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Analysis of Film Subtitle Translation Under the Guidance of Theories of Communicative and Semantic Translation—Taking *Full River Red* as an Example

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Abstract

With the increasing frequency of international exchanges, film subtitle translation plays a crucial role in transmitting and promoting Chinese culture, aesthetic values, and the national spirit. Consequently, greater emphasis has been placed on improving the quality of subtitle translation. As a bridge between different nations and cultures, subtitle translation is essential for fostering cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world. The quality of subtitle translation significantly impacts the dissemination of Chinese culture and the depth of cross-cultural interactions. This study, guided by Newmark's theories of communicative and semantic translation, examines the unique characteristics of film subtitles and their textual nature. Using *Full River Red* as a case study, it analyzes subtitle translation through three lenses: communicative translation, semantic translation, and a hybrid approach combining both methods. The findings aim to provide both theoretical insights and practical guidance, contributing to the broader discourse on effective subtitle translation and its role in cultural exchange.

Keywords

Communicative Translation; Semantic Translation; *Full River Red*; Subtitle Translation

1. Introduction

In the era of rapid globalization and technological advancement, cross-cultural communication has become increasingly prevalent. China's significant economic growth has been paralleled by efforts to enhance its cultural soft power, aiming to share its rich heritage globally. Films serve as both reflections of societal evolution and mediums for cultural expression, playing a pivotal role in this endeavor. The international dissemination of Chinese cinema is crucial for promoting Chinese culture and strengthening the nation's cultural soft power. Consequently, the precision of subtitle translations in these films is vital, as it affects foreign audiences' comprehension and the broader transmission of Chinese culture. Therefore, research into film subtitle translation is of paramount importance.

Chinese director Zhang Yimou's *Full River Red* is one of the most anticipated films in 2023 and it is also a typical representative of Chinese films. The name *Full River Red* comes from a poem by Yue Fei, a military general living in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) in which the film is set, well-known for his patriotism and loyalty to his country. The subtitles of *Full River Red* have the same characteristics as ordinary film subtitles, such as comprehensiveness, instantaneity, popularity, and spatial limitation. Comprehensiveness means that many factors need to be

taken into account when translating film subtitles. These factors include the picture and sound of the film, the length of the subtitle in the picture, and the difference between the audience's culture and the source language culture of the film. Therefore, translators who translate film subtitles need more effort to make the translated version smoother and more understandable. This paper will take the typical Chinese film *Full River Red* as an example to analyze the translation of Chinese film subtitles under the guidance of theories of communicative translation and semantic translation.

2. Literature Review

Subtitle translation has greatly enhanced the viewing experience for audiences. This part mainly talks about the introduction of subtitle translation, the development of subtitle translation at home and abroad, and studies of subtitle translation of *Full River Red*.

When introducing new films to other countries, subtitle translation is a key link for bridging original and target audiences. Condensed written translation of the original spoken language is known as subtitle translation, and it is a unique kind of language change (Nedergaard-Larsen, 2010, p. 5). Expert in subtitle translation Qian Shaoxiang (2000) noted that language used in films and television shows might exhibit unique characteristics in addition to typical literary language aspects: lack of notes, instantaneity, comprehensiveness, popularity, and audibility. The quality of subtitle translation affects the quality of films. Due to the popularization of subtitle translation in films, translators need to improve the quality of subtitle translation by organically combining film content, actor's acting skills, film original voice lines, and film subtitle translation.

In recent years, globalization has spurred the international exchange of films. More Chinese films have entered the global market. However, due to language barriers, most foreign audiences rely on subtitles to understand films, highlighting the crucial role of subtitle translation. The accuracy of such translations affects foreign viewers' comprehension and Chinese culture's spread, making research on it very important. An increasing number of scholars at home and abroad are studying subtitle translation. Subtitle translation has drawn more attention in the West, where related research started earlier.

2.1 Overseas and Domestic Studies on Subtitle Translation

After the mid-20th century, western academics started to offer their own suggestions for raising the standards of film subtitle translation. In *On Subtitles in Television Programs*, Dolerup (1974) discussed the issue of subtitle translation in films and television programs. Additionally, he discussed the importance of subtitle translation and how it might aid in language learning. Christopher Titford (1982) first studied the barriers to subtitle translation in his book *Subtitling: Constrained Translation*. Karamitroglou (1997) researched the requirements for translating subtitles to develop a systematic and thorough standard that would include requirements for standard symbols, word count, and subtitle arrangement.

Western academics have mostly concentrated on the cultural and educational value of subtitle translation in recent years. For example, Jaroslaw Krajka (2013) said that subtitle translation and titles are very important in vocabulary acquisition for language learners. When they watch films, they can use subtitle translation and titles to improve their reading and listening abilities.

Subtitle translation research in China began relatively late but has achieved notable progress while still presenting opportunities for further development. This research is critical for enhancing national cultural strength and improving subtitle translation quality in films. Studying the current status of subtitle translation research provides valuable insights and establishes a foundation for future analysis. Dong Haiya (2007) highlighted the importance of leveraging the breadth and depth of Western subtitle translation studies to advance domestic research. She reviewed the progress of Western film and television translation and emphasized the need for diversified perspectives.

2.2 Studies on Subtitle Translation of *Full River Red*

Recent research on subtitle translation has been strongly supported by various translation theories, including Functional Theory, Association Theory, Skopos Theory, and Eco-translatology Theory. Zhang Zhiping (2023), guided by Skopos Theory, explored how the film *Full River Red* could gain global recognition. Her findings underscored the importance of prioritizing the target audience's acceptance to enhance the film's international influence. Zhang Hongyi (2023), employing Eco-translatology Theory, argued that three-dimensional transformation could improve

translation acceptance and facilitate cultural transmission. Cheng Nuo (2024), using Zhang Delu's multimodal discourse analysis framework, analyzed the subtitle translation of *Full River Red*, recommending that translators consider character modes comprehensively and adopt varied strategies to achieve optimal results. However, a few researches have been done on the film from the perspective of theories of communicative and semantic translation.

3. Analysis of the Subtitle Translation of *Full River Red*

Full River Red, released in 2023, is a film that vividly reflects Chinese traditional culture, making it ideal for analysis through the lenses of communicative and semantic translation. It is a significant text for study. Its subtitle translation not only enables global audiences to appreciate an outstanding film but also fosters a deeper understanding of China's rich traditional culture, promoting its global reach.

Set in the Southern Song's Shaoxing era, four years after Yue Fei's death, his and Liu Guangshi's feats curbed Jin's aggression. The Song then entered peace talks with Jin. Qin Hui ousted rivals and held sway. With Liu Guangshi gone, Zhang Jun siding with Qin Hui, and Han Shizhong out of the military, the Song seemed stable. But beneath, turmoil brewed in both Song and Jin. Four years after the death of Yue Fei, a murder took place at the residence of Prime Minister Qin Hui. The ceremonial officer from the Jin Dynasty was killed, and the secret letter he carried went missing. Suspect Zhang Da, with the help of his uncle Sun Jun, was given a deadline to solve the case. After numerous twists and turns, they uncovered a plot aimed at spreading Yue Fei's *Full River Red* to inspire patriotism. The film is based on the background. The following section will analyze its subtitle translation from the perspectives of communicative translation, semantic translation, and a combination of communicative and semantic translation by giving some examples from this film.

3.1 Communicative Translation

Communicative translation focuses on the reader, striving to recreate the original text's impact in the target language. It aligns the translated text's effect with the intended audience's response, ensuring the expression remains authentic while respecting the source text's form. By liberating the target language from unnecessary constraints, communicative translation improves accessibility and understanding for foreign audiences. This approach aims to achieve the same effect on target readers as the original text had on its source audience. In subtitle translation, the target audience's preferences and linguistic habits must be considered to ensure they can grasp the film's plot. The following analysis examines examples of subtitle translation in *Full River Red* through the lens of communicative translation.

Example 1:

Dialogue: ni fu mu zou de zao, shi wo niang yi ba shi yi ba niao gei ni la che da.
[Literal Translation: Your parents left early, and my mother raised you in a bunch of shit.]
Subtitle: Your parents died when you were little, my mother raised you.

This is a conversation between Zhang Da and Sun Jun, the deputy commander of the army battalion. The expression "yi ba shi yi ba niao gei ni la che da" is a folk saying in Chinese, meaning "I raised you by cleaning your pee and poop" in English literally, which refers to the fact that it is very hard to bring up children and raise them. The former phrase "yi ba shi yi ba niao" in Chinese culture can express the hardness of caring for children. However, it is in a folk way and lacks authentic features if translated literally. The latter "la che da" is the equivalent in English of "raised you". Here translators should take into account the language habits of the audience in the translated version, therefore, the translator did not translate "yi ba shi yi ba niao" literally. According to the communicative translation, the whole expression is translated as "raised you", so that the audience in the target language can understand the translation.

Example 2:

Dialogue: wo mei bai teng ni.
[Literal Translation: I didn't waste my love.]
Subtitle: I love you.

This sentence is Zhang Da's final words to his wife. This reserved and implicit expression reflects the traditional Chinese cultural tendency to convey love subtly. It means that one's tender love for another is meaningful and profound. In contrast, Western cultures often favor direct expressions of affection, such as saying "I love you." The

literal translation is improper to convey the original meaning well for the need of communicative function. Therefore, to comply with Western communicative norms and enhance clarity for the audience, translating Zhang Da's statement as "I love you" is appropriate.

Example 3:

Dialogue: ren shi ni ci de ma.
[Literal Translation: Did you stab the person?]
Subtitle: Are you the killer?

Dialogue: wo sha dou bu zhi dao, wo ci ge niao a.
[Literal Translation: I know nothing. I stab a bird!]
Subtitle: I know nothing. How can I be the killer?

In this film, Sun Jun questions Zhang Da about the death of the Jin Dynasty ceremonial officer. Sun Jun's inquiry, "ren shi ni ci de ma (Did you stab the person)?" is phrased to imply a denial of Zhang Da's involvement. This is translated as "Are you the killer?" to maintain the suspenseful tone. Zhang Da's response, "wo ci ge niao a (I stab a bird!) is a colloquial expression. Translated as "How can I be the killer?", it preserves the original meaning and interrogative tone, effectively conveying the intended message and meeting the demand of communicative function.

Example 4:

Dialogue: wo dang nian liu luo yan hua liu xiang bei huan zuo bu zhi wang guo hen de shang nv.
[Literal Translation: I was called a merchant girl who didn't know what the country hated.]
Subtitle: I had to work in a brothel and be called a heartless whore.

In this film, Zither and her husband finally meet alone. She humorously refers to herself as a heartless prostitute in a brothel, highlighting her means of livelihood. In Chinese culture, the idiom "yan hua liu xiang" refers to brothels, and "bu zhi wang guo hen" suggests that the courtesans are indifferent to the nation's fate. However, providing extensive explanations could overwhelm foreign audiences with cumbersome subtitles and detract from the intended effect. To ensure clarity and maintain the film's communicative function, "yan hua liu xiang" is translated as "brothel," and "bu zhi wang guo hen" as "heartless," effectively conveying the courtesans' indifference to the country's destiny.

Example 5:

Dialogue: xin guan shang ren san ba huo.
[Literal Translation: A new official will make a fire three times when taking office.]
Subtitle: A new broom sweeps clean.

This line appears at the beginning of the film, describing the scene where Sun Jun leads Zhang Da to meet Qin Hui. Wang Biao mocks Sun Jun's low status and unruly behavior. The Chinese idiom "xin guan shang ren san ba huo" refers to a newly appointed official who is eager to implement bold changes and make achievements. If it is translated literally, Western audiences will not understand the position of Sun Jun. The English equivalent, "A new broom sweeps clean," conveys the idea of a new leader bringing vigor and innovation. This translation effectively communicates the intended meaning and helps the audience understand the plot.

Example 6:

Dialogue: ni fang xin, ta na shi pen zi zui hou zao wan kou zan lia tou shang.
[Literal Translation: Don't worry. Eventually, he will put the spittoon of shift upside down.]
Subtitle: You can count on him to blame everything on us.

In this scene, He Li suspects Zhang Da and Sun Jun of being accomplices to Liu Xi and orders them to kill him. Afterwards, Zhang Da complains that He Li has slandered him. The Chinese idiom "kou shi pen zi" means to defame or slander someone. However, its literal translation may not be clear to Western audiences. Instead, the translation adds an explanation to convey the meaning effectively. By omitting the specific imagery of Chinese culture, the translation enhances understanding for foreign audiences from their perspective, thereby achieving the communicative effect.

3.2 Semantic Translation

According to Peter Newmark (2006), semantic translation attempts to convey a meaning that corresponds to that of the original language to the extent permitted by the semantic and syntactic structure of the translated language. This method aims to preserve the source material's essence and evoke a response from the target audience akin to that of the original. Translators should focus on language structure, authenticity, and fluency. Therefore, semantic translation emphasizes audience comprehension and reaction to maintain effective information transmission.

In the film *Full River Red*, certain character dialogues need to be translated semantically to present the original flavor of the characters and stay faithful to the original text. The following examples demonstrate how semantic translation accurately restores the original plots and content.

Example 1:

Dialogue: zai xiang shen bian chu le na liang ge long ya shi nv, shui xiang shang lou jian zai xiang yao wo shuo le suan.
[Literal Translation: Except for those two deaf and mute maids beside the prime minister, it's up to me to decide who can go upstairs to meet the prime minister.]
Subtitle: Apart from the two deaf and mute maids, I decide who can see the prime minister.

This is the line of Wang Biao from the Prime Minister Qin Hui's mansion in the film. It expresses the authority of Wang Biao and the importance of the two deaf and mute maids. The translation modifies the subject from "shui" (who) to "wo" (I). The meaning it conveys is consistent with that of a literal translation. It not only maintains fidelity to the original content but also reflects the characters' language style.

Example 2:

Dialogue: jin tian wan shang wo pei chang qu de na ge?
[Literal Translation: The one I sang a song with tonight?]
Subtitle Translation: The one I entertained tonight?

This sentence reflects the whore's response when Zhang Da asked if she knew the truth about the Jin Dynasty man's death. The term "pei chang qu" (to accompany someone and sing songs) refers to the act of entertaining guests, emphasizing the interaction between the whore and the guest. Using "entertain" better conveys their roles than "I accompanied him and sang songs," while preserving the original meaning of the plot and text. This phrasing helps foreign audiences understand the story more easily.

Example 3:

Dialogue: zhan chang shang si zai lao zi shou li de ren bi ta men jian guo de huo ren dou duo. ni zei dang ran gai sha. dan shi he da ren bu jue de zhe yang wei mian tai huang tang.
[Literal Translation: The number of people who've died by my hand on the battlefield is more than the number of living people they've ever seen. Traitors definitely deserve to be killed. But don't Lord He think this is too ridiculous?]
Subtitle: I have killed more people on the battlefield than people they have seen. An enemy deserves to die. But a game like this is absurd.

He Li stabbed Liu Xi to identify the traitor among Wu Yichun, Sun Jun, and Zhang Da, considering it a test. Sun Jun opposed this action, deeming it harmful and ineffective against innocent individuals. The term "zhe yang" is translated as "a game like this," preserving the original text's meaning. This subtitle translation clearly specifies the pronoun's reference, enabling the target audience to quickly grasp the plot. It also maintains the original style and meaning of the text.

3.3 The Combination of Theories of Communicative and Semantic Translation

According to Newmark, all translations involve both communicative and semantic elements to varying extents, often within the same text. Some sections may require a communicative approach, while others necessitate a semantic one; these methods complement each other. Consequently, purely communicative or purely semantic translations do not

exist. In film subtitling, this dual approach not only considers the audience's perspective but also preserves the source language's characteristics, enabling viewers to gain a deeper understanding of the film's content. The following examples analyze the subtitle translation of *Full River Red*, illustrating the integration of communicative and semantic translation methods.

Example 1:

Dialogue: wo bao ni ri hou rong hua fu gui huo de hao hao de.
[Literal Translation: I promise you'll enjoy glory, splendor, wealth and rank, and live a comfortable life in the future.]
Subtitle: I promise you will have a comfortable life in the future.

This is what He Li speaks to Zither, Zhang Da's wife in the film, attempting to persuade her to recite the contents of a secret letter to him in order to apprehend Qin Hui. The translation employs both communicative and semantic methods, preserving the structure and syntactic features of the original text. The phrase "rong hua fu gui" translates to "glory, splendor, wealth and rank" and the expression "huo de hao hao de" means "living comfortably and safely". Instead of a literal translation, the subtitled phrase "have a comfortable life" conveys the deeper meaning, ensuring the target audience's smooth comprehension. This approach maintains simplicity and clarity, facilitating audience understanding.

Example 2:

Dialogue: xiao ren ben lai jiu chu sheng zai bian guan. na nian zai jie shang fang yang, sha di li tu ran ceng chu ba ge jin bing, ba xiao ren zhua dao jin ting hou, jin ren kan xiao de tui jiao li suo, jiu gei le wo yi ge song jun xin de chai shi.
[Literal Translation: The little man was originally born near the border. That year, while the little man was herding sheep at the border, eight Jin soldiers suddenly emerged from the sand. They captured me and took me to the Jin court. The Jin people, paying attention to my quick reaction, gave me the job of delivering military letters.]
Subtitle: I was born in a border area. That year when I was herding sheep, in the sand appeared eight Jin soldiers. They took me to their kingdom. They noticed I could run, and gave me a job to deliver letters.

In this film, Zhang Da is questioned by Qin Hui, who asks him how he knows so much about the bags the Jin used to carry their letters. The translation demonstrates the use of semantic translation, maintaining the structure and phrasing of the original text. However, the translator did not render "xiao ren" as "little man," since in Chinese, this term is a form of modesty. It is better translated as "I" to reflect Zhang Da's intent. In another part of the text, the phrase "kan xiao de tui jiao li suo" (pay attention to my quick reaction) is not translated literally, but rather through a communicative approach. The following sentence explains that Zhang Da was tasked with delivering military letters, so "tui jiao li suo" refers to his ability to run quickly, shortening the time needed to deliver the letters. As a result, this sentence combines both communicative and semantic translation, ensuring the original meaning is conveyed smoothly and understandably for the target audience.

4. Conclusion

Film subtitle translation plays a vital role in promoting China's rich traditional culture. High-quality subtitle translation not only facilitates the dissemination of this culture but also enables foreign audiences to better understand and appreciate it. However, translating film subtitles is more complex than translating general texts due to the influence of temporal, spatial, and cultural differences among audiences. Subtitles demand a high level of precision and adaptation, given their unique literary characteristics and the constraints of time and space. Translators must navigate linguistic differences between Chinese and English while addressing the cultural nuances embedded in the original language.

The present study utilized Peter Newmark's theories of communicative and semantic translation to examine its application in subtitle translation, with examples from the film *Full River Red*. The analysis highlights that effective subtitle translation requires careful consideration of the target audience's cultural context, ensuring that the translation fulfils its communicative purpose. Translators should strive to balance theoretical guidance with practical

considerations, paying close attention to the cultural customs and linguistic habits of the target audience. By doing so, they can produce translations that are both accessible and culturally resonant.

Newmark's theories of communicative and semantic translation provide valuable frameworks for analyzing subtitles in *Full River Red*. Future research could expand on this work by exploring subtitle translation through other theoretical lenses, such as Skopos theory, and conducting deeper investigations into its impact on audience reception.

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