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A STUDY ON SUBTITLE TRANSLATION OF *EMPRESSES IN THE PALACE* FROM THE  
PERSPECTIVE OF HIGH-CONTEXT AND LOW-CONTEXT CULTURE THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The subtitling is one of the main reasons for the popularity of western films and television works at home and abroad. Nowadays many excellent domestic dramas are trying to explore new ways of taking Chinese television works to the global stage. In addition to the quality of film and marketing strategy, subtitling has been highly concerned from different perspectives. *Empresses in the Palace* is the only domestic TV series to be broadcast on mainstream media platforms in the United States in a paid form. This thesis intends to study the specific film titles, titles, special cultural items, movie songs and other details, as the research objects, in the *Empresses in the Palace* from the perspective of high-context and low-context culture theory. It is to provide translators with new ideas in subtitling for the external communication of Chinese TV series.

Keywords: high-context and low-context culture theory; subtitle translation; *Empresses in the Palace*

1. Introduction

Television programs appeared and stepped onto the historical stage in the 1930s (Gong Chengbo, 2014:5). Broadcast in 2011 by Youku and Letv, China: *Empresses in the Palace* is a royal opera broadcast by international media for the first time, Netflix, a mainstream media platform in American, in the form of Chinese original sound and Chinese to English subtitles on March 15, 2015. It tells a story about a young girl named Zhen Huan in the Qing Dynasty. She enters the Forbidden City and defeats the other concubines, even the Empress, and finally becomes the Empress Dowager herself. Zheng Xiaolong, director of *Empresses in the Palace*, said that this is “domestic TV series entering the United States. The first part of the mainstream market”. (Arthur Sarkinsian, 2015). *Empress in the Palace*, as a domestic TV drama, is a typical representative for foreign communication. The American version of *Empresses in the Palace*, changing the theme songs, cutting most of the plots, was edited and produced by a dedicated American team. Different from the Chinese version, the English version was re-created on the basis of 76 episodes of the original TV series. According to the preferences of American audiences, the English version has only six episodes, about 90 minutes each. Besides, the TV series has won a great reputation among American viewers. It is a great significance as it is the first time that

international mainstream media have broadcast a program to promote Chinese TV series in Western television circles.

## 2. Theoretic Framework

### 2.1 Overview of high-context and low-context culture theory

High-context (HC) and Low-context (LC) theory was first put forward by Edward Hall in the book *Beyond Culture* published in 1976, an American paleontologist who is widely believed to be the pioneer in the systematic study of intercultural communication. One of the most distinct differences between Eastern and Western culture is the use of context in communication (Barna, 1994, p.337). Language has meaning only in real communication. In other words, the actual meaning of language is determined according to the context (Hatim & Manson, 1976). The characteristics of high-context interaction are: The information of the prefabricated program is stored in the recipient and in the background, which contains little information at this process; the opposite is true for low-context interactions: most of the information must be included in the message conveyed to compensate information missing in context. That is to say, people in high-context cultures are more euphemistic and implicit when in communication, including most information in the physical context, and they often need others to use non-verbal information such as context, cultural background, and action expressions to figure out the speaker's intentions; In low-context culture speakers will express the information in language directly, and they can understand it without the assistance of others in the explicit way.

### 2.2 Previous studies on HC and LC culture

Existing studies on HC and LC culture mainly focuses on the following aspects: Cross-cultural communication is the main research, which discussed the differences between HC and LC culture, the causing roots and characteristics of HC and LC cultures and influence of the HC and LC cultures on communication patterns. For example, Tang Degan and Zhang Fangwei (2005) combined Hall's theory with the division theory of George Yule, a linguist, and proposed the methods and guidelines for successful cross-cultural communication. Besides, Journalism and Communication is used to analyze the influence of this theory on TV and news communication. For example, Wu Lin (2012) testified whether Chinese English news websites use low-contextual online communication style by analyzing the differences between high and low context, and suggested that Chinese English news websites should change the ways of thinking guided by the cultural difference of context.

From now, few studies have been done on applying Hall's theory in subtitle translation. However, it is of great importance to explore the field of Chinese films, drama and TV series from the perspective of Western audiences, analyzing styles and customs, which are beneficial to foster foreign communication. Therefore, there will be a broad prospect in the application to subtitling translation. Besides, it will provide a new entry point for translation studies to some extent.

### 2.3 Characteristics of HC and LC culture

According to the explanations of HC and LC culture by Hall, William. B and other intercultural communication scholars ranked 12 countries from low-context to high-context dimension (William, 1985). The ranking order shows the U.S. belongs to LC culture while China has a typical HC culture.

Therefore, non-verbal communication plays a significant role in the process of message sending. For example, Americans rely less on the linguistic context in their mutual communication, while the linguistic context plays a significant role in supplementing information in the mutual communication of orientals. Orientals are often amazed by the conclusions drawn by Americans' personal logical reasoning in the process of interacting with Americans; Americans have been digging into the roots of common sense that orientals consider self-explanatory, and a series of "whys" are simply annoying to orientals if it is too downright. From the perspective of communication and perception, Hall puts forward an effective way to study cultural similarities and differences. Context is the environment in which language is used, which includes all subjective and objective factors in using language. He believes: "Anything can be given with the characteristics of high, medium, and low

context. Things with high context boast the characteristics of pre-arranged information. Arranged information is in the hands of the recipient and in the background, and only a small part is left in the transmission. In the information, low-context things are just the opposite. Most of the information must be in the transmitted information in order to supplement the missing parts in the context.”(Edward Hall, 1959, p.23). That is to say, most of the information disseminated in high context is stored in the material context or internalized in the individual, while very few are in the clear and transmitted coded information. The low context dissemination is just the opposite. The information is placed in a clear code.

From this, high-context coding is strongly dependent on context, while low-context coding is mainly reflected in speech, and communicative information is less dependent on context. Through comparative research, Hall makes a conclusion: “China with a great and complex culture is on the high-context side of the scale”, while “American culture is only biased towards the lower side of the scale.” (Edward Hall, 2010, p.90). Gudykunst arranged the twelve countries with different cultures from “low-context” to “high-context” from which we found that Chinese culture demonstrates high-context characteristics while American culture conveys low-context characteristics.

### **3. The Causes of HC and LC cultures**

The causes of high context and low context communications with the example of China and America may exist in the following; Firstly, social and historical factors help shape different context culture. China is an ancient country with history of 5000 years, which is deeply influenced by Confucius culture. Besides, China is a traditional agricultural country where the daily necessities were produced by farmers themselves. People lived in the same space and worked together with the same relatives and neighbors for a lifelong time, which provided them a common and stable context in communication. However, the situation of America is totally different. America is a country with history of 400 years. Many oppressed people have immigrated to America to seek a new life. At that period, they settled down there with loyal faith in individual equality and freedom, which encouraged them to express their thoughts and ideas without limitation. Secondly, religions and beliefs have resulted in such a difference. Chinese people advocate Buddhism while American put emphasis on Christianity that cares more about self-dependent and little about the context in communication.

### **4. Application of HC and LC culture in Subtitling**

Language serves as a carrier, mirror and container of culture. “The contextual differences between Chinese and English cultures result in the different role of context in containing information. Therefore, the distribution of information at linguistic level and context level is different.”(Zhang Luning. 2003, p.133-137) The dissimilarities in bearing of information between the two languages is bound to affect subtitle translation. However, translation is to transmit and transplant the information carried by the two languages on an equal basis. Therefore, subtitle translation shall have the responsibility to fully convey the meanings that the original authors want to express in that time and situations, so that the readers of target language can generate the same emotional experience with the readers of source language. And translators should compare differences between target language and source language. In the process of translation, translators should consider social, cultural and communicative factors and make the best choices on HC and LC culture.

### **5. An analysis of the subtitle translation of *Empresses in the Palace* from the perspective of HC and LC culture**

Subtitle translation includes three meanings: interlingual information transmission, text simplification or condensing, and conversion of spoken language to written language. (Zhang Min, Ma Xiaoyan, 2014, p.110-112) . Due to differences in geographical environment, religious beliefs, values, customs and habits, there are great differences between Chinese and Western cultures. These differences are manifested in many aspects, such as different views on specific film titles, special cultural items, and detailed translations of movie songs. In order to better promote the cultural exchanges between China and the outside world, when translating the lines of successful film and television work in China, paying attention to the influence of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures is highly important.

### 5.1. The finishing touch of the translation of the title of the play

The title of *Empresses in the Palace* shows that the TV series is about the legendary life story of a woman named Zhen Huan. The American version of the title has been translated into *Empresses in the Palace*, and the back translation of this title is Concubines in the palace. The word Empress means the queen of the empire, and it can also mean the supreme female ruler of the empire. In Western culture, the king who rules the kingdom can only enjoy the monogamy system, and the empire is much stronger than the kingdom, and most of the empires and queens describe the eastern world. This translated name is full of oriental exoticism, and the plural Empresses is specially used, which is more mysterious. This translated name does play a role of finishing touch, and also is helpful for advertising. It can attract the attention of the audience and trigger them to download this kind of movie.

### 5.2. Appellation translations with unique charm

*Empresses in the Palace* tells the story of the imperial family centered on the emperor, full of cultural information with distinguished Chinese characteristics. There are many types of appellation words, expressing the special national culture, reflecting the identity and status of the communicator in the special plot, and playing a huge role in the development of the plot and the portrayal of the characters. Therefore, it is of very importance to translate these appellations well. Translation of appellation words in the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* fully conforms to the principle of translation skopos theory. The translation is concise and accurate, and has a foreign flavor. It can be easily understood and accepted by the audience and realizes the "law of intralingual coherence".

The American version of *Empresses in the Palace* uses concise language to translate different appellations, which is more likely to convey the connotative information of the original text. For example, the Queen Mother of the Virgin is translated into Holy Mother Empress Dowager, Xi Guifei is translated into Noble Consort Xi, Hua Fei is translated into Consort Hua, Guan Wei is translated into Concubine Huan, Shen Guiren is translated into Lady Shen, and Xia Changzai is translated into First Attendant Xia, Yu promised to be translated into Second Attendant Yu. These titles clearly show the importance of female partners around the emperor in China, reflecting the hierarchical differences in the identities of these female partners, and present unique information about the relatives of the royal family in ancient China. The translation is concise and clear, so that the English audience can easily understand and accept its connotative information.

The American version of *Empresses in the Palace* also succinctly expresses the information associated with the appellation in appropriate language. In unusual situations, people use appellations while expressing related information. Translators need to properly blend the two information together, so that the contextual information can be well expressed. For example, "皇后万福金安!" is translated into your highness the empress, may be blessings and peace be with you. Appellation words in these two examples are associated with blessing wishes. It is accurate and beautiful when reading the appellation words, which fully conform to the English expression habits. For those two English expressions "Your highness the empress" and "the young mistresses" show the meaning of the ancient appellation in a specific English context. When doing such translation, translators can easily choose the counterpart word in target language and will not lead to misunderstanding.

The *Empresses in the Palace* tells a story taking place in the Qing Dynasty. Qing Dynasty is a feudal dynasty with a rigid class system. In the *Empresses in the Palace*, there are titles such as Queen, Consort Hua, Concubine Jing, Second Attendant An, and First Attendant Chun. In many harem titles in the US version of *Empresses in the Palace*, the queen is the mistress of the harem. Consort Hua is a very powerful character in the harem. Her background is strong and her strength can not be underestimated. She can rival with the queen. Consort means (ruler) in English. Spouse, polygamy was practised in ancient China. Spouse should also refer to the queen. The Chinese character of the Consort Hua has nothing to do with her real name. It is the first representative of the four concubines. Consort Hua cannot pass this message to foreign friends. We cannot find a completely equivalent word in English words to achieve the effect of the word "华妃" in Chinese. Therefore, according to the theory of high and low context, we can only choose the most appropriate one, whether the Consort Hua is

a powerful, weighty, and recognized wife or consort, or the term “consort”. The word “常在” in *Empresses in the Palace* has also appeared many times. “常在” has a relatively low status in the harem. It is translated as First Attendant in English, which means the waiter in the restaurant. However, it is extraordinarily exaggerated to say that First Attendant is equal to a waiter in the restaurant in the imperial palace. She is, afterwards, the emperor’s concubine with a well-known fame. This translation is obviously inadequate and does not conform to the functional equivalence theory. There is a word Odalisque in English, which means “maid concubine.” According to the principle of high and low context theory, this word is more appropriate to replace First Attendant. Translation of First Attendant is too far-fetched.

Another example is demonstrated that Zhen Huan is apart forever with King Guojun. The ancient poem “终身所约·永结为好。琴瑟在御,岁月静好。” is translated into “Let us commit ourselves to one another for life, two souls eternally united. If only we may live in harmony matrimony, our days filled with peace and joy.” Translation is vivid and also complies with the ancient cultural background.

### 5.3. The straightaway translation of proprietary cultural items

*Empresses in the Palace* is very popular in China, whose audiences’ rating remains high. Meanwhile, it gets good comments from audiences and has a good reputation. It also brings about enormous economic benefits. Due to such economic benefits, this television is introduced to America. Countless Chinese proprietary cultural items are used in the lines, which play a unique role in the narrative process of the plot. It not only conveys unique cultural information, but also makes the plot a special aesthetic appeal.

Proprietary cultural items often integrate the cultural traditions and folk customs of a country from ancient times to the present, which is the difficulty of translation (Jia Yuxin, 1997, p.34). Movies and TV dramas are a special kind of text, and the translation of lines should satisfy the immediacy and popularity of the language (Zhang Chunbai, 1998, p.50-53). Exclusive cultural items in the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* must be translated in a timely, concise and popular way.

The American version of *Empresses in the Palace* translates proprietary cultural items into easily understood terms. So that source language audiences can easily understand the meaning behind the phrase. As target language audiences, they aren’t familiar with such expression. Thus, translators use free translation in this case rather than translate it literally. For example, the old Zhenhuan’s inner monologue when she recalled her love with Guojun Wang, “I wish to have one heart, and the white head is inseparable.” The translation is to capture the heart of my fated lover and cling together till our hair turns gray. The original text is two ancient poems with profound cultural connotations. It comes from the Yuefu “Baitou Yin”. The legend is derived from the story of Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun. It says that an infatuated woman hopes to marry a loving and dedicated man who loves to grow old and is always happy. This is a beautiful and sincere inner voice. Zhen Huan, who is highly literature and knowledgeable, used these two poems to express love to the Guojun King, which played a very good role in the interpretation of the plot. The translation makes it easy to understand and is natural.

Zhen Huan is a woman who is good at dancing and singing. “惊鸿舞” is a kind of dance played in court, which can be originated to Tang Dynasty. “鸿” refers to Anser cyanosis (鸿雁), which is also known as geese now. When dancing “惊鸿舞”, the action and posture of the dancer looks like a flying goose. It intends to describe the light and flexible of the dance. Source language readers can easily understand the meaning of the dance from its name. When translated to target language, it was translated as “Flying Wild Goose”. It is the literal translation. As for subtitle translation, time and space is limited. Therefore, there is little possibility to give an annotation for this phrase. From such literal translation, audience in target language can at least know the rough meaning that the action of the dance may like a flying goose. “惊鸿” stands for beauty and nobility while goose has no such connotative meaning. Another word “Swan” has closer meaning to “惊鸿”

. In target language, Swan has a beautiful and noble image. Therefore, it could be better to use swan to replace goose in the phrase. Using the cultural theory of high and low context, we can see that this translation is not equivalent, there is no equivalent in context, and there is no equivalent in meaning.

*Empresses in the Palace* has a punishment called “一文红”, which is used in ancient palaces to punish wrongdoers. It is very cruel and brutal. The English translation in the American TV series is the scarlet red. The scarlet noun is scarlet, and the adjective is “scarlet red”. The meaning of “criminal and evil” is well expressed. In English, you can also feel the cruelty of the punishment of “The scarlet red”, so that foreigners can feel the same as Chinese. This is the theory of high and low context of free translation. Some netizens translated “Rewarding Yizhanghong” into “give you 3.33 meters red”. This is a literal translation method, which is obviously not appropriate, but Chinese people read it with a funny effect. The word Scarlet means “scarlet; red; crimson that symbolizes sin; crimson; crimson; bright red; sinful; licentious.” This word is used to modify red, giving the word red, whose meaning of this red color is a symbol of sin and serious sin, showing the harshness and cruelty of this punishment. From the perspective of paraphrase, this meaning is very accurate.

#### 5.4. Redistributing of the song

The American version of *Empresses in the Palace* is extracted from the original opening and closing songs, but was re-created in English by the famous Hollywood film musician Benjamin Wofischi. This makes the film icing on the cake. The creation of the opening and closing songs is a mix and match route, which is a cross-border fusion of international style and national style. The opening song A New Day was sung by You Hongfei, a soprano from the Central Opera House. The opening tune is poignantly beautiful and extremely atmospheric. The MV is matched with some brand-new shots to give the audience a sense of fantasy and make the audience speculation and recall about the plot. The ending song Farewell is sung by the young Chinese tenor Zhang Yingxi. The ending song gives the audience the feeling of country music, sing three sighs, and the sound is endless. The translator should focus on conveying the meaning and spirit of the source language, not on the language structure, nor on formal equivalence. High context is not the same as traditional free translation or live translation. Translation is required to reproduce the original intention as accurately as possible in different language structures. (Tan Zaixi, 1989, p.28-49). Nida pointed out that “the response of the recipient of the information in the target language to information in the translation should be the same as that of the recipient of the source language. The response level of the original text is basically the same” (Nida, 2004, p.73). Therefore, when translating, the American audience should be able to understand the deep affection of Dr. Wen for Zhen Huan, instead of simply translating the meaning of the poems, so as to follow the principle of high and low context.

#### 6. Conclusion

The American version of *Empresses in the Palace* has made huge adjustments in content, length, and narrative methods, and also made great efforts in the soundtrack to meet the purpose of profiting for the dissemination agency. In terms of detailed translation of specific film titles, appellations, special cultural items, etc., we also fully cater to the taste of Western audiences, and adopt simple and popular translation methods to make the language and culture of film and television dramas vividly and smoothly displayed in front of Western audiences.

Due to time and span, the study of subtitle translation under the theory of high and low context culture is a new attempt, so there are also some limitations in this thesis given as follows: First, in terms of words translation, only cultural words and sentiment words and abstract words. Secondly, when analyzing subtitling, this thesis only considers titles, songs and appellations and so on. Based on the above discussion, the author wants to provide inspirations for future researches in this field.

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