



Cross-Linguistic Reconstruction of Cultural Memory: C-E Translation Strategies for the "Third Front Spirit" from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of globalization and China's "Going Global" cultural strategy, the international communication of the "Third Front Spirit" constitutes a cross-linguistic reconstruction of cultural memory. Adopting Eco-translatology as its theoretical lens, this paper views translation as a process wherein translators adapt to the "translational eco-environment" and make selective choices. By analyzing the English translation of core terminology and narrative texts related to the "Third Front Spirit," this study explores how translators adapt and select within the three-dimensional transformations—linguistic, cultural, and communicative. The research indicates that successful translation necessitates integrated strategies such as deep contextualized compilation, embodied transmission of cultural memory, construction of an interpretive discourse framework. These strategies aim to balance historical authenticity with contemporary interpretation, thereby achieving the dynamic inheritance and effective international dissemination of cultural memory.

Keywords: Cultural Memory; Eco-Translatology; Third Front Spirit; Translation Strategies

1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of China's "Going Global" cultural strategy, interpreting China's unique historical experiences and spiritual values for the world has become a topic of both academic significance and practical urgency. The role of translation has transcended mere linguistic conversion, evolving into a profound act of cultural interpretation and meaning reconstruction. Zhang Jian points out that a more neutral definition of "external propaganda" can be "international communication," which means presenting a true, multi-dimensional, and comprehensive China to the world through international expressions[1]. Particularly in the international communication of political and cultural concepts with Chinese characteristics, translation activities directly concern the construction of national narratives and the enhancement of international discourse power.

The "Third Front Spirit" was nurtured within the large-scale, special historical practice of China's "Third Front Construction" during the 1960s and 1970s, which was a

major national strategic deployment at the time, playing a historic role in the layout of national defense industries, the balance of regional economies, and national strategic security[2]. Covell Meyskens points out that the third front construction was both a militarization strategy in response to international security threats under the backdrop of the Cold War and a social project that profoundly affected the daily lives of tens of millions of people[3]. Through this grand practice, the Third Front Spirit—characterized by "hard work, selfless dedication, solidarity and collaboration, and bold innovation"—gradually took shape [4]. This spirit is not only an epic portrayal of collective struggle in a specific era but also a significant component of contemporary China's spiritual genealogy. However, for international audiences unfamiliar with modern Chinese history, "Third Front Construction" itself may be an unfamiliar historical term, and the collectivist values it embodies, such as dedication and sacrifice, risk being misinterpreted when encountering individualistic value systems in different cultures.

This complex phenomenon calls for a new theoretical perspective. Eco-translatology, proposed by Hu Gengshen, views translation as "a selection activity of the translator's adaptation to the translational eco-environment[5]." Its core principle of "three-dimensional transformations"—the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions—provides a clear pathway for analyzing how translators weigh options and make creative decisions in specific texts. Liu Yanshi was among the early scholars to introduce Eco-translatology into the study of English translation for red tourism cultural materials, exploring the translator's subjective role in translation practice[6]. This study aims to explore strategies for the international communication translation of the "Third Front Spirit" from the perspective of Eco-translatology, seeking to answer the following questions: How can translators achieve effective transformations across the three dimensions through adaptation to the translational eco-environment? What specific strategies should be adopted to balance the fidelity of historical truth with comprehensibility for international audiences?

2 Theoretical Framework: The Reconstruction of Cultural Memory from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

Eco-translatology, systematically proposed by Hu Gengshen, finds its philosophical foundation in Darwin's theory of adaptation and selection[7]. Translation is defined as "a selection activity of the translator's adaptation to the translational eco-environment." Its core components include the fundamental principle of translation as adaptation and selection; the principle of "three-dimensional transformations"—the linguistic dimension, the cultural dimension, and the communicative dimension; and the evaluation criterion of the degree of holistic adaptation and selection, which posits that the optimal translation is the product achieving the best balance across these three-dimensional transformations [5]. Hu Gengshen points out that adaptive transformation in the linguistic dimension refers to the translator's adaptive transformation of linguistic forms during the translation process, a transformation that occurs at various aspects and levels[8]. Zhang Xiaomin notes that translation is not merely a conversion between two languages but also an exchange and collision between cultures[9]. Lei Na, researching

international communication translation based on Eco-translatology's three-dimensional transformation method, argues that successful international communication translation requires achieving a dynamic balance between the source and target languages [10].

Cultural Memory Theory, as systematically elaborated by Jan Assmann, provides a crucial perspective for understanding how groups maintain historical identity through symbols. Cultural memory is stored and transmitted through solidified forms such as texts, images, and rituals, characterized by its constructed nature, media dependence, and functional orientation [11]. When cultural memory needs to cross linguistic boundaries, it enters the realm of "cross-linguistic reconstruction." Ding Xiaoshan emphasizes that the transformation of these heritage sites should not only preserve physical structures but also extract the spiritual core—the "Third Front Spirit"—and create a sense of place through natural and built environments, thereby enabling visitors to achieve emotional resonance and value identification, which is essential for the reproduction of cultural memory[12]. Yang Tianya, in her study on the cultural memory of the Third Front Spirit in Panzhuhua, explores how this spirit is concretely embedded in local place names and urban landmark facilities, demonstrating that cultural memory is not only preserved in material remnants but also actively constructed and activated through spatial symbols and commemorative practices in urban development[13]. Liu Jingyi, using the Panzhuhua Third Front Construction Museum as a case study, examined how museums employ display elements and interactive formats to evoke or reshape visitors' collective memories[14].

Integrating these two theories, the international communication translation of the "Third Front Spirit" can be conceptualized as a cross-linguistic reconstruction practice involving the translator's multi-dimensional adaptation and selection of texts carrying the source cultural memory, aimed at ensuring its effective survival within the target language's translational eco-environment. This integrated perspective elevates the research focus from textual equivalence to adaptation to the memory ecology, providing systematic principles to guide translator decision-making.

Within the three-dimensional framework of Eco-translatology, its translation faces a series of structural difficulties. In linguistic dimension, core terms lack equivalents in English, resulting in a systematic absence of terminology; Chinese political parallel constructions and slogan-like expressions, if literally translated, do not conform to the discursive conventions of English academic historical texts. In cultural dimension, the macro-historical context constitutes a knowledge gap for international audiences; emotional experiences may be misinterpreted within consumerist cultures. In communicative dimension, translation must balance multiple intentions, conveying historical information, shaping national image, and fostering identification with spiritual values; the audience is highly diversified, making it impossible for a single translation strategy to meet all expectations; there is a need to establish an equal dialogue with the audience.

3 Analysis of "Three-Dimensional" Adaptation and Selection in the C-E Translation of the "Third Front Spirit" from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

This part, based on the "three-dimensional transformation" theory, analyzes translators' adaptation and selection using the English translation practice of History and Culture of the Third Front Construction in the Museum of Third-Front Construction.

3.1 Adaptation and Selection in the Linguistic Dimension

Standardization and contextualization are two complementary strategies in translating core cultural and political terms. For the core connotations of the "Third Front Spirit," "艰苦创业、无私奉献、团结协作、勇于创新", translators provided a standardized rendering: "Hard Work, Selfless Dedication, United Cooperation, and Bold Innovation." The Chinese original presents four four-character phrases in parallel, a highly compact and rhythmic structure typical of formal Chinese discourse. In the English version, the translator converts each phrase into a noun phrase (adjective + noun), preserving the parallel structure and solemn tone. The decision to render "艰苦创业" as "Hard Work" instead of a more literal "Difficult Entrepreneurship" adopts a high-frequency, positive English collocation. Likewise, "勇于创新" becomes "Bold Innovation" rather than "Courageous Innovation", balancing brevity with semantic force. These linguistic adaptations ensure that the translation reads naturally in English while retaining the original's inspirational and dignified style, effectively bridging the two linguistic systems.

At the same time, strict standardization alone cannot account for all textual situations. Translators also engage in contextualization by flexibly adjusting terms like "奉献" – rendered as "commitment", "contributions", or "dedication" depending on the surrounding discourse. This dynamic practice constructs a "concept family" around the core spirit, allowing the same Chinese term to fulfill different communicative functions in different contexts. Such a balanced approach – combining stable equivalents for core slogans with context-sensitive variations for associated notions – enhances both terminological consistency and natural readability, ensuring that the Third Front Spirit is conveyed accurately and persuasively across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

3.2 Adaptation and Selection in the Cultural Dimension

Translation practice should compensate for historical context. A typical case of in-depth contextual compensation is the translation of the historical motivation for launching the Third Front Construction. The original Chinese states: "20世纪60年代中期, 基于对严峻国际形势的判断, 中央决定启动三线建设。" The English translation is: "In the 1960s, great changes took place in the international situation, and China's surrounding environment further deteriorated. In the south, the United States launched the war at the border between China and Vietnam, posing a serious threat to China. In the north, the tension on the border between China and the Soviet Union was further intensified.

The Soviet Union had continuously increased its military strength near China's border areas and targeted strategic missiles at China. In the southwest, the situation on the border between China and India had not been eased, and India was constantly trying to encroach on Chinese territory." The original text only refers to the "severe international situation" briefly, while the translation elaborates it into a detailed narrative, specifying southern US-Vietnam war threats, northern Sino-Soviet border tensions and southwestern Sino-Indian border frictions. This non-intrusive compensation embeds essential background into the text, resolving international readers' lack of historical context.

Translation practice should balance values. For example, "献了青春献终身，献了终身献子孙" is rendered as "sacrificed their youth, lifetime and even the future generations for the cause". This line, the key to understanding Third Front constructors' dedication, carries profound pathos, loyalty and collectivism in Chinese context, challenging translators to convey such emotions without melodrama. The translation recreates the hierarchical sacrifice layers through the progressive temporal terms. "For the cause" defines the sacrifice's object, leaving interpretive space. It strikes a delicate cultural balance, objectively presenting the constructors' spiritual world and letting global readers perceive the sacrifice's weight and dignity.

3.3 Adaptation and Selection in the Communicative Dimension

From the communicative dimension, successful translation lies in fostering a smooth "dialogue" between the source text and the target audience. For example, the slogan "备战、备荒、为人民" is rendered as "preparing for war, preparing for famine, serving the people". From the perspective of the communicative dimension, the translator must adapt to the slogan's intended function—rallying public support with a concise, rhythmic appeal—while selecting linguistic forms that resonate with English readers. The Chinese original features three parallel three-character phrases, creating a strong oratorical rhythm. The English translation preserves this parallelism by using three identical "-ing" structures. Notably, the translator adds "serving the people" instead of a more literal rendering such as "for the people", directly evoking the standard English version of Mao's well-known phrase "serve the people." This strategic selection adapts to the English reader's familiarity with Communist China's political discourse, thereby enhancing the slogan's communicative effectiveness and ideological resonance across cultures.

4 Effective Translation Strategies: Balance, Reconstruction, and Dialogue

To enhance translation effectiveness, a systematic and integrated set of strategies must be adopted.

4.1 Deep Contextualized Compilation

The most effective way to address the knowledge gap of international audiences is not through external footnotes but through “non-intrusive” contextual embedding within the main narrative. As demonstrated in the translation of the Cold War motivations for the Third Front Construction, the original Chinese phrase “严峻国际形势” is expanded into a detailed description of US-Vietnam War threats, Sino-Soviet border tensions, and Sino-Indian frictions. This strategy weaves essential historical background directly into the text as the logical motivation for actions. Likewise, when a core term such as “三线建设” first appears, a concise definitional clause can be inserted. This approach simultaneously adapts to the linguistic and communicative dimensions, lowering comprehension barriers without interrupting the narrative flow.

4.2 Embodied and Personified Transmission of Cultural Memory

Abstract spiritual values are best transmitted through concrete human experiences. The strategy converts collective memory into micro-narratives centered on individuals, artifacts, and direct quotations. For example, the slogan “献了青春献终身，献了终身献子孙” is rendered as “sacrificed their youth, lifetime and even the future generations for the cause,” preserving the temporal progression while attaching the sacrifice to a definable purpose. Material symbols such as “干打垒” (rammed-earth shelters) should be described not merely as building techniques but as lived experiences—what they meant for the builders under harsh conditions. By moving audiences through emotion rather than abstract argumentation, this strategy bypasses direct value conflicts and enables cultural resonance.”

4.3 Interpretive Discourse Framework construction

A dynamic, contextualized interpretive framework should be constructed for core value concepts. Establish a “concept family,” providing different translations for terms like “奉献” (dedication) based on context. Adopt the “explain first, simplify later” principle, using interpretive phrases to fully define key concepts upon first appearance, then using simplified translations subsequently. Paratextual systems such as prefaces, afterwords, and appendices are applied to provide space for extended interpretation. This strategy represents an advanced synthesis of adaptation in the linguistic and cultural dimensions.

5 Conclusion

The international communication translation of the “Third Front Spirit” constitutes a cross-linguistic reconstruction of cultural memory within the target language ecology. The translator’s task involves creative adaptation and selection across the “three dimensions.” The main contributions of this study are threefold: First, it integrates Eco-translatology with Cultural Memory Theory, offering a new theoretical perspective for researching the translation of political and cultural concepts with Chinese characteristics.

Second, it systematically analyzes the connotations and characteristics of the "Third Front Spirit" as cultural memory, along with the difficulties encountered in its translation. Third, based on the "three-dimensional transformation" framework, it proposes integrated translation strategies including deep contextualized compilation, embodied transmission of cultural memory, construction of an interpretive discourse framework.

Future research may further focus on audience feedback, collaborative mechanisms in multimodal translation, the application of digital humanities technologies, and comparative studies between the translation of the "Third Front Spirit" and that of other similar red cultural concepts.

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