

A Functionalist Analysis of the Film Subtitle Translation

A Case Study of "The Flowers of War"

Yapeng Song

School of Foreign Languages
Huanghe Science and Technology College
Zhengzhou, China

Abstract—With the rapid development of economy and culture, the cultural communication in the world is increasing. Nowadays film is an important way of cultural communication and entertainment. Plenty of foreign films appear in China, meanwhile a wealth of Chinese films roll in the world film market and gain wide popularity. No doubt it is a good opportunity for foreigners to understand Chinese culture. As a new and special translation mode, subtitle translation can add more success to movie, it will attract more people's attention. And it will not only make people acquire better enjoyment, but also promote the communication of different culture. If Chinese films want to hold a leading post in the world, great attention must be paid to successful subtitle translation. According to the perspective of functionalist, the translation principle is the purpose of translation activity. So subtitle translation is a purposeful activity. This thesis analyses the case study of the subtitle translation in *The Flowers of War* from the perspective of functionalist. It tries to explore the guiding theory of subtitle translation, analyze feature and influence elements, and put forward some translation principles and strategies in subtitle translation practice.

Keywords—*functionalist; subtitle translation; translation strategy; The Flowers of War*

I. INTRODUCTION

With the development of economy and culture, the communication of different countries in the world is increasing. And nowadays film is an important way of cultural communication and entertainment for people all over the world. Plenty of foreign films appear in China, meanwhile a wealth of Chinese movies flock into the world. But while audiences are appreciating foreign films, language becomes the biggest barrier for people who do not understand foreign languages. Therefore, film subtitle translation plays an important role in people's daily life. Good subtitle translation can enhance people's understanding and appreciation of the film. On the other hand, subtitle translation of low quality would make people at a loss what is going on and even spoil the fun of appreciating the movie. It's generally known that good subtitle translation is not just to translate the lines one by one literally, but to make audience better understand the movie and culture in the original movie. This kind of subtitle translation is the one we

need to apply in translation practice. This thesis is intended to discuss the subtitle translation of Chinese movie *The Flowers of War* from the perspective of functionalist theory.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Subtitle Translation Studies Abroad

In the west, subtitle translation studies have an early start, draw more attention and make a certain achievement. In 1956, the first volume of the journal of *Le Linguiste/ De taalkundige* had dealt with the special subject under the title of *Tradition et Cinema* in couple of pages. In 1976, a significant article focused on subtitling appeared. Dollerup published the article *On Subtitles in Television Programs in the Babel*. Dollerup discussed the different types of errors that arose in the subtitling of TV programs from English to Danish. Dollerup's greatest contribution was his mention of the pedagogical value that subtitles have, that is, people can learn foreign languages by means of the subtitles. In 1991, Luyken and other four European experts published the book *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television: Dubbing and Subtitling for the European Audience*. This book analyses different translation modes, studies the number of the European translated films, labor costs and audience preferences.

In 1993, Gottlieb Henric published *Subtitling: People Translating People*. He discusses the training and education of subtitling. In 1994, he described this process as "two dimensional 'jaywalks' (crossovers) from source language speech to target language writing". So the translated subtitles are required to "remain speech characteristics in a written text, especially those in spontaneous speech, such as pauses, false starts, interruptions, ungrammaticalities...". In 1995, Gottlieb Henric published *Subtitling: A Unique Type of Translation*. In this book, he defines distinctive characteristics of subtitling as opposed to other types of translation. In 2004, Gottlieb Henric published *Subtitles and International Anglification*, which discussed present screen translation practices the feature language- political implications. In 2005, Gottlieb Henric published another book *Subtitling Against the Current: A Danish concept, English minds*. He studied the strategies used in Anglophone

subtitling of Danish localism. In 2009, scholar Karamitroglou published *A Proposed Set of Subtitling Standards in Europe*. He made a proposal towards a standardization of subtitling practices, including layout, punctuation and target text editing.

B. *Subtitle Translation Studies in China*

Compared with the prosperous development of film subtitle translation in the west, subtitle translation studies in China are still lagging behind. In 1998, Professor Zhang Chunbai summarized the nature, principles and techniques about film translation. He discussed that the translation of films should focus on the target audience, meanwhile, the translator should consider the target audience's language level and cultural awareness. In 2000, Professor Qian Shaochang published an article entitled *Film Translation--the More and More Important Realm in Translation Field*, which tired to arouse more people's attention to film translation. He explored the features of film translation and summed up some strategies for film translation. He also pointed out that the film is a perfect synchronization of moving pictures and voice, so in order to achieve vividness a certain extent of faithfulness can be sacrificed.

In 2001, from October 18th to 20th, Department of Translation, the Chinese University of Hong Kong held an International Conference on Dubbing and Subtitling in a World Context. The conference's aim is to assemble scholars, professionals and other interested parties to study the field of dubbing and subtitling both in theory and practice. The conference also discussed the possibilities of co-operation between business and academia, the relevance of dubbing and subtitling to the theory of translation studies. In 2002, You Hong published an article *An Exploration to Foreign Film Subtitle Translation*. She stated that when seeing movie, it requires the viewers to "find solutions in face of problems, to seek order out of chaos, and to make sense of what they perceive."

III. FUNCTIONALIST THEORY

A. *Main Theories*

Functionalist theory was mainly developed by German scholars so it is also called "German school of translation studies". Functionalist means the function or functions of texts and translations. The development of functionalist theory has gone through four stages: the first stage is Katharina Reiss's text types and functions theory; the second stage is Hans J. Vermeer's Skopos theory; the third stage is Justa Holz-Manttari's translational action theory; and the fourth is Christiane Nord's function plus loyalty theory. Functionalist theory has been used effectively in many fields of translation, so it can be used as a yardstick to evaluate the film subtitle translation.

1) *Text types and functions*: In 1971, Katharina Reiss's book *Possibilities and Limitations in Translation Criticism* is regarded as the starting point for the scholarly analysis of translation in German. In this book, Reiss introduced a functional category into her objective approach towards

translation. She considered that the ideal translation would be one "in which the aim in the TL[target language] is equivalence as regards the conceptual content, linguistic form and communicative function of a SL[source language] text". Katharina Reiss identified a fourth text-type which she called audio-media. This kind of texts are dependent on a non-linguistic medium or other audio-visual forms of expression, language is only a part of complex factors. These findings bring about a heated discussion among translation scholars in Germany. Then according to Bernad Spiller's suggestions, Reiss turned the term audio-media into multi-medial. Multi-media texts include songs, stage plays, operatic texts, comics and advertising materials which contain audio-visual elements. A film script is definitely the fourth type text, which mixed informative, expressive, operative functions with visual images and sounds. So Katharina Reiss is creative to enlarge the filed of text types.

2) *Skopostheory*: Skopostheory is the most important theory in the functional school of translations studies. In 1978, German translation theorist Hans J. Vermeer created the Skopostheory with the translation purpose of a translation as a general principle in translation activity. It holds that translation is a specific type of human activity, it is generally accepted that human activity is purposeful so translation has its own purpose. In *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*, Christiane Nord defined the Skopostheory that "Skopos is a Greek word for 'purpose'. According to Skopostheorie(the theory that applies the notion of Skopos to translation), the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose(Skopos) of the overall translational action. This fits in with intentionality being part of the very definition of any action." In 1989, in Hans J. Vermeer's *Skopos and Commission in Translation Action*, he defined Skopostheory as "any form of translation action, including therefore translation itself, maybe conceived as an action, as the name implies. Any action has an aim, a purpose. The word Skopos, then, is a technical term for the aim or purpose of a translation." Vermeer defines human action as intentional, purposeful behavior that takes place in a given situation; it is part of the situation at the same time as it modifies the situation, of its verbalized and non-verbalized elements, depends on the status it has in a particular culture system.

3) *Translational action theory*: Based on Vermeer's Skopostheory, Justa Holz-Manttari further developed functionalist theory. According to communicative theory and action theory, she put forward the translational action theory with the aim of "providing a model and guidelines applicable to a wide range of professional translation situations". She defined translation as a complicated activity for specific purpose. The transferred information includes a variety of cross-cultural transformation, such as text, picture, voice, body language, ect. Manttari's translational action theory lays emphasis on the action of translation process,

participant's role and the situational conditions in which the activities take place. Communicative situations are settings in which people interact and thus communication is interpersonal interaction. Therefore, Manttari broadened the field of translation studies.

4) *Function plus loyalty*: The inventor of function plus loyalty theory is Christiane Nord, who is a famous linguistic and translational professor. "Loyalty commits the translator bilaterally to the source and the target sides. It must not be mixed up with fidelity or faithfulness, concepts that usually refer to a relationship between the source and target text. Loyalty is an interpersonal category referring to a social relationship between people." Nord formed her own thoughts into special translation theories, and put forward documentary translation and instrumental translation. First, loyalty means that target text purpose should be compatible with original author's intention. In other words, in the process of translation, the translator should consider both the audience's requirements and the original author's intention. Second, Nord's loyalty theory is the individual concept and social relationship between human beings. The loyalty theory by taking account of the legitimate interests of initiators, target receivers and the original authors, places the translator in a place of seeking understanding of all sides inside translation.

B. Main Principles

The main principles of functionalist theory are purpose principle, coherence principle and fidelity principle.

1) *Purpose principle*: Above all, functionalist theory puts emphasis on "skopos rule". Skopos is a Greek word which means purpose. According to Skopostheory, the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose of the overall translational action. And among the three possible kinds of purposes in the field of translation (including the translator's general purpose, the communicative purpose aimed at by the target text in the target situation, and the purpose aimed at by a particular translation strategy or procedure), the term "skopos" usually refers to the purpose of the target text. Purpose principle is the fundamental principle of functionalist theory and also the most important principle to judge whether the translation is appropriate or not.

2) *Coherence principle*: Another important principle of functionalist theory is coherence principle, which means that "a translation should be acceptable in a sense that it is coherent with the receivers' situation". So the task of translation is to make the target text meaningful, then the receiver can understand the text fully. The coherence principle is also called intratextual coherence, it stimulates the translator to make the target text readable and fit in with the communicative situations.

3) *Fidelity principle*: Fidelity principle is also an important principle of functionalist theory. As a text is an offer of information, and translation is an offer of

information about a preceding offer of information, it is expected to bear some kind of relationship with the corresponding source text. Meanwhile, subject to skopos rule, the important point is that intertextual coherence should exist between source and target text, while the form it takes depends both on the translator's interpretation of the source text and on the translation skopos. Both coherence principle and fidelity principle are derived from the purpose principle, and the purpose principle is the most important. Fidelity principle is secondary compared to coherence principle.

C. Translation Strategies and Criteria

Text type is the principal element which influences the translator to choose appropriate methods. In other words, the analysis of text type is closely related with translation strategies. Nord put forward the text types: informative type, expressive type and operative type. In terms of the relationship between text function and the purpose of translation, Nord divided translation into two categories: documentary translation and instrumental translation. Documentary translation is the record of actual events in original communication. It aims at recurring the original text and lays emphasis on source language's culture. The main translation methods include interlinear translation, literal translation and foreignization. However, instrumental translation aims at realizing the source text's function. In the process of translation, it pays more attention to the communication between translation initiator and translation receiver. It focuses on the target text's culture and the main translation methods contain equivalent translation, translation of different effects and translation of the same effect.

IV. FUNCTIONALIST THEORY APPLIED IN SUBTITLE TRANSLATION

A. Successful Subtitle Translations in *The Flowers of War*

The Flowers of War is a famous movie directed by Zhang Yimou, who is one of the greatest directors in China and even the world. Set in Nanking Massacre, the film tells us that in the war against Japanese fascist, twelve humble prostitutes and a responsible boy, instead of girl students in cathedral, keep an appointment of heroic death. This movie is the champion of Chinese box office in 2011, it is nominated as the 84th Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film. This film is very meaningful, it will let the world know the truth of Nanking Massacre, which present Japanese totally deny. And as a great director, Zhang Yimou's film also attracts attention of people at home and abroad. The subtitle is translated by Zhang Mo, the daughter of Zhang Yimou. There are many successful subtitle translations in *The Flowers of War*.

Example 1:

《金陵十三钗》 *The Flowers of War*

The translation of the movie title is a form of subtitle translation and it's a very important part of the film. The

translation of movie title is also the first impression to audience, therefore it is very important to translate the movie title well. Jinling is the ancient name of Nanking. Chai refers to beauty. The movie's Chinese name 《金陵十三钗》, if translated as Thirteen Beauties of Jinling, many foreigners will be puzzled. Where is Jinling? Are there only thirteen beauties in Jinling? This translation is not successful because it will get foreigners confused. The Flowers of War is a successful translation because it will attract people's interest in the film and it also implies that the story is about some beauties set in a war. So the translation of movie title is the first successful example.

Example 2:

轰炸了二十多天 After twenty days of continuous bombing,

南京到底被日本军队攻破了。 Nanking finally fell to the Japanese.

那是 1937 年 12 月 13 日 It was December the 13th, 1937.

我记得那天所有人都在跑, I remember everyone was running that day,

好像永远也跑不出那场大雾。 but no one could escape that heavy fog.

这是李教官他们, Major Li only had a few men left.

这时候的南京已经没有抵抗能力, Nanking was no longer able to put up a fight.

剩下的就是逃命了。 And those left behind, ran for their lives.

These sentences are said by Shujuan, the narrator in the film and also one of the girls in the church. "好像永远也跑不出那场大雾" is translated into "but no one could escape that heavy fog". The translator uses "escape" but not "run out of ". From this word, we can experience the feeling of Nanking people at that time. In Nanking Massacre, the Japanese is very cruel so every citizen is eager to escape from Nanjing.

Example 3:

因为缺少打坦克的有效武器 The Chinese army didn't have adequate weapons

那个时候的中国军队 to destroy the enemy's tanks,

会用一种原始的方法 So they employed a tactic from ancient warfare.

以战友的身体来做掩护 They formed a human shield

让爆破手尽量靠近坦克 to get a bomb close to the tanks.

当时的中国人 At the time, the Chinese people

不愿意忍受当亡国奴的耻辱 couldn't bear the thought of losing their country,

往往就拿命去拼 And such selfless acts were not uncommon.

This is said by Shujuan, who is the narrator in the movie. "往往就拿命去拼" is translated into "And such selfless acts were not uncommon". This is very successful because from the translation, we can feel that at that time many Chinese did such selfless acts.

Example 4:

都怪我 It's all my fault.

怎么能怪你呢? It's not your fault.

我看就是怪你 It is your fault.

This is a dialogue between girls in the church. One of Shujuan's classmate named Xiaojuan was stabbed by Japanese, all of the girl students were very sad and they discussed the reason of Xiaojuan's death. 怎么能怪你呢? is translated as "It's not your fault." Here the translator doesn't use question to ask, but a positive clause. We can see that the girl's attitude toward Xiaojuan's death, she was in favor of Shujuan and did not think that it is Shujuan's mistake.

Example 5:

你爸爸不是保证我们每个人 Your father promised to take us

都能坐上汽船离开南京吗? on a boat and leave Nanking.

他人呢? Where is he?

自己颠了吧。 He ran off.

害得我们穷等 We waited and waited

把日本鬼子等来了 and now the Japanese are here.

现在全城都是日本兵 Now the Japanese are everywhere,

想躲到安全区都迟了 and it's too late to go to the refuge.

"自己颠了吧" is Nanking dialect and means that he leaves away himself. Here, the translator translates it as "He ran off". From this sentence, we can feel that the students complain for Shujuan's father's behavior. "害得我们穷等" is translated as "We waited and waited". And the author focuses on the students' disappointed emotion.

Example 6:

这些北欧人 These North Europeans they're all like

就知道金枪鱼或戏剧 you know, tuna, playwrights,

没劲 not much fun.

"没劲" is translated as "not much fun". It is also a good translation. If the translator translates it into "not much strength", the audience may be puzzled. And here, from the context, John refers to the North Europeans don't have much fun, not strength.

Example 7:

死鬼 Bastard!

This sentence is said by Yumo, she disgusts John's frivolous words and scolds him. If the translator translates it into "dead devil", nobody could understand it. Here, the translator uses "bastard" to express Yumo's dissatisfactory mood.

Example 8:

都是钓鱼巷的 They're from the red-light district.

"钓鱼巷" is a place in Nanking, where many prostitutes live. If the translator translates it into "fishing lane", it must be accompanied by additional information to explain the place. In the west, red-light district means the place which is full of prostitution. The translator uses "red-light district", so while the foreigners are seeing the film, they can understand it immediately.

Example 9:

她们只用了一会儿功夫 But within hours,

就把秦淮河拖到那里 they had transformed it into the Qin Huai River.

连香水胭脂的味道 The fragrance of rouge and perfume

好像也被她们带来了 danced up through the air.

"好像也被她们带来了" is translated into "danced up through the air". This translation is successful because it describes the environment vividly.

Example 10:

老娘要上来了! We are coming up!

This sentence is spoken by one of the prostitutes. "老娘" should not be translated into "mother" because in Chinese it means the speaker herself. And it is not polite to say word like this.

Example 11:

我也没办法, 她们不讲理 I can't stop them!

This translation is good because it is brief enough to make viewers understood immediately.

Example 12:

看, 好戏开始了。 Look, this should be good.

Here, "好戏" did not mean "good opera" but means the following will be good. So the translator translates the sentence "好戏开始了" into "this should be good".

Example 13:

凯旋之师嘛! He thinks he's so tough.

老子劳苦功高 He thinks he's a hero.

挡住了小日本的枪炮弹 Since he's fighting the Japanese,

保护了南京, 保护了你们这些女人 protecting Nanking and women like us,

脾气大点还不行吗? he feels he is entitled to have a temper.

"凯旋之师嘛" is translated into "He thinks he's so tough". It is successful since it is easy to understand. "老子劳苦功高" is translated into "He thinks he's a hero". "老子" means the speaker himself.

Example 14:

女人们钻老鼠洞保命是应该的 Women like us need to hide here.

当兵的躲在这, 算什么东西 But if he hides here, he's a coward.

孬种 What a sissy!

"算什么东西" is translated into "he's a coward". It is successful since "coward" is someone who is not at all brave.

Example 15:

《秦淮景》 The Qin Huai River

我有一段情呀 I have a story

唱给诸公听呀 and I let me put it into a story

诸公各位 I hope every one of you

静呀静静心呀 can listen to me patiently

让我来 Allow me

唱一支秦淮景呀 to sing the legend of the Qin Huai River

细细呀 道来 slowly and passionately

唱给诸公听呀 for each one of you

秦淮缓缓流呀 Ever since the ancient era

盘古到如今 the river has been flowing gracefully

江南锦绣 It is the beauty of the south

金陵风雅情呀 The elegance of Nanking

瞻园里 Walk in the famous Zhan Palace

堂阔宇深呀 enjoy the spectacular architecture

白鹭洲	Look at the Colony of Cranes
水涟漪	with water rippling all around
世外桃源呀	What a paradise this is.

B. Unsuccessful Subtitle Translations in *The Flowers of War*

Example 1:

她们是人我们是什么？ You mean we are not people?

Here, the translator translates “人” into “people”. It is not good because people has many meanings in English. So it is better to use “human beings” instead of “people”.

Example 2:

让大鼻子围着我们转才好 Make the big nose go crazy for us!

“大鼻子” refers to the westerner, “big nose” is a literal translation. Because generally speaking, the westerner’s nose is very big. But some Chinese people may have big nose, too. So it is better to use “westerner” instead of “big nose”.

Example 3:

姐姐 Big sister.

This sentence was said by the girl student, they were very grateful to the prostitutes because all the prostitutes would like to took place of them to go to the Japanese soldiers’ banquet, which was destined to be misfortune. The translation is not good because “姐姐” is better to translate into “elder sister” rather than “big sister”. “Big sister” seems like literal meaning and make audience puzzled. So it is unsuccessful example of film subtitle translation.

C. Summary

To sum up, we can see that the subtitle translation of *The Flowers of War* is very successful. There are many successful subtitle translations in this movie no wonder it has gained recognition throughout the world.

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis is devoted to the study of subtitle translation of Chinese movie *The Flowers of War* into English from the perspective of functionalist theory. *The Flowers of War* is an epic war film directed by Zhang Yimou. Set in Nanking Massacre, the film tells us that in the war against Japanese fascist, twelve humble prostitutes and a responsible boy, instead of girl students in cathedral, keep an appointment of heroic death. This movie is the champion of Chinese box office in 2011, it is nominated as the 84th Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film. According to the perspective of functionalist, the translation principle is the purpose of translation activity. So subtitle translation is a purposeful activity. This thesis analyses the case study of the subtitle translation in *The Flowers of War* from the perspective of functionalist. Firstly, it introduces the research background, object, questions, theory & method adopted in

the research, research purpose & significance as well as layout of the thesis. Then the thesis reviews the subtitle translation at home and abroad, as well as functionalist theory which includes main theories, main principles, translation strategies and criteria. The paper also focuses on the functionalist theory applied in subtitle translation. Subtitle's features, types, functions and constrains are also discussed. Meanwhile, the author analyzes the successful and unsuccessful film subtitle translations in *The Flowers of War*. From these examples, we can see that the subtitle translation of *The Flowers of War* into English is consistent with functionalist theory. Therefore, functionalist theory can be utilized to guide the analysis of subtitle translation. In a sense, the subtitle translation of *The Flowers of War* into English has been a success on the whole in that it expresses the underlying meaning to the foreign viewers and makes the foreigners understood, meanwhile the subtitle translation is purposeful, coherent and loyal.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alvarez, Roman, M. Cn- Afica Vidal (eds.). Translation, Power, Subversion Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1996:1.
- [2] Cay Dollerup, On subtitles in television programs, [A]. *Babel*, 1974(20): 197-202.
- [3] Ellis. Jack C.A History of Film. [M]. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990: 2.
- [4] Gottlieb, Henric. Subtitling: People Translating People [A]. Dollerup, Cay and Anntte Lindegaard. Ed. Teaching Translation and Interpreting: Insights, Aims, Visions [C]. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1993.
- [5] Gottlieb, Henric. Subtitling: "A Unique Type of Translation" An Encyclopedia of Translation: Chinese- English/ English- Chinese Translation Chan Sin- wai & David E. Pollard (eds.). Chinese University Press, Hong Kong.1995.
- [6] Gottlieb, Henric. Subtitles and International Anglification Words of Words. A tribute to Arne Zettersten. Cay Dollerup (ed.) *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, Special Issue, 2004.
- [7] Gottlieb, Henric. Subtitling Against the Current: A Danish Concept, English Minds. In So Many Words. Jorge Diaz- Cintas & Gunilla Anderman (eds.) *Multilingual Matters*, Clevedon, 2005.
- [8] Ivarsson, J. Subtitling for the Media. A Handbook of an Art [M]. Stockholm: Transedit. 1992.
- [9] Karamitroglou, Fotio. 2009. A Proposed set of Subtitling Standards in Europe, *Translation Journal* (7).
- [10] Luyken, Georg- Michael. Overcoming Language Barriers in Television. [M]. Manchester: European Institute for the Media, 1991.
- [11] Mayoral, R. D. Kelly& Gallardo. N. Concept of constrained Translation. Non- linguistic Perspectives of Translation. [A] 1988. *Meta* 33(3): 356-367.
- [12] Munday, Jeremy. *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Application* [M]. London: Routledge. 2001.
- [13] Nord, C. *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*[M]. Manchester: St. Jerome.
- [14] Nord, C. *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. 2001.
- [15] Vermeer, Hans J. "Skopos and commission in translational action", in Chesterman(ed). 1989.
- [16] Vermeer, Hans J. "Skopos and commission in translational action", in Chesterman(ed). 1989.