices of *Lust for Life* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. By examining Yu Guangzhong's translation thoughts and retranslation practices, the study revealed his profound understanding of the translational eco-environment and his pursuit of the translated text's vitality.

The five works mentioned above discuss the application of Eco-translatology in translation practice from different angles, covering various fields such as literary translation, subtitle translation, ethnic classics translation, and public sign translation. These studies collectively emphasize the core concepts of Eco-translatology, namely the translator's adaptation and selection within the translational eco-environment, and the transformations across the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions.

2.2 Overview of Documentary Subtitle Translation

Subtitle translation, as a branch of translation studies, has gained increasing popularity since its inception. Over the past few decades, numerous scholars both domestically and internationally have conducted extensive research on it. In this section, the author will introduce and organize domestic and international research on subtitle translation.

2.2.1 Previous Studies Abroad

Dollerup (1974) extensively studied various types of errors that could occur in television program subtitles, demonstrating the critical value of subtitle translation in the educational field and proving how subtitles can assist viewers in learning new languages.

In the Western world, Fodor's *Film Dubbing: Phonetic, Semiotic, Esthetic and Psychological Aspects* is considered a pioneering work in film translation. In the book, Fodor studied the linguistic, aesthetic, psychological, and semiotic aspects of film translation. He argued that when conducting audiovisual translation research, phonetic features, content, and text should all be taken into consideration. Fodor (1976) believed that "due to the irreplaceable uniqueness of each country's language and culture, achieving absolute synchronization in every aspect of film translation is difficult".

Another renowned scholar focusing on the accuracy of subtitle translation, Diaz-Cintas (2001), argued that factors including material assets, working conditions, and linguistic barriers are related to the quality of subtitle translation. Hazel R. Morgan (2001) endeavored to use her experience of regular television viewing to find ways to improve subtitle translation. In summary, she stated that while high-quality subtitles might save a poor film,

low-quality subtitles could equally ruin a good one. Furthermore, she emphasized that effective subtitles must accurately convey the author's original intent. Bruti (2008) conducted research on how to handle politeness issues in subtitle translation.

Overall, research on subtitle translation in the West started earlier and exhibits significant systematic diversity.

2.2.2 Previous Studies at Home

Translation research in China has primarily focused on written translation, while dubbing and subtitling have been less explored. Since the reform and opening-up policy, the use of subtitles has continuously increased.

Domestic research on subtitle translation has lagged, with relatively few scholars studying this issue. Qian Shaochang (2000) studied the differences between spoken and written language, identifying five major characteristics of film and television language. Based on his many years of translation practice and numerous translation examples, he concluded that fluency is most important in film and television translation.

Li Yunxing (2001) conducted a detailed study of subtitle translation from three aspects: temporal and spatial constraints, informative function, and cultural factors, and analyzed corresponding translation strategies. Shao Wei (2009), through the translation of Chinese and Western films, proposed the guiding role of Nida's functional equivalence theory in film and television subtitle translation. Lu Ziru and Zhang Jun (2020), before expounding on the three principles of Skopos theory, outlined the characteristics of subtitle translation and also compared two main translation strategies in subtitle translation—domestication and foreignization—and their different translation effects.

The aforementioned studies have researched film and television subtitle translation from different perspectives and using various theories.

3.Theoretical Framework

Eco-translatology is a translation studies theory first proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen in 2001. Its core concept is to view translation activity as a complex ecosystem, emphasizing the translator's adaptation and selection within the translational eco-environment. The theoretical framework of Eco-translatology mainly includes the following aspects:

The translational eco-environment refers to the overall environment in which translation activity occurs, encompassing multiple dimensions such as the source text, target text, translator, reader, cultural background, and social environment. These factors interact to form the ecosystem of translation activity.

3.1 Translator-Centeredness

Eco-translatology emphasizes the translator's subjectivity, believing that the translator possesses subjective initiative during the translation process and is the leader within the translational eco-environment. The translator needs to make adaptive selections based on the requirements of the translational eco-environment. During translation, the translator must coordinate relationships among the source text, target text, readers, and cultural background, achieving a balance in the translation ecology through adaptive selection.

3.2 Translation as Adaptation and Selection

Adaptation and selection are the core mechanisms of Eco-translatology, emphasizing that the translator must continuously adapt to the requirements of the translational eco-environment and make selective transformations during the translation process. Adaptation and selection constitute a dynamic process; the translator needs to flexibly adjust translation strategies according to different ecological environments. For instance, the translator may need to make selective transformations in terms of linguistic form, cultural connotation, and communicative intent to achieve the optimal translation effect.

3.3 Three-Dimensional Transformations

Three-dimensional transformations are the specific operational methods of Eco-translatology, involving adaptive selections and transformations in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions.

The linguistic dimension focuses on the conversion of linguistic forms, including adaptive selections in lexicon, syntax, and grammar.

The cultural dimension focuses on the transmission of cultural connotations, including adaptive selections related to culture-loaded words and cultural background information.

The communicative dimension focuses on the realization of communicative intent, including aspects like the readability and acceptability of the target text.

By viewing translation activity as a complex ecosystem, emphasizing the translator's adaptation and selection within the translational eco-environment, Eco-translatology proposes the three-dimensional transformation method involving linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. This theoretical framework not only offers a new perspective for translation studies but also provides scientific guidance for translation practice. Future research can further deepen the theoretical study of Eco-translatology, explore its application in different translation fields, and promote the development of translation studies.

4. Case Analysis

This chapter explores the translation strategies employed in the English subtitles of *A Bite of China* Season Two under the guidance of Eco-translatology.

4.1 Transformation from the Linguistic Dimension

Adaptive transformation in the linguistic dimension refers to “the translator's adaptive transformation of linguistic forms during the translation process, which occurs at different aspects and levels” (Hu Gengshen 2008). This includes adjustments at the lexical, syntactic, and grammatical levels to ensure the target text is effectively understood and accepted within the target language environment. The goal of linguistic dimension transformation is to make the target text close to the expression habits of the target language in terms of linguistic form while retaining the core information of the source text.

Example 1:

ST: 古老的传说和悠久的职业，正被机械们一茬茬收割殆尽。

TT: Their age-old profession and their legends are fading away in the face of machine competition.

Analysis: “古老的传说和悠久的职业” is translated as “Their age-old profession and their legends”, maintaining the parallel structure of the original, making the sentence more balanced. Using “their” adds referential clarity, helping readers understand that these professions and legends belong to a specific group. The original emphasizes the gradual process of ancient legends and professions being replaced by machinery. Through “fading away” and “machine competition”, the target conveys a similar meaning but emphasizes the gradual disappearance caused by mechanical competition, giving the sentence a more dynamic and urgent feel.

Example 2:

ST: 在中国的厨房，无论烹饪菜肴还是制作甜点，蜂蜜都是其他糖类无法替代的。

TT: Honey is irreplaceable in Chinese cuisine, both in cooking and in making desserts.

Analysis: “其他糖类” is not directly translated, but the word “irreplaceable” implies honey's uniqueness and irreplaceability. The parallel structure “both...and...” is used, maintaining the logical relationship of the original, allowing readers to appreciate honey's importance in different culinary contexts.

Example 3:

ST: 无论脚步走多远，在人的脑海中，只有故乡的味道熟悉而顽固。

TT: No matter how far you travel, the familiar flavors of home are one thing that always remains in your mind.

Analysis: “脚步” is translated as “travel”, a common English word for journeying or walking, fitting the original meaning of “footsteps walking”. “熟悉而顽固” is rendered as “familiar flavors...always remains”. “Familiar” conveys the original meaning accurately, and “remains” effectively expresses the idea of “stubbornly existing”,

preserving the original's imagery while conforming to English expression habits. “只有.....”is translated as “one thing that always remains”, using the “one thing that...” structure to emphasize the unique place of “hometown flavors” in one's mind, aligning well with the original semantics.

4.2 Transformation from the Cultural Dimension

Documentaries often serve as vehicles for cultural representation and identity expression. Translators must navigate the complexities of cultural specificity. In *A Bite of China* Season Two, the translator frequently encounters culturally specific terms related to Chinese cuisine, local customs, and regional identities. The following examples illustrate how adaptive transformations in the cultural dimension are employed to preserve cultural connotations while making the content intelligible and engaging for international viewers.

Example 1:

ST: 雷山鱼酱

TT: Leishan fish sauce

Analysis: Leishan fish sauce is a specialty food mentioned in *A Bite of China*. It is a sauce made by fermenting fish, possessing strong local characteristics and a unique flavor. Dishes named after places often reflect regional characteristics. In translation, the place name “Leishan” is retained via transliteration, while “fish sauce” is translated directly. This preserves the uniqueness of Chinese food culture.

Example 2:

ST: 叫花鸡

TT: Beggar's chicken

Analysis: Beggar's chicken is a traditional Chinese dish whose name originates from a story about a beggar. It is typically prepared by wrapping a chicken in lotus leaves and mud before roasting. A literal translation would prevent target language readers from understanding the dish. Therefore, an explanation of the name's origin can be added in the translation or through notes, it retains the uniqueness of the dish name while helping foreign audiences understand its cultural background and preparation method.

Example 3:

ST: 西湖醋鱼

TT: West Lake fish in sweet and sour sauce

Analysis: West Lake vinegar fish is a traditional Hangzhou dish known for its tender fish and sweet and sour vinegar sauce. It blends sweet, sour, and savory flavors and is popular among locals and tourists. The dish is typically made with grass carp from West Lake. “West Lake” emphasizes the regional characteristic, allowing foreign readers to associate it with the beauty of West Lake and Hangzhou's culinary culture. “Fish” directly indicates the main ingredient. Although no direct annotation is added, the description “sweet and sour sauce” aligns with Western readers' understanding of sweet and sour flavors, enabling them to quickly grasp the dish's taste. This translation avoids potential cultural misunderstandings that might arise from literal translation.

Example 4:

ST: 玛仁糖

TT: Xinjiang nut cake

Analysis: This is a traditional Xinjiang Uyghur specialty food. Made from rich dried fruits, nuts, and sugar syrup, it is colorful, sweet, durable, and portable. It has a history of several hundred years in Xinjiang and was an important supply on the Silk Road. When translating this dessert, a combined transliteration and literal translation strategy is used: "Xinjiang" retains the regional characteristic, while "nut cake" directly describes its main components.

Example 5:

ST: 九层皮

TT: Nine-layer cake

Analysis: Within the culinary culture of southern Jiangxi in China, it is not merely the name of a dish; it embodies a specific method of preparation—steamed in layers—as well as folkloric symbolism. In Chinese culture, the number “nine” represents abundance, perfection and good fortune. This name serves as a cultural symbol within the local culinary landscape, describing the preparation process whilst also arousing curiosity about the dish’s appearance and texture. The translator’s choice of “cake” as the core term represents a proactive adaptation to the cultural context of the target language. In Western culinary culture, “cake” generally refers to a pastry made from ingredients such as flour or rice flour and shaped into a specific form. This choice places the food within the English cultural framework of “pastries”, eliminating any sense of unfamiliarity and aligning with the culinary expectations of the target audience.

4.3 Transformation from the Communicative Dimension

Adaptive transformation in the communicative dimension centers on the realization of the source text’s communicative intent within the target language context. As Hu Gengshen (2008) articulates, this dimension involves the translator’s adaptive selection of linguistic and stylistic elements to ensure that the translated text effectively fulfills its intended function—whether to inform, persuade, entertain, or evoke emotional resonance. The following examples demonstrate how the translator makes adaptive choices in the communicative dimension to maintain the documentary’s narrative coherence and emotional resonance, thereby enhancing cross-cultural understanding and viewer engagement.

Example 1:

ST: 木榨榨油，……，重达 100 公斤的撞锤敲打木楔子，对榨膛中的坯饼施加巨大的压力。

TT: Wedge oil ... The hammer, weighing over a hundred kilograms, slams against the wedge to create a huge pressure in the chamber and crush the pulp.

Analysis: This passage describes the Huizhou oil pressing technique and the making of Su-style pastries, reflecting the inheritance and cultural value of traditional Chinese skills. The translation retains culturally specific terms like “wedge oil presses”, “hammer” and “wedge” while explaining their function and role, enabling foreign readers to understand the complexity and uniqueness of this traditional craft. This translation not only conveys information but also promotes cultural exchange.

Example 2:

ST: 春雷过后的第一拨笋子，当地称作雷笋。竹笋 10 天之内可以食用，10 天之后就会长成竹子。

TT: After thunder, we all go out to dig bamboo shoots. They have come for the first batch of bamboo shoots, known to the locals as thunder bamboo shoots. Thunder bamboo shoots are edible only for the first 10 days, any later and they grow into bamboo canes.

Analysis: This passage talks about Lei bamboo shoots, one of China's seasonal foods. The translation not only conveys the seasonal nature and edible period of Lei bamboo shoots but also, through the vivid description “after thunder”, allows readers to appreciate the nuanced observation of natural laws in traditional Chinese culture. This translation helps foreign readers understand the Chinese philosophy of living in harmony with nature.

Example 3:

ST: 人们成长，家常美味，也是人生百味。

TT: People grow, love, part and reunite. The tastes of home are so rich, the tastes of home cooking have all the flavors of life itself.

Analysis: This sentence conveys the importance of home-style food in Chinese culture and its close connection with life experiences. The target text adds descriptions of life experiences like “People grow, love, part and reunite”, making the information more complete. Furthermore, “the tastes of home cooking have all the flavors of life itself”

explains “人生百味” more concretely, making the message clearer. By adding background information and emotional descriptions, it helps foreign readers more easily understand the original text's connotations, achieving a better communicative effect.

5. Conclusion

This study, taking the second season of *A Bite of China* as an example, delves into the strategies of documentary subtitle translation from the perspective of Eco-translatology. Through a detailed analysis of the subtitle translation practices, it reveals the transformation strategies employed across the three dimensions, linguistic, cultural, and communicative, providing scientific theoretical support for documentary subtitle translation.

In the linguistic dimension, the subtitle translation of this documentary achieves a balance between simplifying language and preserving original information through adjustments in vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. This makes the target text closer to the expression habits of the target language while ensuring accurate information transmission. In the cultural dimension, the translator effectively handles culture-loaded words and cultural background information. By combining transliteration, literal translation and annotation, the translator effectively conveys the unique charm of Chinese food culture. In the communicative dimension, flexibly adjusting the expression of subtitles according to different contexts and audience needs is key to producing highly adaptive subtitle translations. This study, through the theoretical framework of Eco-translatology's "three-dimensional transformations," provides systematic guidance for documentary subtitle translation. The research results indicate that the Eco-translatology perspective can effectively enhance the quality of subtitle translation and promote the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese culture. Future research can further deepen the application of Eco-translatology in other translation fields, explore its applicability in different cultural contexts, and provide more theoretical support and practical references for promoting the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

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