

# *A Study on Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology: A Case Study of Empresses in the Palace*

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**Abstract:** As a new field of translation research, subtitle translation has been studied from different perspectives. However, most of the domestic studies have mainly focused on a large number of foreign film and television works introduced in recent years, and this unbalanced situation is not conducive to subtitle translation research. In 2015, *Empresses in the Palace* was introduced to the United States as an original Chinese costume drama, and its subtitle translation became a new perspective for scholars' research. In addition, as a local Chinese translation theory, Eco-Translatology is also maturing. This paper takes the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* as an example and examines its subtitle translation from the perspective of Eco-Translatology. Through the analysis, we can conclude that the translation has generally overcome the language barrier and cultural differences well, but there are still some areas for improvement.

## 1. Introduction

With the increasing improvement and enrichment of people's cultural life, many excellent foreign films and TV programs have flooded into the Chinese market. At the same time, many excellent Chinese movies and TV programs also go to the world. As a series of ancient court life, *Empresses in the Palace* is a good example, which carries the unique cultural connotation of Chinese feudal society. In order to realize the appreciation of movies between different languages and cultures, translation plays a crucial role. As an emerging field of translation research, subtitle translation has been studied from different perspectives. However, there are some problems with these domestic studies: First, the scope of research is narrow. The research results mainly explore the principles, methods and techniques in the translation process from the micro level. Lacking macroscopic research and effective theoretical guidance, some related articles have many similarities. At present, a large number of subtitle translation studies focus on the guidance and application of theories and techniques such as association theory, purpose theory, dissimilation and assimilation, and the current subtitle translation studies mainly focus on early film and television programs. China's subtitle translation research should broaden its vision and further study this theory in depth. Secondly, compared with the English-Chinese subtitle translation research, the proportion of Chinese-English subtitle translation research is smaller.<sup>[1]</sup>

To sum up, the current situation of Chinese subtitle translation is not optimistic compared to the traditional literary translation theme, especially in the field of Chinese-English subtitle translation research. Film and television works play an important role in cultural communication, but not much research has been done on subtitle translation of film and television works. Chinese subtitle translation research also lags behind the world relatively in terms of practical operation, theory construction and quality control. The need for high quality subtitle translation is obvious. Against this background, this paper studies the subtitle translation in *Empresses in the Palace* with eco-translatology as a guide, in order to provide new ideas for subtitle translation research.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2. Previous studies on subtitle translation

Although subtitle translation is still a relatively new research field in translation studies, it has been developing rapidly in the last decade. With the advancement of information and communication technology and globalization, research in this field has become increasingly diverse.

### 2.1 Previous studies on subtitle translation abroad

In the aspect of film subtitle translation, the foreign research situation is relatively mature. In the early 1960s, a paper on subtitle translation was published on *Babel title Cinema and et Translation*, and the research on subtitle translation began to attract people's attention. It opened a new field of translation studies and made western countries, especially European countries, begin to study film translation.

Over the past hundred years, different scholars have had different views on the definition of subtitle. Henrik Gottlieb, the authority of subtitle translation theory in the 20th century, held the view that subtitles usually consist of one or two lines of text, often located at the bottom of the image, and he defined subtitle translation as “the rendering in a different language of verbal message in filmic media, in the shape of one or more lines of written text, presented on the screen in synch with the original verbal message”. In addition, subtitling is defined in Shuttleworth and Cowie as “the process of providing synchronized captions for film and television dialogue.” Diaz-Cintas and Remael further defined it as “a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that discursive elements that appear in the image (letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, placards, and the like), and the information that is contained on the soundtrack (songs, roices off)” Cintas & Remael, 2007, p.8). Based on these three definitions, subtitling can be defined as a translation activity that aims to provide written interpretive textual information to a video file in another language, at the same pace as the audio and visual information.

### 2.2 Previous studies on subtitle translation in China

In contrast, the development of domestic subtitle translation is relatively slow compared with that of western countries, and there is a lack of systematic research. However, with the rapid increase of exchanges between different countries, China has also exported many movies and TV programs abroad, playing an important role in cultural dissemination and information exchange. Although the theoretical research on subtitle translation in China started later than that in western countries and is still in the early stage of development, more and more attention has been paid to it, and people have studied it from various perspectives, such as standards, characteristics and principles.

Ma Zhenqi (1997) brought forward five basic principles to be observed in subtitle translation

(popularization, lip-sync, colloquialism, emotion, figure characterization) and he pointed out that subtitle translators must balance these five principles.

Zhang Chunbai (1998) proposed that the language of film and television dramas is characterized by two major features: immediacy and publicness, and he particularly analyzed the spoken language of film and television in depth. He summarized five major limitations of subtitle translation, namely, the limitation of word number, the limitation of on-screen actors' movement, the characterization of language, the cultural factors, and the translation of puns.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 The background and introduction of eco-translatology**

Any kind of concept has its profound background and social thinking. The emergence of eco-translatology is in line with the direction of social and academic development of the times.

The formation of eco-translatology begins with the economic and social transformation of translation studies. Since the 1960s, human society has gradually entered the stage of ecological civilization construction, and more and more attention has been paid to ecological and environmental issues at home and abroad. At this time, translation studies researchers have introduced the dimension of "ecology" into translation studies, bringing a new research approach for translation studies. In the past, translation studies were mostly conducted from the perspective of linguistics and literature, and often neglected to control the whole translation environment. Under the influence of global ecological thinking, eco-translatology was born due to the inspiration of ancient Chinese ecological wisdom, the stimulation of the development of related disciplines and the promotion of ecologically oriented translation research in the translation field, as well as the needs arising from the limitations and deficiencies of the existing translation theory research.

There are many scholars discussing eco-translatology in the international and domestic translation circles. In 1988, Newmark divided cultural involvement in translation into five categories, among which the translation features of "ecology" were borrowed. David Katan clarified and refined the classification of translation ecological culture, pointing out that physical environment, climate, constructed environment and political environment all belong to the "environment" defined in translation.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### **3.2 Main concepts of eco-translatology**

Eco-translatology refers to the translation theory using the principles and methods of ecology, so it is an interdisciplinary theory between ecology and translation. Hu pointed out that "Eco-translatology can be understood as an ecological approach to translation studies, or translation studies from an ecological perspective."

Eco-translatology hold that translation is an organic whole, which is integrated and harmoniously unified. Each part of the system interacts with each other, and any ecological behavior is affected by many factors. Hu Gengshen believes that translation ecosystem refers to "a functional unit of translation studies that interacts and depends on each other within a certain range of time and space, between languages, between translation elements and non-translation elements (such as society, communication, culture, etc.) through continuous material circulation and energy flow".

The basic theory of eco-translatology summarizes the translation method as three-dimensional transformations, that is, under the principle of "multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection", it focuses relatively on the adaptive selection and transformation from the linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions. Only by truly adapting to the specific translation ecology in a multidimensional manner and by choosing to shift at least three dimensions in the translation

process can the translator produce an appropriate translation.

### 3.3 Features of eco-translatology

As a new theory in the field of translation studies, eco-translatology has its own unique characteristics.

First, from the perspective of theoretical research, eco-translatology is an interdisciplinary research discipline spanning "nature" and "humanities", so its theoretical starting point is relatively high. This theory provides an example for the introduction of ecological thoughts in other fields, indicating that the research in this field has a broad space for development.<sup>[3]</sup>

Second, in terms of the content of theoretical research, the most distinctive features of the whole theoretical system of eco-translatology are its comprehensiveness, integrity, systematicness and interconnectedness. No matter from the "translation ecological environment" or the cognitive chain describing the inner logical connection between translation and nature, these concepts show that ecological translation science regards translation activities as a link in the whole translation ecosystem. Both the translation process and the various elements involved in translation activities are closely related to the translation ecological environment in which they are located, and the roles played by these links are two-way, which makes the theory of ecological translation reflect the comprehensive, holistic, systematic and interactive nature.

Thirdly, from the perspective of theoretical research methods, eco-translatology adopts the method of combining comprehensive argumentation with analysis and illustration. That is to say, eco-translatology has sorted out the research of each sub-item, and paid more attention to the integrity, the overall relevance and interaction among the sub-items of the study.

Fourth, from the perspective of development, the general approach of the development of eco-translatology studies is: under the guidance and control of ecological concepts, discussions and studies are carried out from the perspective of language, culture and human communication, which are closely related to translation activities, and finally return to the ontology research of translation studies.<sup>[4]</sup>

Fifth, the author puts forward the question of "translator centered theory". The study of translators should be one of the important fields of translation theory. eco-translatology clearly put forward the translation view of "translator-centered theory" and fully affirmed the leading role of translators in translation activities.

## 4. *Empresses in the Palace* from the perspective of three-dimensional transformations

Subtitle translation is limited by time and space. In the process of converting subtitles into the target language, translators must take into account the three dimensions of language, culture and communication in order to effectively convey its connotation and extension and to optimize the viewer's viewing effect. As a cultural carrier, subtitle translation is not only requires language accessibility, but also needs to be able to effectively convey the cultural connotation and communicative intent.<sup>[5]</sup>

In general, the successes and subtleties of the subtitle translation of the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* abound, but at the same time, its shortcomings or questionable points also objectively exist, and I will analyze them with some translation examples of the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* with Chinese and English subtitles.

### Example 1

TT(Target Text): Long live the emperor!

Chinese emphasizes repetition, while English strives to avoid repetition as much as possible. Both Chinese poems and idioms are used to overlapping words, and they are characterized by their

sound and rhythm, which makes them neat and easy to read. On the contrary, the English language strives for simplicity and is used to omit some words and phrases to achieve the purpose of easy to understand. This line also has the effect of emphasizing and strengthening the tone in the repetition. According to the English language expression habits, the translation avoids repetition, so it adopted the method of free translation according to the meaning expressed, which conforms to the English expression habits and can be clearly understood by foreign audiences.<sup>[6]</sup>

### **Example 2**

TT: Each year and every year, the blossoms return anew. Each year and every year, the bloom of youth does not.

The original text of the poem was taken from Baitou Yin by Liu Xiyi. These two poems in a beautiful, smooth, neat match concentrated to show that youth is easy to old, things change. These two lines of the poem are beautifully, smoothly and neatly composed, and they focus on the passing of the years and the impermanence of the world. The poet uses flowers as a metaphor for human beings, and the metaphor is so well executed that it is not only rich in the mood of ancient Chinese poetry, but also alarming and intriguing, and very philosophical. In the drama, Zhen Huan, now in her late years, is filled with emotion as she recalls the shocking palace battles of the past. Although the translation uses the same repetition technique as the original text, the rhythm of the poem is properly reconstructed. "The blossoms" and "the bloom" are presented in alliteration, which makes the translation blend with emotion, harmonize meaning and sound, with strong expressive force and appeal. The phrasing of the translation is incisive and in line with the meaning of the original poem, "the bloom of youth", with the use of explicit metaphors, cleverly linking the upper and lower lines, making the transition between the English and Chinese versions of the poem more natural and highlighting the infinite sentiment for the passage of time. Although the translation cannot be as neat as the original poem, the beauty of the English sound and form has been shown to a greater extent, and the adaptation of the linguistic dimension has been successfully realized, which is a successful translation.<sup>[7]</sup>

### **Example 3**

TT: They would rather die on the branch retaining their scent than be scattered on the cold wind.

Chinese and English are sometimes not convertible in terms of phonetics, characters, rhyme and rhetoric, so it is impossible to reproduce the common five- and seven-rhymes in Chinese ancient poetry in English. When converting from an analytic language to a hypotactic language, we need to add prepositions, articles, conjunctions and verbs according to the characteristics of English, which may result in the absence of specific imagery in Chinese and the loss of the beauty of meaning in ancient poems. The process of translation is a process of language transfer, but also a process of context transfer. If we forcefully and rigidly translate a large number of ancient poems, it is not only inconsistent with English grammar, but also inconsistent with the aesthetic orientation of foreign audiences.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **5. Conclusion**

Due to the increasingly extensive and in-depth cross-cultural communication, more and more domestic film and television works go abroad, and the output of works increases year by year, but there are few people engaged in film and television translation. In this context, the research of film and television subtitle translation shows its important significance of The Times, greatly promotes the cultural exchange between China and foreign countries, and conforms to the development of globalization. The research on subtitle translation helps to better reflect the characteristics of each language, vividly convey the meaning of the film, stimulate people's interest in the film industry, foreign language literature and translation enlightenment. The research of film and television

subtitle translation has narrowed the distance between the two cultures and ensured the original flavor of the language.

Due to the limitation of time, as well as the author's lack of knowledge and ability, there are many limitations in this paper, and some aspects need to be further improved in future research.

First of all, the author analyzes subtitle translation of *Empresses in the Palace* from three dimensions of eco-translatology. Due to the limited space, it is difficult for the author to carry out detailed and systematic analysis of these three dimensions. Secondly, because the analysis of examples in this paper is based on the author's own understanding and observation, it has a certain subjectivity. Thirdly, as eco-translatology is a complex theory involving many aspects, there are many other aspects of eco-translatology that can be studied. Although there are some limitations in this paper, it is hoped that the results of this study can be used as a reference for film and television translators and provide suggestions or lessons for future translation practice.

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