

On Subtitle Translation of Documentary Seasons of China——from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract: *Seasons of China* is an epic documentary series produced by CNC, which focuses on the 24 solar terms in China and traditional Chinese culture. With both Chinese and English dialogues and subtitles, the documentary clearly presents the long history and unique customs of China, which is favored by audiences at home and abroad. Skopos Theory is the core of functionalist translation theory, emphasizing that translation purpose determines translation strategies and specific translation methods. According to Skopos Theory, translation should follow three rules: skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule. Based on Skopos Theory, in order to help the audience under different cultural backgrounds better understand traditional Chinese culture and promote the exchange and development of Chinese and foreign cultures, this paper adopts the method of text analysis, discussing and analyzing the methods and skills of subtitle translation in the documentary *Seasons of China*.

Keywords: *Skopos Theory; Seasons of China; Subtitle translation; Documentary*

1. Introduction

Culture is reflected in different aspects of life. Nowadays with the globalization, cross-cultural exchanges among countries are becoming more and more frequent. With the development of mass media, the limited physical borders of countries are overcome and a lot of documentary films are produced and introduced to other countries. In order to share extraordinary Chinese culture and expand our influence, the ability of external communication is one of the decisive factors and translation plays an essential role in the process. According to Luyken, "Viewing the world through the eyes of other nations and peoples can contribute to the breaking down of the barriers which ignorance and prejudice impose."^[1] As one of the most popular audiovisual media, documentary film focuses on documenting reality, which often includes footages of real events happened in daily life. It applies a unique way to present the world to the audience. *Seasons of China* is a documentary film recording traditional Chinese culture "the 24 solar terms", in which a large number of cultural-loaded words are included. However, the translation of these cultural-loaded words which represents traditional Chinese culture have not been extensively discussed and studied by scholars.

In this paper, Skopos Theory is adopted as the guideline to have a comparative and descriptive analysis of documentary subtitle translation, with much emphasis on its applicability in guiding documentary subtitle translation by employing corresponding translation strategies and methods. Since the twenty four-episode series documentary contains rich traditional Chinese cultural elements, how to convey the contents and information of the work is a major concern for the translator. Therefore, the thesis mainly explores how to effectively deliver documentary contents and spirits with proper translation strategies to target audiences under the instruction of Skopos Theory. This paper consists of five parts. First is the introductory part, which specifies the research background, methodologies and thesis structure. The second part is literature review of foreign and domestic researches of documentary subtitle translation. The third part is the introduction of the theoretical framework Skopos Theory, introducing the theory with regard to its development, its basic concepts and three essential rules. The fourth part is the application of the Skopos Theory to the documentary subtitle translation of the case study of *Seasons of China*, in which translation brief is specified and examples are studied and analyzed to illustrate the translation strategies and methods. The fifth part is a conclusion to the whole paper. This paper discusses the traditional Chinese culture and analyzes the strategies and methods of documentary subtitle translation, hoping to provide useful reference for the relevant research, help the audience under different cultural backgrounds better understand Chinese traditional culture and promote the exchange and integration of Chinese and foreign cultures.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Documentary Subtitle Translation Researches Abroad*

Documentary subtitle translation is relatively a new research field and few articles that specifically address it have been written by scholars and researchers at home and abroad. The study of audiovisual subtitle translation started earlier in western countries. Up to now, most of the experts active in the field of international film translation are scholars from Western countries, especially Europe. The popularity of film subtitle translation is directly related to the prosperity of the film industry. The close relationship among European countries, the high correlation of languages and the diversity of cultures promote the development of subtitle translation.

Bill Nichols addressed that it was Scottish documentarian John Grierson who first defined documentary film as the "creative treatment of actuality" in the 1930s.^[2] John Grierson also argued that the basic principle of documentary film is to achieve a goal of life observation. As the most commonly recognized version of the definition of documentary film, it is suggested that documentaries have strong story-telling power to inform people about what takes place in the real world. Stories in the documentary film are so different from those in the fiction films, it may be essentially based on the actual events.

In 1956, International Federation of Translators on the official journal *Babel* published an academic paper titled *Cinema et. Traduction* which discussed about audiovisual translation for the first time. It was regarded as the inception of European audiovisual translation theoretical studies. It drew the curtain of world audiovisual translation studies from then on. In the 1990s, G-M. Luyken has published *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television*. In this book, the author carried forward data studies from multiple perspectives, including translation's manpower costs, translation program volume, and translation audiences' preferences, and simultaneously talked about different translation modes suitable to film programs. In 2009, George Diaz Cintas cooperated with Gunilla Anderman to release the book *Audiovisual Translation: Language Transfer on Screen*. The book made a comprehensive summary of the latest progress and research findings in film translation, dubbing translation, audiovisual translation acceptability and audiovisual translation education by collecting related works from 17 well-known scholars.

Up to now, western audiovisual translation research has made great progress. But the research focuses on the definition and limitations of subtitle translation, the differences between subtitle translation and general translation, and the strategies and methods of subtitle translation.

2.2. *Documentary Subtitle Translation Researches At Home*

Compared with the West, the study of audiovisual subtitle translation started relatively late in China. In 1997, Ma Zhengqi issued the article *Discussion on the Basic Principle of Film Translation*. He discussed the five principles of audiovisual translation and dubbing, namely colloquial principle, figure characterization principle, emotional principle, mouth-shape principle and popularization principle. Afterwards, Ma Zhengqi successively released papers and books about film translation. In 2000, Qian Shaoshang issued the article *Audiovisual Translation—The Field with Growing Importance in the Translation Field* to advocate the leading figures in translation field to turn their eyes to film translation. After summarizing the importance of film translation, he quoted empirical cases to generalize the five major characteristics exclusive to film language and share seven tips of experience.

Li Yunxing is one of the first scholars to study subtitle translation in China. In his paper *The Strategy of Translating subtitles*, he gave an overview of subtitle translation. According to his opinion, because of the time and space limit of subtitle, translators had better adopt the reduction translation method. In addition, five translation modes for culture-loaded words were proposed by reference to the analysis on subtitle functions and stylistic features with cases.^[3] Whereas, he underlined that subtitle translation for culture-loaded words in film works should adopt the literal translation or transliteration method but forsake domestication, integration and explanation translation method. "Successful subtitle translation should seek perfect integration between scenes and sound within limited time and space." With the continuous cultural exchange policies of Chinese film and television works and the introduction of foreign works, subtitle translation has received more and more attention. A search for the keyword "subtitle translation" on CNKI showed that 2,128 related articles are published. Since 2012, the number of articles on relevant research has been stable at 300 to 400 per year. In a word, the research on film subtitle translation has attracted extensive attention from domestic scholars in recent years, but the research still focuses on the characteristics, specific translation strategies and methods of film subtitle

translation, while the subtitle translation of documentaries has not received enough attention.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Theoretical Background of Skopos Theory

As one of the most important theories in the Functionalist School, Skopos theory is continually developed and improved since its inception from Germany in the 1970s. Three prominent figures have made their respective contribution to make functional approaches to translation an influential trend in modern translation studies. They are Katharina Reiss, Hans J. Vermeer and Christiane Nord. In opposition to traditional linguistic translation theories, the Skopos Theory regards translation as a purposeful activity, and it opens up a new perspective to translation studies. Obtaining the inspiration from action theory, communication theory, text linguistics and reception theory in literary studies, Skopos Theory is considered as core of German functionalism. On the basis of Katharina Reiss's text-typology, Skopos Theory is first put forward by Hans J. Vermeer and then developed by Christiane Nord.

Reiss first investigates the relationships between text-type and translation. She develops a translation-oriented text typology, intending to derive strictly objective criteria for assessing the quality of translation.^[4] Her research contributes a lot to the forthcoming Skopos Theory. Based on Bühler's threefold division of language functions, she proposed three corresponding text-types, which include the informative, the expressive and the operative, focusing on achieving equivalence on text types.

Then Reiss's student, Hans J. Vermeer took some of her thoughts and proposed Skopos Theory in his work *Towards a General Theory of Translation Action*. Then in his work with Reiss *Groundwork for A General Theory of Translation*, he gave detailed explanations of the theory. According to Skopos Theory, every action has a purpose, and translation is also a purposeful cross-cultural communication activity. Translators should adopt translation strategies according to the purpose of translation. According to Vermeer, the Action Theory underpins Skopos Theory in that every action is steered by a purpose.^[5] That is to say, translation purpose determines translation strategy and specific translation methods. In order for the translator to interpret the purpose of the translation and employ strategies to act in accordance to the purpose, a translation brief provided by the client is deemed necessary.

With the development of Skopos Theory, Nord put forward her own functional model of "functionality plus loyalty" as a supplement to the Skopos Theory so as to develop a translation-oriented functional model, which can be effectively practiced in translator training.^[6] Within the framework of the functional approaches, Nord first introduces the concept of "Loyalty" so as to account for the culture-specificity of translation concepts, setting an ethical limitation to the otherwise unlimited range of possible skopos for the translation of one particular source text. She also emphasizes the special responsibility of the translator as a mediator for two cultures, and the important interpersonal relationship between the translator and the source-text author.

3.2. Three Rules of Skopos Theory

3.2.1. Skopos Rule

According to Skopos Theory, translation should follow three rules. As the core rule of translation, the skopos rule refers to the process in which the purpose to be achieved in translation determines the whole process of translation, namely, the translation purpose determines the translation strategies and methods. Skopos theory holds that the communicative purpose of a translation is determined by the initiator of the translation process.

3.2.2. Coherence Rule

The coherence rule refers to translations must achieve intratextual coherence. Intratextual coherence means that the translation must be comprehensible to the recipient and make sense in the culture of the target language and the communicative environment in which the translation is used.

3.2.3. Fidelity Rule

The fidelity rule states that there should be intertextual coherence between the original text and the translated text. Interlingual coherence is similar to what is commonly known as fidelity to the original text, and the degree and form of fidelity are determined by the purpose of the target text and the translator's understanding of the original text.

3.3. Applicability of Skopos Theory to Documentary Subtitle Translation

The Skopos Theory has been widely applied to film translation. Documentary films share many similarities with fiction films, this theory also can be applied in dealing with documentary translation. As a special translation activity, subtitle translation aims to solve the communication barriers caused by different languages and cultures, so that audiences can fully understand the content of film and television works. Therefore, subtitle translation is a purposeful translation in nature. Skopos theory holds that the purpose of translation determines the translation strategy, which is of great significance to the study of subtitle translation of audiovisual works. In the process of documentary subtitle translation, translators should pay attention to three key factors: text type and function, audience group and communicative purpose of translation.

Firstly, the translator must be familiar with the genre and content of the documentary. As an informative text with reference function, documentary aims to provide information and facts to the audience through narration and description. Only after understanding the theme, linguistic features and other details of the documentary can the translator decide what to present to the audience through subtitles. Secondly, the characteristics and expectations of the target audience are also important. In translation-oriented text analysis, text recipients, as one of the extrinsic factors affecting the communicative function of the source text, play a crucial role, and their social roles and reading expectations determine the purpose and focus of text translation.^[7] Therefore, in the process of subtitle translation, translators should pay attention to the social background and reading expectation of their audiences, and adopt corresponding translation strategies and methods. Finally, the translator must make clear the purpose of subtitle translation on the basis of fully understanding the documentary director and the audience. In the three rules of skopos theory, the skopos rule plays a crucial role, which has three interpretations: the translator's purpose; the communicative purpose of translation; and the purpose to be achieved by using a particular translation means. Usually, "purpose" refers to the communicative purpose of the translation. In the process of translation, the translator should pay attention to the communicative purpose of the target text and then choose the corresponding translation strategy and use the appropriate translation methods and skills.

4. Subtitle Translation of Documentary Seasons of China under Skopos Theory

4.1. Introduction of Seasons of China

Seasons of China is a large-scale publicity documentary launched by CNC. Dominic Johnson-Hill, a British host, introduces the 24 solar terms in traditional Chinese culture to the audience at home and abroad. The 24 solar terms are the product of ancient Chinese farming civilization. They not only play a guiding role in agricultural production, but also affect the clothing, food, housing, transportation and even cultural concepts of the Chinese people. In 2016, the 24 Solar terms of China were listed on UNESCO's Representative List of intangible Cultural Heritage, attracting more attention around the world. The 24-episode documentary series, *Seasons of China*, tells the story of one solar term in each episode, revealing the long historical origin and unique festival customs of the 24 solar terms.

As this documentary is closely related to China's long history and profound culture, it contains a large number of words with national characteristics. Among them, words with unique activities that are different from other nationalities are called "cultural-loaded words". When translating these words, translators need to adopt appropriate translation strategies and skills.

4.2. Translation Strategies and Methods

According to the Skopos Theory, translation skopos determines the translation strategies. The subtitle translation of *Seasons of China* is to provide valuable information to audiences eager to learn about traditional Chinese culture and help them better understand China's long history and unique culture. In particular, a large number of cultural-loaded words appear in the translation, which should not only retain Chinese cultural characteristics, but also conform to the English expressions. Therefore, translators should adopt appropriate translation methods and skills to present the subtitle clearly to the audience and make it easy for the audience to understand. Thus the following strategies are employed by translators to make the subtitles as informative and concise, easily comprehensible, and faithful to some extent to the source-language context which can be eventually acceptable by the target audience.

4.2.1. *Literal Translation*

Literal translation is a translation method that preserves both the content and the form of the original text. Literal translation will help the audience to understand and appreciate the charm of the original text when there is no great difference between the original text and the target text. The translation of oral communication requires that the other one in the conversation can understand the speaker's intention and convey the information of the source language in a short time through simple and accurate words. In *Seasons of China*, many scenes are conveyed through the instant dialogue between the foreign host and local Chinese. Literal translation can directly and clearly convey the original information to the audience.

Example 1: spring bamboo shoots up after the rain (Episode 2:05:20)

Example 2: Dragon Heads-raising Day (Episode 3:01:47)

Example 3: In spring plant just one grain and in autumn you can harvest ten thousand.
(Episode 4:17:10)

Example 1 is a four-character idiom in Chinese used to describe the rapid development of new things, just like spring bamboo shoots after the rain. In this case, literal translation is adopted. "Shoots up" vividly expresses the rapid growth of bamboo shoots and conveys the meaning of the original text concisely and clearly. Example 2 is a traditional Chinese folk festival during the Awakening of Insects. "Dragon" has the meaning of "auspicious" in traditional Chinese culture. In farming culture, "the raise of Dragon head" symbolizes the vitality of life and the beginning of spring ploughing. Since ancient times, people have regarded the day of dragon heads-raising as a day to pray for favorable weather, deriving many festival customs. The literal translation is used to express the original meaning vividly. Example 3 is a line from a poem of Li Shen, a poet in the Tang Dynasty. It describes the natural law of sowing in spring and harvesting in autumn. Seasons and numbers are clearly expressed here through literal translation. The word "grain" is also translated directly in the subtitle. The meaning of the original text is clear and follows the skopos rule and fidelity rule, which can meet the needs of target language readers.

4.2.2. *Free Translation*

Free translation is a translation method that expresses the content of the original text without requiring formal correspondence. Cultural differences tend to increase the difficulty of translation, bringing great challenge. In order to convey the meaning of the original text more accurately and make it easy for the audience to understand, the translator needs to adjust the translation by means of free translation. The purpose of *Seasons of China* is to spread traditional Chinese culture, especially when it comes to words and phrases about Traditional Chinese festivals and customs. The application of free translation can help foreign audiences better understand the original content.

Example 4: playing football (Episode 5:01:42)

Example 5: eating soybean flour cakes (Episode 4:01:39)

In Example 4, the original text refers to an ancient Chinese activity of kicking the ball with feet, which is similar to today's football. The strategy of domestication is adopted here, which is familiar to the target language audiences. Example 5 is one of the traditional snacks in northern China. It gets its name from the fact that the soybean flour used in the final process look like dirt thrown up by wild donkeys when they roll. If the name is translated literally, it is not only difficult for the audience to understand its meaning, but also likely to cause misunderstanding. Therefore, the translator uses free translation to translate its raw material, soybean flour, to make the translation more easily understood for the target audience.

Example 6: offering sacrifices to the Earth God (Episode 13:01:40)

Example 7: Man and nature were one and the same. (Episode 3:17:35)

Example 8: Still waters run deep. (Episode 11:12:46)

The source text in example 6 refers to the fifth day after the start of Autumn. The translation here is not the literal meaning, but according to its cultural connotation, "offering sacrifices to the Earth God" reflects the traditional Chinese cultural customs and conforms to the way of expression of the target language readers. Example 7 is a traditional Chinese philosophy that emphasizes the unity and harmony between nature and man. The word "nature" is translated from "tian" in the source text. It not only consists of the literal meaning, but also covers all things in nature. Therefore, the translation has accurately expressed the connotation of the original text. In example 8, it is a Chinese idiom, which means only

when the mind is calm and focused can we achieve ambitious goals and make a difference. Here the method of corresponding translation is adopted, and the expression in English is "Still waters run deep", which not only maintains the content of the original text, but also conforms to the expression habits of the target language readers, helping the audience to appreciate the interesting coincidence between different cultures and reducing the difficulty for foreign audiences to accept, which meets the requirements of skopos rule.

4.2.3. Transliteration and Explanatory Translation

Transliteration refers to the method of expressing the characters of one language with the same or similar pronunciation in another language. Explanatory translation means that the translator explains the cultural characteristics of the source language to the reader and supplements the missing information in the original text, thus enhancing the readability and completeness of the target text.

Example 9: Chama Gudao, the tea trail (Episode 6:07:53)

Example 10: Leizu, the goddess of silk (Episode 8:04:33)

China has a long history with many folk stories and specific expressions handed down from ancient times. But most foreign audiences may find it difficult to understand. In *Seasons of China*, the foreign host often uses expressions that foreign audiences are accustomed to, but it is difficult to find corresponding English words when explaining some traditional Chinese characteristics. Therefore, in order to make the target text as clear as possible, transliteration plus explanation is a good choice in translation, which not only expresses the unique characteristics of Chinese culture, but also is easy to be accepted by the target audience. "The tea trail" is an ancient transportation route formed by the tea and horse trade between inland and frontier areas in China. Leizu, one of the characters in Chinese folklore, is said to have invented the silk reeling technique and was regarded by later generations as the goddess of silkworm. Transliteration and explanatory translation are combined in both cases to facilitate the audience's understanding.

4.2.4. Reduction

Reduction refers to deleting some unnecessary expressions in the translation according to logic, syntax and rhetoric needs.^[8] The limitation of time and space of documentary requires subtitle translation to convey the content of the original text in a simple and easy way with reduction of unnecessary information. The application of reduction can make the expressions more clearly and concisely delivered and achieve the specific purpose of translation.

Example 11: It had hundreds of people in its heyday...and they all had good lives here.

(Episode 3:18:20)

The above example is an introduction to the Hakka earth building, which is unique in style. The architecture is round in shape and the Eight Diagrams ideology is used in the design and construction from the perspective of security, reflecting the wisdom and lifestyle of the Hakka people. "It" in the first sentence, refers to the Hakka earth building. The word "here" is translated from the source text "zi ji de tian di", which also means the earth building. Therefore, in order to avoid repetition, the original expression is reduced to "here". In the target text, "had good lives" is translated from the source text "zi ji zi zu" and "zi de qi le". They cover the similar meaning, which refers to satisfaction with one's own life. Here the translation is reduced to one phrase, which expresses the content of the original text in a more concise way, and conforms coherence and skopos rules in subtitle translation.

5. Conclusion

As a country with a history of 5,000 years, China's traditional culture is the most profound cultural soft power of the nation. In recent years, with the growing influence of China, Chinese culture has attracted more and more attention worldwide. China's publicity documentaries undertake the mission of telling Chinese stories to the world, spreading traditional Chinese culture and promoting cultural exchanges among countries.

This paper analyzes the subtitle translation of the documentary *Seasons of China* from the perspective of Skopos Theory. With the traditional 24 solar terms as its core, this cultural documentary presents extensive and profound Chinese culture to the audience at home and abroad in its unique way. Skopos Theory points out that the purpose of translation depends on the cultural background of target language users and their needs for translation, and determines the specific strategies and methods of translation.

Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, the documentary subtitle mainly adopts the literal translation, free translation and transliteration plus explanatory translation to achieve vocabulary and idiomatic equivalence. Cultural-loaded words with Chinese characteristics have been expressed in a proper way to make it more understandable for foreign audiences, promoting the cultural exchange worldwide.

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