

# Chinese-English Subtitle Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Communicative Translation Theory: A Case Study of *China from Above* by Knny Png and Klaus Toft

Wei Zhao<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Jianzhu University, Jinan, Shandong, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: 1379236986@qq.com

## ABSTRACT

Documentary subtitle translation is a relatively new research field, and more and more attention has been paid to it at home and abroad. In this thesis, the researcher aims to study and interpret documentary subtitle translation from the view of communicative translation theory. By analyzing the characteristics and techniques of subtitle translation of the case documentary *China from Above*, the researcher concludes that the translation strategy under the guidance of communicative translation theory is mainly domestication strategy, and the specific translation methods are paraphrase and additional translation. It is hoped that it can help the Chinese-English translation of documentary subtitles reach a higher level, promote the world-wide spread of Chinese culture, and provide reference for the study of Chinese-English translation strategies of subtitle translation.

**Keywords:** *Communicative translation theory, Subtitle translation, China from Above.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

The film is a wide and influential communication tool for spreading culture around the world. It is more and more important to promote cultural spread. *China from Above* is a national-level documentary that aims to promote exchanges between China and the world, enhance China's cultural soft power, and let the world to understand China better.

Based on the text type theory, New Mark come up with the theory of semantic translation and communicative translation. Communicative translation theory takes into account the "non-equivalence" caused by unequal time and space factors. Therefore, in the translation of non-serious literary texts, communicative translation theory is of great significance in outputting a smooth, authentic and simple translation and improving the readability of the translation.

### 1.2 Research Significance

Documentary is one of the effective means to spread culture under different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and the subtitle translation of documentaries has an important effect on foreign cultural communication, so high quality subtitle translation is a necessary precondition for cultural communication.[1] Therefore, it is of great significance to study the strategies and principles of documentary subtitle translation.

This paper conducts analysis on subtitle translation from the perspective of New Mark's theory as a new standard by highlighting the communicative translation between the source text and the target text and transferring the angle of view to the receptors. Translation skills like conversion, addition, reduction and paraphrase are proper to be used into subtitle translation. Peter New mark's communicative translation theory offers a new and broad horizon for subtitle translation field.

## **2. COMMUNICATIVE TRANSLATION THEORY**

### ***2.1 Background of Peter New Mark's Communicative Translation Theory***

Since the 1960s, translation as a language activity has begun to receive widespread attention. Especially after the emergence of linguistic theories, translation studies have made remarkable progress. In 1974, New Mark became professor and began to offer a course in translation theory. Since then, New mark set about writing articles committed to translation. After years of teaching research and translation practice, New mark's translation thought gradually became a system. New mark once said that most of his translation thought come from the classroom. [2] In 1981, *the Study of Translation*, the New Mark's first book, was published and immediately received widespread attention. It is in this book that he comes up with the concepts of "semantic translation" and "communicative translation".

### ***2.2 The Thought of Communicative Translation Theory***

New mark's communicative translation theory is to convey the information of source text by using language, culture of the target language audience, so as to reproduce the effect which the original author feels as much as possible. The whole translation process should be faithful to the target language and the target language audience, and the translator should not be too stereotyped in the form of the source text, nor should it be limited to a certain translation strategy or method, all from the perspective of the target language and its audience. There is no doubt that language accuracy is an important translation criteria. New mark's communicative translation theory pay attention to be faithful to the target language and the target language readers, so it is necessary for the translator to strive to respect the English language expression habit and the English receiver, and to strive to make the individual influence of the translation to the target language receiver equivalent to the influence on the original reader.

## **3. SUBTITLE TRANSLATION AND PROBLEMS IN RESEARCH ON SUBTITLE TRANSLATION**

### ***3.1 Subtitle Translation***

Subtitle translation is a kind of "binary text" translation. The language message provided by the subtitle is used to match the audio-visual message of the documentary, and the subtitle is a kind of progressive text, and in the process of film playback, a bundle of painting surface also means the end of the subtitle under the screen. [4] Therefore, the subtitle broadcast of the documentary is "irreversible" (except in the network video environment), and the scrolling speed in the television broadcast process is very fast, which leads to the need for the translator to take into account the coherence and connection between the painting surface and the subtitle.

The subtitle is a supplement to the language, so it should be in harmony with the language. In order to better research subtitle translation, it is very necessary to learn the classification of subtitle. Up to now, the subtitles are rich in categories, and the main classification basis is as follows.

According to the classification of the language used, subtitles can be divided into translation subtitles, bilingual subtitles and Intra-language subtitles. It is well known that translation subtitles, which means local language translation is shown in foreign film and television works. Bilingual subtitles usually apply to multilingual areas, such as Belgium, which mainly uses Dutch and French, and Israel, where Hebrew and Arabic are all official languages. In addition, there are bilingual subtitles that are common in Chinese online subtitles, suitable for foreign language learning, and compared with foreign languages.[4] Intra-language subtitles means the language used in the subtitles is the language used in the film and television works. The main function of such subtitles is to assist the hearing impaired, as well as to take into account the differences in dialects. This category also includes lyrics subtitles from karaoke or music videos.

There are five characteristics about subtitle translation. Colloquialization is the primary feature of subtitle translation. [5] Except for some formal programs, such as general entertainment programs, film and television programs, popular science programs and some news interviews are close to life. The second characteristic is adaptation of style and plot. What characters say is an important means

of shaping characters in film and television works, so subtitle translation must also concentrate on the adaptation of language characters and style. The adaptation of the plot means that the subtitles should be consistent with the plot of the film. This is the biggest challenge for the translator, and it is also the place where the translator's skills are reflected. Convenience is the third characteristic. That is, popularization, for film and television subtitles, the main need of subtitle translation is to help viewers or chase dramas, fans understand the meaning of the source text, using the native language of viewers, easy to understand and express clearly. In addition, from an aesthetic point of view, subtitle translation has the characteristic of visual aesthetics. This is about the typesetting of subtitle translation. First of all, the font cannot be too small to be unrecognizable, nor too large to affect the picture. And the picture stays for a short time. Therefore, the length of each subtitle is limited. So the content of the subtitle cannot be too much. The special feature of subtitle translation compared with other texts lies in the latter two implied texts, especially the skillful oral translation of written language, because the subtitle of the documentary is the conversion from spoken language to written text in the documentary.

### **3.2 Problems in Research on Subtitle Translation**

For movies and TV dramas, the time of subtitles is limited, and it will change with the change of the picture. Subtitles are set to help people better understand the plot. If the audience do not understand subtitles quickly, they can only give up and think about them, because if they think about them, they will probably miss the important information behind. In addition, the subtitles are limited by space. Restricted by the external objective conditions such as the size of the film and television screen, the presentation of subtitles is limited to a certain space, which also means that the translation of subtitles is also limited by space. So in subtitle translation, especially in the subtitle translation of movies and TV dramas, the subtitle translation should be as concise and clear as possible and fully express the meaning of the source language. So the audience can understand it as soon as they hear it, and should not let the audience think hard.

Documentary comprehensively use text symbols, pictures, music and other forms, vivid and intuitive feelings to convey rich information and

cultural connotations.[6] The factors in the documentary, such as picture, color, background sound effect, character action, and even the cognitive ability of the target language audience, will affect the audience's recognition and acceptance of the documentary. To a certain extent, these factors put forward higher requirements for the subtitle translation.

Language is not only an important embodiment of culture, but also the most direct and effective way to express culture. Different countries and regions have different customs and cultural details, resulting in differences in language expressions and habits. In language translation, it is essentially the collision and communication between different cultures.

Cultural differences are specifically reflected in the following aspects. There is no doubt that the different ways of thinking behind the language is the most apparent difference. Different countries and regions have different ways of thinking, giving birth to different language systems. For example, Chinese and Western expressions of time are different. Chinese people are used to expressing specific times in the order of year, month and day, while Westerners are just the opposite. Secondly, different customs contribute a lot. Under the influence of historical factors and other objective factors, each country has formed its own unique customs and habits in the process of its own development, which is a remarkable manifestation of their own national culture. The complexity of customs in different countries and regions brings higher challenges to translation. Therefore, in the process of translation, the translator must thoroughly understand the cultural connotation behind the language and express the cultural connotation behind the source language accurately and comprehensively through the language thinking familiar to the target readers.

## **4. THE APPLICATION OF COMMUNICATIVE TRANSLATION THEORY IN SUBTITLE TRANSLATION BY A CASE STUDY OF CHINA FROM ABOVE**

### **4.1 Overview of China from Above**

*China from Above* tells about the vivid social humanities from the perspective of the north and south of China, showing a magnificent and colorful

China. China is a vast land with rich biodiversity. China has created an urban civilization with Chinese characteristics. So many urban buildings and infrastructure have been built, while still maintaining its ancient traditions.

The documentary is divided into two episodes. The theme of the first episode is that it has a long history. After centuries of keeping a low profile, today's China is blooming in splendor. The theme of the second episode is to carry on the past and open up the future. China is undergoing a brand-new and great change at the beginning of the 21st century. China is now blooming.

#### **4.2 Linguistic Characteristics of China from Above**

Four-character cases are often used in Chinese. In Chinese, the use of four-character words is very common, because people have been using it for a long time. A special lexical phenomenon formed in use, its language is condensed and its structure is strict. Chinese four-character is formal and dignified, with extraordinary momentum and compact structure, which reflects the broadness and depth of Chinese characters and the beauty of language. Sincere, rich in meaning is a highly expressive four-character structure. If this structure can be used in English-Chinese translation, it will make the translation read. The film subtitle translation is colloquial and easy to understand. Documentary films, especially scientific and educational documentaries, have remarkable colloquial features and slightly dialogue. In subtitle translation, People should adopt a more general language and avoid using complex sentence patterns to make the translation. Straight forward words are easy to understand. This is reflected in *China from Above*. For example, “天道酬勤”, a Chinese idiom. It means that God will reward everyone according to their hard work. Concise idioms summarize a lot of information. The use of idioms adds icing on the cake to the translation. “泱泱华夏并非总如今日般歌舞升平，四夷乱华，战火纷飞。” In this sentence, three four-word phrases are used to make the sentence concise, bright structure, beautiful shape, cadence, ups and downs.

#### **4.3 Translation Strategies for Subtitle Translation in the Case Study of China from Above**

Informative text draws attention to convey information accurately. Therefore, when translating

the informative text, the translator should realize the understandable type of the translation, express the original text succinctly and clearly, and finally convey information accurately and effectively. There is no doubt that the communicative translation theory which pays attention to the target language audience is applicable to informative texts. Communicative translation theory is also incisively and vividly embodied in the documentary *China from Above*.

##### **4.3.1 Domestication Strategy**

Domestication method adopts the attitude of ethnocentrism, which means that the source language text conforms to the cultural values of the target language and brings the original author into the target language culture. “When translating, the translator should not only think about the original and its author, but also express the content and style of the original accurately and vividly” (Lian Shuneng, 2006: 33). The translator should also think of the readers of the target text, and the translated things should be as close as possible to the readers so that they can understand and accept them.

Taking the cultural identity of the target language audience as the axis and using a variety of translation methods such as addition, free translation, literal translation to translate the source text, the audience can understand and accept the content of the source text more clearly. There are usually differences between the cultural background of the source language and the cultural background of the target language, so that the translator needs to adopt the domestication strategy in view of the acceptance of the target language audience and the degree of pleasure to the audience. The documentary *China from Above* introduces China to the people of the world, so the audience of this documentary is mainly foreigners. In introducing Zhangjiajie Forest Park, a famous scenic spot in China's Hunan Province, the documentary highly materializes the thousands of towering peaks in the park, saying that the peak is three times the height of the Empire State Building in New York. In addition, it is also the inspiration for the fantasy alien landscape of the famous movie Avatar. The Empire State Building and the movie Avatar are familiar to people, so this description of Zhangjiajie National Forest Park is more conducive to the understanding of foreign-speaking countries.

### 4.3.2 Paraphrase

Paraphrase, is made up of two roots, para and phrase, which means to reproduce the meaning of the original text in one's own words (but not one's own point of view). That is, a kind of synonymous translation, which uses different words, but expresses the same meaning. It should be noted that when interpreting, it is emphasized to write in your own language, so first of all, we should try to avoid using the words and phrases of the original text; at the same time, interpretation is not only to replace words and phrases, but also to change the structure of the original text, including sentence structure and text structure. Chinese four-character idioms and idioms generally have profound meanings. Therefore, in order to fully express the profound cultural connotation behind Chinese, free translation should be adopted in Chinese and English translation.

For instance, the documentary refers to the sentence “不到长城非好汉”. It can be translated into “Less than the Great Wall is not a hero”, which means not to enter the Great Wall pass is not a hero. Actually, it means that one person cannot overcome difficulties, achieve the goal, is not a hero. This reflects the spirit of the Chinese nation, a positive spirit of struggle.

### 4.3.3 Addition

The addition is a way to make the audience better understand the source text, which means adding some words or phrase based on the context. It is necessary to apply the strategy of additional translation when a translator makes a Chinese-English translation.

Language expression is often applied to conjunctions in order to maintain the coherence and smoothness of sentence meaning. So it is very important to apply the method of additional translation into English-Chinese translation. In the specific translation process, translators need to carefully analyze and understand the meaning of words and sentences and dig into their depth.

The documentary *China from Above*, which describes many ethnic groups, buildings, customs and customs with Chinese characteristics, so it is important to add information to fully express the profound cultural connotation behind Chinese. There are some examples as follows.

Firstly, Dragon Boat Race is a unique custom for Dai people to celebrate their new year.

Foreigners do not know it, so it is necessary to introduce the custom in English. Secondly, Kong Ming lamp is also called sky lamp, commonly known as wish lamp, also known as prayer lamp. Is an ancient Han handicraft, in ancient times more military use. Modern people put Kong Ming lamp as a blessing. Men, women and children personally write down the wish of blessing, symbolizing harvest success, happiness year after year. General Kong Ming lamp is made of bamboo into a barrel, surrounded by thin white paper and open down. Thirdly, Kaner well is a kind of ancient horizontal water collecting building, which is suitable for foothills and alluvial fan zone. It is mainly used to intercept groundwater for farmland irrigation and residents' water use. Kaner well is a special irrigation system in desert area, which is common in Turpan, Xinjiang, China.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This thesis aims to study the documentary subtitles translation from the perspective of communicative translation theory. Through analyzing the case *China from Above*, the research questions of this paper draws the following conclusions:

Documentary subtitle translation is an important process of cultural exchanges and spread, and we should put the study of subtitle translation in a more important position.

The main rules of documentary subtitle translation are form constrains and cultural constrains. Through the analysis of the case, the researcher thinks that the formal contract is a kind of "contract" to solve the verbal contract and cultural constrains.

Under the guidance of communicative translation theory, the translation strategies are mainly domestication strategies, and the specific translation methods are free translation and additional translation. On the basis of fully understanding the source language, the translator conveys information through the language, culture and pragmatics familiar to the target language readers.

Through the thesis, the researcher hopes that the conclusions drawn from the case study can provide reference for the study of Chinese-English translation strategies of subtitle translation.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Wei Zhao.

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