



A Study on Subtitle Translation of "Empresses in the Palace" from the Perspective of Medio-Translatology

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Abstract. The Chinese TV series "Zhen Huan Zhuan" can be crowned as a "pearl" among Chinese royal harem dramas, as it has enjoyed a high reputation among Chinese audiences. However, its six-episode cut American version - "Empresses in the Palace" - released on Netflix, did not generate much buzz in the North American market. Based on this phenomenon, this paper aims to explore how translators of "Empresses in the Palace" employ creative treason to convey cultural intentions in its subtitle translation and provides recommendations for Chinese audiovisual translation-out practices. Under the premise of being restricted by audiovisual translation rules, medio-translatology is adopted in this paper to analyze the subtitle translation from the following perspectives: personalized translation, mistranslation, condensation and expansion, re-creation and adaptation. This paper provides new insights into subtitle translation from the perspective of medio-translatology. In order to gain recognition in overseas market and spread Chinese culture, the audiovisual translation of Chinese TV series and films need to grasp the essence of medio-translatology, flexibly employ various translation strategies with the guidance of the creation treason principle and gain a deep understanding of the essence of translation-in and translation-out practices.

Keywords: Medio-translatology, Creative Treason, Translation-in and Translation-out, Characteristics of Film and Television Language

1 Introduction

"Empresses in the Palace" has received different responses from audiences in China and in North America. In China, it has a high rating of 9 out of 10 on Douban, with over 160,000 votes submitted. In North America, although it receives a high rating of 8.3 on IMDb, "Empresses in the Palace" only attracts 367 viewers to vote.

This big difference is caused by many factors, such as significant cultural differences between China and the West, fewer target audiences in foreign markets, an undeveloped receptive environment, limited means of dissemination, and the constraints of subtitle

translation characteristics. This paper explores this big difference by analyzing the subtitle translation of "Empresses in the Palace", because the subtitle translation, serving as a direct tool for connecting with the audience, bears the responsibility of conveying the underlying messages behind the original text to its audience.

The Chinese scholars have conducted the analyses of subtitle translation in "Empresses in the Palace" mainly from the following three perspectives: First, from the perspective of specific translation strategies, they analyzed the subtitle translation by using the theories of "adaptation" and "foreignization." Second, from the perspective of the translators, they took the translator's subjectivity into consideration. Third, from the perspective of the audience, they adopted theories of communication, aesthetics of reception, and the subjective initiatives of aesthetic subjects in analyzing translation. The above-mentioned papers examine the translation strategies used in the subtitle translation of "Empresses in the Palace" and their impacts on the audience from different angles. However, there is no paper considering the subtitle translation of "Empresses in the Palace" as an existing product from a bigger picture while conducting analysis.

This is where this paper fills the gap in analyzing the subtitle translation of "Empresses in the Palace." Under the guidance of medio-translatology, this paper treats the subtitle translation of "Empresses in the Palace" as an existing product, focusing on various factors that constrain the translated output and evaluating the entire translated "product" from the view of the fundamental principles of literary and cultural cross-linguistic communication, namely creative treason, and the essence of the translation-out practice. Professor Xie Tianzhen emphasized the importance of proposing different strategic suggestions at different stages by capturing the main contradictions and urgent problems of the time^[1].

Facing the significant cultural differences, changes in the audience group and the constraints of subtitle characteristics, the translators of "Empresses in the Palace" strives to achieve the desired "translated output" through the use of various translation strategies. Under the restriction of audiovisual translation characteristics, this paper analyzes the translation strategies and "translated output" of the subtitle translation of "Empresses in the Palace" from the perspective of medio-translatology. It aims to provide feasible reference solutions for future Chinese TV series and films to "go global".

2 Introduction to Medio-translatology

The primary objective of traditional translation studies has often been to summarize and guide translation practices. In contrast, in the view of Medio-translatology, translation is regarded as a whole for literature or cultural study^[2]. Theo Hermans refers to it as a "descriptive, target-oriented, functional and systematic research approach; the research interest lies in the various norms and constraints that determine the translation product and its reception, the relationship between translation and various textual processes, the position and function of translation within specific national literature, as well as the role of translation in the interactive processes of different cultures"^[3]. Based

on this premise, the investigations and analyses can be conducted in exploring the relationship of translation and cultural exchange as well as the impact and reception of the translation-out practice.

Medio-translatology initially emerged from the perspective of mediology in comparative literature, but it has increasingly shifted its focus towards the study of translation and translated literature from a comparative cultural standpoint^[4]. Strictly speaking, Medio-translatology focuses not on language study but rather on literature or culture. It is concerned with exploring the loss, transformation, supplementation, and expansion of the original information in the process of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural transfer. Additionally, Medio-translatology also pays attention to the unique value and significance of translation as a human cross-cultural communication practice^[4].

Professor Xie Tianzhen, driven by his attention to the "going global" strategy for Chinese culture, initially aimed to promote the process of translating Chinese culture abroad more effectively. The practical propositions advocated by Professor Xie Tianzhen are primarily based on an understanding of various restraining factors in the target language culture^[5].

2.1 The Basic Laws of Literary and Cultural Cross-linguistic Communication in Medio-Translatology

Medio-translatology first redefines the meaning of translation, especially literary translation, as a creative and subversive practice. It also focuses on the outcome of translation, particularly the status of translated literature. Creative treason is not limited to literary translation but also is one of the fundamental laws of cross-linguistic transmission in literature and culture^[6]. The theoretical foundation of Medio-translatology lies in this creative treason. French sociologist of literature, Escarpit introduced the term "creative treason" and pointed out that translation is always a creative act of treason^[7]. The creative treason in literary translation goes beyond mere changes in form; its core feature resides in the form of the original text changes by translators because of the introduction to the unforeseen receptive environment, which is not anticipated by the original author. In this process, the subject of creative treason can be the translator, the receiver, or the receptive environment^[4].

Professor Xie Tianzhen provides an explanation of creative treason, stating that in literary translation, creativity reflects the translator's subjective efforts to approach and recreate the original work through their artistic abilities, while treason reflects the translator's objective deviation from the original work in pursuit of certain subjective desires^[4].

2.2 The Essence of "Translation-In" and "Translation-Out" Practices in Medio-translatology

The "intermediation" in Medio-translatology refers to the cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, cross-national dissemination and reception in fields of literature and culture^[6]. Professor Xie Tianzhen believes that, in general, cultural exchange is always mediated by a dominant culture towards a weaker culture, and it is always the translators within

the weaker cultural context who actively introduce the dominant culture into their own cultural context. Professor Xie Tianzhen pointed out that even if the quality of a translation is excellent, it still cannot achieve an ideal "going global" effect, which means it cannot be widely exposed to and influence audiences in the target language country. The fundamental reasons lie in: 1) the lack of proper understanding of the basic laws of cross-linguistic transmission and communication of literature and culture and 2) the ignorance of the essential differences between the practices of "translation in" and "translation out" [4].

The differences between "translation-in" and "translation-out" are reflected in the following aspects: "translation out" practices face a lower literary and cultural demand from the target language country, an undeveloped receptive environment, and a smaller audience group. When conducting translation-out practices, translators cannot achieve the expected success by just focusing on faithful, accurate, and fluent translations. Other constraints and factors which may affect the success of translation should also be taken into considerations, such as the reading habits, aesthetic preferences of the target country readers, the ideological and poetic concepts of the target language country, as well as the intermediators' own strategies and approaches [4].

3 A Brief Overview of the Characteristics of Film and Television Language

Film and television language possesses five major characteristics. Firstly, it is auditory, aiming to ensure that the audience can comprehend the dialogue in films. This requires the translation of dialogue to be accurate without any deviation. Secondly, it is comprehensive, as the translation of film dialogue needs to blend seamlessly with other aspects of the entire film, such as visuals and background music, thus it needs to achieve a harmonious and consistent effect. Thirdly, it is instantaneous, meaning that film dialogue should be easily understood without the need for additional contemplation. Fourthly, it is colloquial, which refers to the translation of film dialogue in a manner that avoids the use of excessively obscure language, making it accessible and understandable to individuals from all cultural backgrounds. Lastly, it is devoid of annotations, indicating that additional annotations cannot be added to a film or TV series [8].

The above five characteristics of film and television language require that the subtitle translation should fully take the language comprehension abilities of the target audience into consideration, because its primary objective is to explain the plots to its audiences while meeting their cultural demands. Therefore, the subtitle translation should abide by the following rules: First, as the language used in the film or television being colloquial and easily understood, the subtitles should also be easily comprehended while avoiding word-for-word translations that would disrupt the linguistic structure. Second, subtitle translation should employ the appropriate translation strategies based on the characteristics of the text and the genre of the film or television series in order to highlight its cultural connotation and achieve a positive dissemination effect. Third, the fact that subtitles in film and television are limited by space and time requires them to be concise in length and brief in duration [8]. Typically, a single line of subtitles can only

accommodate 33 to 40 English characters (including spaces and punctuation), preferably limited to two lines. Additionally, subtitles remain on the screen for a maximum of 7 seconds and as short as 2 seconds^[9]. Thus, subtitle translation should abide by these rules, conveying the message concisely within the limited time and space without causing any comprehension barriers for the audience.

4 An Analysis of the Case of American Subtitle Translation of "Empresses in the Palace" Using the Perspective of Mediotranslatology

The following paper analyzes the translation strategies and "translation out" effects of the text from the perspective of creative treason in the context of translation studies, mainly through the typical case of the subtitle of "Empresses in the Palace" and the characteristics of the language of film and television:

4.1 Personalized Translation

Personalization is meant to be a non-popular thing. Personalized translation refers to the addition of new and alternative translation phrases that are unique to one's own translation characteristics on the basis of the popular translation and create a distinctive effect. For instance, the line "从来英雄不问出身" (True heroes never ask about one's background) has been translated as "Birth is much, but breeding is more". This is the character Shen Meizhuang in "Empresses in the Palace" to comfort An Lingrong's lines. Because An Lingrong grew up in a humble family and developed a low-self esteem character. In order to console her, Shen Meizhuang said not to judge a person by family background. After fully grasping the original meaning of "Birth is much, but breeding is more", the translator breaks the language constraint and uses English proverbs to express the same meaning. These show the translator's mastery of Chinese and English culture and demonstrate the ability of personalized translation, thus fully respecting the reading habits and psychology of Western audiences. The translation is combined with the current context to achieve the effect of integration and consistency with the plot, showing the comprehensiveness of the film and television language.

4.2 Mistranslation

Mistranslation is also divided into two categories: unintentional mistranslation and intentional mistranslation. The first thing to say is an unintentional mistranslation. Language is a carrier of culture, and every language inevitably bears the imprint of a particular national culture. However, normal translation or mistranslation as an interpretative activity of another language is also a cultural phenomenon. Unintentional mistranslation is closely related to the cultural difference between the original language and the translated language^[10].

First of all, unintentional mistranslation reflects a misalignment of cultural intentions [10]. For example, the line "太皇太后决定举行三年一选秀, 充实后宫" (The Empress Dowager decided to hold a three-yearly selection to enrich the harem) has been translated as "the Empress Dowager held audition to fill the Imperial Harem every three years." The line is from the first episode of "Empresses in the Palace", in which the Empress Dowager, knowing that the Emperor's heir was few, conducted a triennial audition to enrich the harem in order to extend the heir. "Audition" originally meant a short performance given by an actor or a singer so that he/she can decide whether they are suitable to act in a play or sing. In this sentence, 选秀(xuan xiu) is translated to "audition". "Audition" is immediately followed by "to fill the Imperial Harem" for explanation to avoid ambiguity, which quickly and clearly conveys the harem selection system of the Chinese feudal dynasty to the Western audience in a simplified way. The choice of this translation version respects the reading habits of the Western audience and also conveys the true meaning of "xuan xiu" in a more concise way.

The line "我知道为了殿选之事你已经烦恼多日了" (I know you have been worried about the palace election for many days) has been translated as "I know you have been worried about the audition for many days." This line is from the first episode of "Empresses in the Palace", where Wen Shichu went to the palace and met Zhen Huan and spoke to her. "Audition" originally meant a short performance given by an actor or a singer so that he/she can decide whether they are suitable to act in a play or sing. In this line, "audition" is further translated into the palace selection. Unlike the above, "audition" has different meanings depending on different contexts. Chinese culture is vast and profound, and the selection process is tedious and complicated. Although the last selection is held in the palace, called the "Palace Selection", it is still part of the actual selection. Therefore, the translation as "audition" here has the advantage of simplifying the language expression and contrasting with the above. This translated version was chosen to fully accommodate the Chinese cultural reserves of Western audiences while also conforming to the characteristics of subtitle translation.

Then, unintentional mistranslation reflects the loss and distortion of cultural intention. The line "那就给甄氏正六品常在吧, 赐号'莞'" (Then let's give Zhen Huan a sixth-grade permanent position and give her the name 'Wan') has been translated as "Sixth rank, First Attendant. We will call her 'Wan'". This line is from the second episode of "Empresses in the Palace", in which Zhen Huan is awarded the title of Wan Changzai. Because of the differences in language and culture between different countries and the limitations of the translator's ability, the word "Changzai (常在)" is translated as "First Attendant". Because of the huge cultural differences between different countries, translators must take into account the perception of the audience in the target language countries when translating, so they adopt the direct translation method. This reflects not only the colloquial and instantaneous characteristics of film and television languages but the untranslatability of certain film and television languages, which shows obvious disadvantages.

This line "请作惊鸿舞一曲" (Please make a stunning dance) has been translated as "Please dance 'Flying Wild Goose'". The original meaning of "jing hong (惊鸿)" is the frightened flying geese, and by extension, it means the light body and graceful dance of beauty. However, the translation-Flying Wild Goose is very straightforward and does

not fully convey the meaning of "jing hong". It reflects the untranslatability of film and television translation to a certain extent.

The second major category of mistranslation is intentional mistranslation^[10]. In the intentional mistranslation, the foreign culture and the original culture show a more tense confrontation, but the translator does push his translation activity to an either-or choice. This choice not only drastically adapts the expressions of the original language to suit the mentality of the native culture but also deliberately translates with unequal linguistic means in order to forcibly introduce foreign cultural patterns, disregarding the possibility of accepting the aesthetic interests of the native people. The word "大理寺少卿" (Dalisi Shaoqing; Young Secretary of the Dalisi) has been translated as "Deputy Chief of the Grand Court". It is an ancient Chinese official title, but it does not exist in Western countries. The translator intentionally mistranslates in order to bridge the cultural gap between countries and make the target language readers understand the storyline better. It reflects the comprehensive and instantaneous characteristics of film and television language.

The line "这举止完全不像她平日柔柔弱弱的样子，兔子急了也会咬人的" (This behavior is completely unlike her usual soft and weak look, rabbits will bite when they are anxious) has been translated as "It's completely unlike the delicate and gentle manner she's always had. A baited cat grows as fierce as a lion". The line is a comment on An Lingrong from Shen Meizhuang. Despite her usual soft-spoken nature, An Lingrong was ruthless and decisive in instigating the murder of Yu Yinger, much to the surprise of Shen Meizhuang. The Chinese saying "兔子急了也会咬人 (rabbits will bite when they are anxious)" is difficult to be understood by Western audiences. The true meaning of this proverb is that even a coward gets angry and resists when they are driven to the last ditch. The translator has adopted a domestication translation to make the translation more fluent in order to provide a better viewing experience for the Western audience. The translation reflects the instantaneousness and colloquiality of the language of film and television. Through the above examples, both intentional mistranslation and unintentional mistranslation are a form of subtitle translation activity and a way of language interpretation, and both have advantages and disadvantages.

4.3 Condensation and Expansion

Condensation and expansion are both conscious creative treason. There are many reasons for creative treason: to conform to the habits and customs of the receiving country, to appeal to the interests of readers in the receiving country, to facilitate dissemination, or for moral or political considerations^[10]. For example, this line "那我的孩子呢？又是被谁克死的？" (What about my child? And who killed him?) has been translated as "Then what of my child? Who should be responsible for my loss?" The line is from what Empress Yixiu said to the emperor in "Empresses in the Palace", in order to express her grief over the death of her child to the emperor. "克(ke)" is evolved from the Chinese thought of the five elements theory, which in Chinese culture can be said to be "mutual generation and restriction"; while in Western culture few people know about it. Therefore, in order to make it more intuitive for the Western audience, the translator

ignores the word "克(ke)", which is difficult for the Western audience to understand, and uses "loss" to make a clever conversion. This reflects the comprehensive and instantaneous characteristics of the language of film and television.

The line "这样德行的人也配入宫? 当真一副空皮囊而已" (How can a person with such virtues deserve to enter the palace? He is really just an empty skin) has been translated as "How was someone like her selected? There's not a bit of good in her." The line was said by Songzhi when Consort Hua and Songzhi saw Changzai Xia in the palace having a verbal altercation with Zhen Huan and others. The original meaning of "空皮囊 (empty skin)" is a useless but good-looking pocket, but now it means a person who looks good but has no cultural cultivation. Due to the translator's cultural limitations, he did not translate the true meaning of "空皮囊" in this translation but chose to use "a bit of good" instead. The translation reflects the comprehensive and instantaneous characteristics of the language of film and television.

4.4 Re-creation and Adaptation

Re-creation and adaptation both fall under the realm of specific and creative treason, and their shared characteristic is that they subject the original work to a "double transformation." Re-creation refers to the process of using one foreign language (the medium language) to translate a work into another foreign language. Adaptation not only involves changing the literary style and genre of a work but also includes the conversion of language and words. The line "是嫔妾当日目光短浅, 不知学良禽择佳木而栖" (I was too shortsighted to learn that good birds choose good trees) has been translated as "It's my own fault to be so shortsighted. I should have chosen a better master." The line was said by Guiren Cao to Zhen Huan. When Guiren Cao said this to Zhen Huan in order to save herself, Zhen Huan's position in the palace was flourishing. The line "良禽择佳木而栖" means that a capable person should choose a person of equal strength to follow. If this line is translated directly, the Western audience will not understand the meaning of it, so the translator adopts a re-creation method here. Further, the word "master" also accurately describes the relationship of Guiren Cao's dependence on Zhen Huan at that time. The translation is a good representation of the comprehensive and instantaneous characteristics of the language of film and television.

5 Conclusion

China's film and TV series, particularly those rich in unique cultural elements like royal harem dramas, face not only language challenges when venturing into international markets, but also significant obstacles due to cultural differences between China and the West, fewer target audiences in foreign markets, undeveloped receptive environment, limited means of dissemination, and the constraints of subtitle translation characteristics. In the face of such limitations, it becomes a true test for the subtitle translators to accurately, swiftly, and comprehensively depict the thrilling plots of these TV series, because the translation outputs rely heavily on their cultural background knowledge, translation strategy skills, and translation attitude.

Nearly a decade has passed since "Empresses in the Palace" made its international debut in 2015. The latest ten years have witnessed many remarkable progresses achieved by China in various aspects, and a rapid growth in comprehensive national strength. With China's rise in power, there is an increasing demand for understanding China among overseas countries. It is this trend of demand that has driven a rise in translation-out practice. Being an essential part of ordinary people's entertainment lives, films and TV series have the potential to serve as the best window for overseas audiences to gain an insight into China.

This paper, from the perspective of Medio-translatology, analyzes the subtitle translation of "Empresses in the Palace" and provides a broader vision for future subtitle translators. In order to enter into dominant cultural markets, it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of the basic principles of cross-cultural literary and cultural communication, as well as the essential differences between translation-in and translation-out practices. By understanding market demands and flexibly employing various translation strategies under the guidance of creative treason, Chinese subtitle translators are able to attract overseas audience and spread Chinese culture.

Due to the page length restrictions, this paper cannot cover all the factors that influence translation-out practices, nor can it analyze at which stage "Empresses in the Palace" stands in the translation-out practice of Chinese films and TV series. It is also unable to compare "Empresses in the Palace" with other influential TV series in the current overseas market in terms of translation-out practices. Future researches can further analyze the translation-out practices of Chinese films and TV series from the aforementioned perspectives, thus providing a clearer vision for understanding the growth path of Chinese films and TV series in the overseas market.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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