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A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF CHINESE-ENGLISH SUBTITLING TRANSLATION OF THE  
"CHINESE DOCTOR" FROM SKOPOS THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Film and television translation is a platform for cultural exchange between China and the West, and its quality is closely related to national cultural soft power. This paper takes the film "Chinese Doctor," whose theme is the Chinese zeitgeist, as an example. The Skopos theory addresses English subtitle translation issues related to the theme of the film, language expression, and cultural information transmission. Accordingly, the choice of vocabulary should match the purpose of translation at the lexical level. The sentence level should strengthen the information transmission (retain the original form and compensate for the lack of style). Various strategies should be flexibly employed to overcome problems arising from the lack of punctuation at the text level, ensuring the completeness of cultural transmission in translation. After analyzing the causes, the author provides some reference versions. With the strategic guidance of promoting the nation's culture globally, the objective is to enhance the influence and discourse power of Chinese film and television translation. It aims to facilitate the dissemination of excellent Chinese culture on the international stage.

**Keywords:** subtitle translation the Skopos Theory Chinese Doctor

**摘要:** 影视翻译是中西文化交流的平台,其质量与国家文化软实力关系密切。本文以中国时代精神主旋律的电影《中国医生》为例,在翻译目的论的关照下,针对电影的主题、语言表达和文化信息传递等字幕英译问题,在词汇层面应采用以目的为标准的选词;句子层面应加强信息传递的连贯性(契合译入语表述形式和缺失风格补偿);以及语篇层面为了克服字幕翻译中标点缺失带来的问题,需灵活运用各种策略来实现文化传递翻译完整等原则,审视《中国医生》字幕翻译。在分析问题产生的原因后,给出了相应的参考译文。旨在国家文化走出去大的战略指导下,提升中国影视翻译的影响力和话语权,以更好地推进中国优秀文化的传播。

**关键词:** 字幕翻译; 翻译目的论; 中国医生

Introduction

With the accelerated development of globalization, cultural exchanges between countries in the world are becoming more and more frequent. The flow of film and television works from different countries is crucial

in promoting world cultural exchanges. While China is importing excellent foreign film and television works, many domestic high-quality films have also begun to flow into Western countries. Upon its release, "Chinese Doctor" received numerous accolades from domestic viewers. Some highly authoritative newspapers like Guangming Daily (2021) <sup>[1]</sup> and Beijing Daily (2021) <sup>[2]</sup> also spoke highly of the film. Beyond that, the film also has a good reputation abroad and has garnered widespread recognition from overseas Chinese and many foreign viewers. It is closely related to the subtitle translation of the film. However, due to the cultural differences and the particularity of film and television translation—where it involves not only a singular textual component but a combination of visual elements such as images, scenes, sounds, colors, and other distinctive symbols <sup>[3]</sup>—the stability of high-quality subtitle translation still needs improvement. Based on the example of "Chinese Doctor," this paper explores the specific translation strategies of Chinese-English subtitle translation under the Skopos Theory, hoping to provide a reference for relevant film subtitle translation.

The author searched the publication of journal papers in the past five years (2018.5-2023.5) using "translation teleology" as a keyword in CNKI. The results show that the theoretical ontology research on "the Skopos Theory" is rising. The theory applies in various research fields, including but not limited to film and television subtitle translation, advertising language translation, political text translation, news translation, and literary work translation. As far as the research on film subtitle translation is concerned, many studies focus on appreciating the quality of subtitle translation of some domestic and foreign high-quality films, exploring translation strategies, or conducting translation criticism. For example, there are many studies on subtitle translation of films such as "Flipped," "Wandering Earth," "Desperate Housewives," and "White Snake." However, there are only three journal papers on the translation of subtitles of "Chinese Doctor," which has been well received as soon as it debuted in 2021. Two of them are from the perspective of ecological translation, and the other is on the research strategy of domestication and foreignization. At present, there is no specific research on the subtitle translation of this film from the perspective of Skopos Theory.

### Theoretical Basis

The Skopos Theory was first proposed by the German scholar Hans J. Vermeer in the article *Framework of General Translation Theory* and was formally shaped in the co-authored work *Overview of the Fundamentals of Translation Theory* with Resis. "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.<sup>[4]</sup> The Skopos Theory posits that the intended goal of the translation determines the entire process of the translational act, emphasizing that the result dictates the method. The quality of translation mainly depends on whether it can achieve the predetermined purpose. Vermeer put forward three principles of Skopos Theory: the skopos rule, the coherence rule, and the fidelity rule. According to Vermeer, the highest criterion among these three principles is the first principle, that is, the skopos rule. The second and third principles are two other necessary translation principles based on the first one.

Primarily sprung up in the post-reform and opening-up era, the research on film and television translation in our country started later than in Western countries. The research content is relatively narrow, mainly introducing Western theories, summarizing translation strategies and methods based on their own translation experience, applying different theories to case analysis of subtitle translation, etc. Undeniably, pioneers who entered the field of audiovisual subtitle translation in earlier years have provided valuable insights for subsequent generations through their summaries of translation strategies, methods, and principles. For example, Zhang Chunbai (1998) analyzed the temporal and spatial limitations, language personality, cultural factors, and the translation of puns that affect subtitle translation, and proposed that film and television translation follows the principle of free translation,<sup>[5]</sup> Qian Shaochang (2000) summarized the language of film and television works into five characteristics: audibility, comprehensiveness, transience, popularity, and lack of annotation,<sup>[6]</sup> Li Yunxing (2001) analyzed the characteristics of subtitle translation from three aspects: temporal and spatial constraints, information function and cultural factors. He subsequently proposed the translation strategy of "contraction, simplicity, and straightness."<sup>[7]</sup> In recent years, there have been many studies on the

specific application of film and television translation strategies, such as Fan Xiaodi (2020), based on the analysis of translation problems such as slang, Chinese connectives, and Internet terms in film and television translation, elucidated film subtitle translation from the perspectives of domestication and foreignization strategies.<sup>[8]</sup> In general, subtitle translation, as a primary form of audiovisual translation, is influenced by various constraints in its translational process, as evident from the insights derived from the summaries of previous research in this field. Subtitle translation is the process of providing synchronous instructions for the dialogue of films and teleplays. The author believes that “synchronization” not only refers to the sound and picture synchronization proposed by the ancestors but also includes character synchronization (subtitle translation should match the character’s personality), environment synchronization (subtitle translation should adapt to the dialogue environment) and semantic synchronization (subtitle translation should prepare to convey the implied meaning beyond the dialogue).

The film “Chinese Doctors” remarkably captured the arduous three-year period in China, from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to the eventual lifting of city lockdowns. It portrayed various levels of government agencies, responsible individuals, national medical professionals, and numerous volunteers dedicated to the fight against the epidemic. They displayed unwavering determination, resilience, self-sacrifice, and dedication to the greater good. And their collective efforts resulted in a triumphant victory over the pandemic at the minimal cost possible. It is not just a film but a true embodiment of the resolute, courageous, and dedicated spirit. The ultimate goal of the subtitle translation for this film is to convey the essence of the Chinese spirit naturally, fluently, and accurately. This enabled Western viewers to understand and embrace the real stories in the film and the patriotic sentiments from Chinese traditional culture. The translation aims to evoke a heartfelt response from the viewers.

#### **English translation of “Chinese Doctor”**

Subtitle translation is a branch of literary translation that undoubtedly has something in common with general literary translation and should follow the translation criteria.<sup>[9]</sup> However, subtitle translation has its traits. In the translation process, it is necessary to consider the integrity and conformity of visual, auditory, and film content. The popularity of the film and the instantaneous nature of foreign subtitles on the screen require subtitle translation to keep in line with the theme in the film, combine the context and plot, and dig deeply into the cultural elements contained in the subtitles. It includes and is not limited to the characterization of film characters through subtitle translation, reflecting the task identity, personality, mental state, and other content beyond the expression of the subtitle itself. These particularities of film subtitle translation require translators not to stick to a specific translation strategy in the translation process, but to always consider the particularities of various types and themes of films. Skopos theory belongs to functional translation theories, employing Skopos rules to guide the translation process. In other words, translators can choose different strategies according to different purposes. This guiding ideology can give translators more flexibility. However, in sorting out the subtitles of the English translation of “Chinese Doctor,” the author found three kinds of problems: meaningless words, distorted sentences, and incoherent transmission of cultural information at the text level. The specific analysis is as follows:

#### **Subject and skopos rule**

The skopos rules require the translator to adjust and adapt to the translation according to the translation purpose and specific situation in the translation process so that the subtitle translation can deliver the information truthfully and meet the expected communicative effect well. Based on the events of COVID-19 prevention and control, with the portrayal of healthcare workers in Wuhan and other parts of Hubei as the main line, “Chinese Doctor” also depicts the people of the whole country standing together, getting united, and fighting the epidemic. In the film, slogans like “中国加油,” “武汉加油,” “大家加油,” “姑娘们加油” which are to encourage each other and cheer up morale appeared 13 times. However, because the time, scene, and context are different, these subtitles need to be translated and adjusted according to the purpose of the expression.

For example, in the early days of the outbreak, “武汉加油” was translated as “Let’s go” in the film, which may have been the biggest problem. *The Modern Chinese Dictionary* defines “slogan” as “a brief sentence with a programmatic and provocative role for oral shouting.” Its purpose is to arouse public sentiment and thus lead the masses to unite. In addition to the semantic ambiguity, in English, “Let’s go, Wuhan” is mostly used to express suggestions or invitations, expressing “let’s go to do something together.” It obviously does not coincide with the connotation of the people of the whole country cheering, shouting, providing encouragement, and uniting to help Wuhan when Wuhan was locked down. Because “加油” at this moment is synonymous with “Hold on,” if it is translated into “Hold on, Wu Han,” it is not only catchy but also reflects the collectivist spirit of the Chinese people’s mutual care. In contrast, the later repeated “大家加油” and “姑娘们加油” translated as “Let’s go” will be more appropriate.

Another typical example is the high death rate of the Jinyintan Hospital, which has just been exposed to people infected with the new coronavirus. Zhang Jingyu, the director of the hospital, lamented “我心里很难过。” In English, “my heart aches” is used to describe a deep emotional pain, usually caused by a desire, miss, or other emotional distress. In the case of devastating events that cost tens of millions of lives, such translation pales. “My heart is broken” would be more appropriate, as “broken” heart is often used to describe extreme sadness and disappointment, emphasizing a complete breakdown and pain of the mind. It was a sudden disaster, grief, and helplessness as doctors and deans. Compared with “ache,” the word “broken” emphasizes more on compassion for life and conveys the emotional tension of grief accurately and powerfully. “My heart is broken” which is brief, sonorous, and striking. Its intensity of transmission is proper, and the sense of substitution is strong.

Faithful subtitle translation requires appropriate semantics and tone. The lack of “connotation” and “intensity” of the translated words will weaken the target language viewers’ understanding and emotional resonance of the film. Excavating the profound connotation and cultural meaning contained in the film and paying attention to the differences in vocabulary semantics and usage between English and Chinese are conducive to improving the quality of subtitle translation. Successful subtitle translation should not only fully express the original text’s meaning but also deeply integrate the viewer’s mind and thoughts with the work and obtain emotional sublimation at the spiritual level. The examples above are crucial for translators to note. Many emotionally expressive sentences are often relatively brief. Therefore, in the Chinese-English translation, the translator should select appropriate words, maintain a moderate word count, and effectively convey emotions. The Skopos rules under Skopos Theory require that subtitle translation combines the content of the film, sets off the main theme of the film, reveals the plot, and explores the spirit of the times conveyed by the film through watching the film. Specifically, “Chinese Doctor” is a realistic film that shows patriotism and dedication, and the national feelings and collectivist atmosphere are the tones of this film. In the translation process, the translator should notice preserving the cultural characteristics and spiritual values of the film and fully show the traditional Chinese concepts. At the same time, it is necessary to consider a situation in which the expression contradicts the target language, and the improper choice of words caused the weak strength of the emotional transmission.

### Expression and coherence rule

Sentences are the foundational communication unit. Precisely, it is the usage unit in both English and Chinese<sup>i</sup>. Movie subtitles synchronized with sound is a cinematic technology designed to make the content clearer to the viewers. Movie subtitle translation is a valued way for the target language viewers to understand the movie. Chinese sentences are usually open with a bamboo-shaped structure and many verbs in between, while English sentences are comparatively close with a tree-shaped structure and more nouns. These differences often lead to poor sentence coherence in subtitle translation.

At the mobilization meeting of the whole hospital of Jinyintan Hospital, to evoke the sense of mission of the medical staff, Director Zhang’s speech “为了保护我们的城市，保卫我们的国家，保护我们的亲人。”

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<sup>i</sup> 潘文国 汉英对比纲要 p.188

was translated into English as “to protect our city, protect our country, protect our families.” Such a translation violates the coherence of English expression and has been wordy. Changing the translation to “to protect our city, our country, and our families” not only makes the sentence fluent inside but also more in line with the expression habits of the target language. The same situation also appeared at a critical juncture in the darkest moment of the epidemic. Dr. Wu in Shanghai arranged for his death and entrusted Dr. Tao in Guangzhou to pass on the suicide note and say, “一封给我太太，一封给我女儿。” This sentence was translated into English as “One for my wife and one for my daughter.” It is a typical Chinese sentence with two verbs. This kind of sentence relies on semantics to construct logical relationships, but English ones of the same kind often have compound structures. They pay attention to logical relations using the conjectures between or even within the sentences. Therefore, it is more appropriate to translate the sentence “One for my wife, the other for my daughter” than “One for my wife, one for my daughter.” Subtitle translation is an art that combines pictures and sounds, and it is required to pay attention to matching the language and images. The two sentences appear on different screens using “one” and “the other” in correspondence, which not only enhances the alignment of language and visuals but also makes the sentences presented on different screens more coherent. Additionally, Chinese culture emphasizes the collective over the individual. The use of “one” and “one” here accentuates the individual, disrupting the overall sense of the family. In this context, Dr. Wu’s concern for his wife, daughter, and the whole family enriches the character’s selfless dedication to the greater good.

The coherence rule requires the translation subtitles to maintain consistency and fluency in language use and communication, to understand the plot, and to deepen the theme of the film bit by bit. The coherence of subtitle translation encompasses the mutual connection within and between sentences, the logic of language information, and the expression habits of the target language. Film subtitle translation, especially the translation from Chinese to English, should pay attention to the cohesion transformation of the logical relationship between the two languages from implicit to explicit,<sup>[10]</sup> abide by the habit of English connection (fit), and strengthen the logical relationship at the sentence level to help the target language audience understand.

#### Culture and fidelity rule

The fidelity rule requires the translator not only to ensure that the subtitle translation can faithfully convey the plot of the film and accurately present the relevant information in the translation process but also whether the translator can reflect the background information in the subtitle translation and carry out cultural transmission. These higher levels of fidelity directly determine the quality of subtitle translation. Before Wu Chenguang, a Shanghai doctor, set out to support Wuhan, his father said at the family banquet, “士，不可以不弘毅，任重而道远，为国为民是为大孝。这杯酒给你壮行。” These two sentences show his profound understanding of the deep righteousness and indicate his cultural accomplishment, ideological realm, and language expression ability. “士不可不弘毅，任重而道远，” said Zeng Zi, quoted in *The Analects of Confucius*. The last word in “An educated man cannot be but resolute and broad-minded, for he has a huge responsibility” may be misspelled, but “responsibility” is the correct expression. But even with the correct spelling, the translation leaves much to be improved. The expression “huge responsibility” only shows that there is a “heavy responsibility” rather than a “long way to go.” Second, “For the country, for the people, is great filial piety” is displayed on a split screen, translated as “For country for people// is for filial piety.” There is a grammatical error here due to the lack of punctuation. Again, there are two problems with “This cup is for you.” In terms of expression, the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* notes that “壮行” means to boost morale, which uses words, banquets, and ceremonies to send people off so that the journey has a grand and heroic atmosphere. In the film, the father proposes “壮行” to wish his son a safe, smooth, triumphant return. The translation of film subtitles serves the characters, which needs to reflect the language characteristics of the characters faithfully and improve the shaping of characters and the setting of identities. Therefore, the sentence changes to “A gentleman must be broadminded and resolute, for his burden is heavy and his road is long. For country, and for people, are for filial piety. A toast for your bon voyage” is more appropriate. One is because “bon” comes from French, meaning “good, noble” and commensurate with good wishes. Second, because the French prevailed in

the Middle Ages aristocratic class, many written and literary expressions in English still have a large number of foreign words from French. “for your bon voyage” not only accurately conveys the meaning of the original line but also conforms to the principle of compensation in subtitle translation,<sup>[11]</sup> which helps to make up for the lack of identity information of Wu Chenguang’s father due to the limited space of the film. Thus, Western viewers can better understand the lofty moral accomplishment and rich cultural connotations of Chinese senior intellectuals.

The poor fidelity of subtitle translation or “mistranslation” often results in unsatisfactory translation results. High-quality subtitle translation requires not only being faithful to the expression of the original meaning and not deleting the original content at will but also paying attention to the transmission of national spirit and values, highlighting the traditional national culture. Especially when it comes to the translation of classical books, we should pay attention to the verification of the source language, combined with the use of scenes, and fulfill the principle of fidelity to the greatest extent. We should not only be faithful to the connotation of the source language but also to the culture of the source language.

### Conclusion

The three principles of Skopos Theory of translation, combined with the subtitle translation of the film “Chinese Doctor,” point out that to convey the theme of the film, the translator needs to deeply analyze the selfless dedication of the Chinese people to give up their families for everyone and the true feelings of the characters in the film under the background of the community of human destiny, and choose appropriate words as far as possible to render the theme, set off the atmosphere and express emotions. Considering the particularity of film subtitle translation (mainly instantaneity, popularity, and compensatory), we should make reasonable Chinese and English sentence patterns, pay attention to the problem of poor sentence coherence caused by the split-screen display, and strive to make simple and smooth sentence patterns. In addition, translators should flexibly choose translation strategies (including transliteration, interpretation, and additional translation). Being understandable and acceptable to the viewers in the target language country, the emphasis is on conveying cultural information to ensure that the translation aligns with the translation purpose, the original dialogues, and character portrayals in the film, thereby achieving a high-quality film translation.

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