



# On the Translation of Chinese Traditional Culture Film Subtitles from the Perspective of the Skopos Theory---A Case Study on “Chang'An”

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**Abstract.** As a product of cultural communication and dissemination in the Internet era, film works are one of the effective ways to tell China's stories well and make the voice of China heard. A popular issue of discussion between the translation community and the film business is how to offer films featuring Chinese traditional culture to global viewers through subtitle translation while still allowing foreign viewers to experience the rich legacy and values of Chinese traditional culture. The representative Chinese traditional culture film “Chang'An”, in which the translation of poems in the subtitle translation is not only the highlight but also the difficulty. Through translation practice and previous researches, the Skopos Theory is a prescription for the translation of film subtitles. Skopos Theory is skopos-oriented and skopos is the highest principle, which is suitable for subtitles translation of films. Meanwhile, this kind of translation strategy focuses on the target audience. And it not only makes the film easy for the audience to understand, but also avoids the shortcomings of certain culture.

**Keywords:** Skopos Theory, Film Subtitle Translation, Translation Strategy.

## 1 Introduction

With the deepening of globalization, cross-cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent. In the process of upgrading its national cultural soft power, China attaches more and more importance to the international dissemination of traditional culture. Subtitle translation of traditional culture film works has become an important way of cultural communication.[1] With the increasing popularity of Chinese film works in the international market, the demand for high-quality subtitle translation in the international market is growing. And the Skopos Theory provides a new theoretical support for the research in this field, and emphasizes the selection of translation strategies according to the characteristics of the target culture in order to achieve accurate communication of culture, which is in line with the needs of cultural output in the context of globalization.

As the longest animated film in the history of Chinese films, “Chang'An” tells the story of the flourishing Tang Dynasty. The timelessly beautiful verses and meaningful

place names are the difficulty of translation in this film, and require thoughtfulness and refinement. In fact, there are already famous translations of the Tang poems by Li Bai and other great poets in the film, but the subtitles of the film have to be different from the literary works, and the time limit for watching the film is short, so the subtitles should be more concise and reach the meaning. Therefore, in “Chang’An”, the subtitle translation of the poems of excellent poet Li Bai and others adopts the rules of the Skopos Theory and the strategies of domestication and foreignization to make it easier for the world to understand and appreciate the beauty of Chinese traditional culture.

## **2 An Overview of the Skopos Theory**

The Skopos Theory, also known as Functional Translation theory, put forward by German functionalist translation scholar Hans J. Vermeer. The theory is based on three key principles: skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule.

These principles posit that translation is an act of specific intention and consequence based on the source material. Vermeer reckoned that the source text serves merely as a repository of information, which may be partially or wholly utilized for the benefit of the target audience. In other words, from the perspective of the Skopos Theory, the source text is accorded a lesser significance compared to its role in the theory of reciprocity, which emphasizes the equality between the source and target texts.[2] The Skopos Theory transforms the focus of translation from the source text to the functional role and purpose of the translated text. This paradigm shift challenges the traditional concept of translation, advocating for a teleological perspective that prioritizes the fulfillment of the translation's objectives within the target language context.

## **3 Application of the Skopos Theory in “Chang’An”**

### **3.1 A Synopsis of the Film “Chang’An”**

The title of this film is taken from the poem of Chen Zilong, a literary scholar at the end of the Ming Dynasty, “Meng dao Chang’An san wan li, hai feng chui duan qi xi tou”, which is the admiration of the descendants for the Great Tang Dynasty, and the distant hope of the poets of that time for the ideal world. As the longest animated movie in the history of Chinese cinema, “Chang’An”, with the background of the flourishing Tang Dynasty, tells the story of Gao Shi, who is in the midst of the situation, recalling his own past with Li Bai, after the An Shi Rebellion, when the whole Chang’An is in a state of chaos due to the war. Tying together many historical figures, it tells us about the ups and downs of the destinies of all beings under the great Tang Dynasty, and brings to life the grandeur of the Tang Dynasty.

The film's English-subtitled translation is matched with stunning images and grandiose scenes that blend throughout the 48 Tang poems. The entire film “Chang’An” is immersed in the poetic rhythms of Tang poetry and provides a path for the viewers to resonate with the poets of a thousand years ago and experience the romance of Chinese

culture. This magnificent and romantic dynasty has captivated the hearts of many literature enthusiasts, making this 168-minute masterpiece the longest domestic animated film ever created. The film depicts the flourishing Tang Dynasty through vivid imagery, allowing the viewers to immerse themselves in a world of poetry and experience the emotions of the literati.

### 3.2 Application of the Skopos Rule in Translation Practice

The skopos rule underscores the imperative that translation endeavors must ascertain their strategies and methods based on the translation's intended purpose or functional objectives.

Sample 1:

SL: Jun bu jian gao tang ming jing bei bai fa, zhao ru qing si mu ru xue.

TL: Can you see the grief of white hair in the mirrors. As dawn's black silk turns to evening snow?

From a syntactic point of view, the poem “Jun bu jian gao tang ming jing bei bai fa, zhao ru qing si mu ru xue.” expresses the relentlessness of time and the shortness of life. The poet highlights the hasty passing of time by comparing the “qing si” (i.e., the black hair, which is a symbol of youthfulness) and “bai fa” (which is a symbol of aging). By comparing “qing si” and “bai fa”, the poet highlights the hasty passage of years.

Here, the advantage of translating “bai fa” as “white hair” is that it can more accurately convey the sense of complete greying of hair in the poem, which symbolizes the complete aging of life in the poem. At the same time, “white hair” is also more in line with the contrast in the verse “zhao ru qing si mu ru xue”, because “snow” is white, which is the same as “qing si” (black hair). The contrast between “bai fa” and “qing si” highlights the relentlessness of time and the shortness of life, which more fulfil the purpose of the sentence.

In this sample, translating “bai fa” as “white hair” reflects the skopos rule, that is, choosing the most appropriate translation strategy and method according to the purpose and function of translation. This type of translation achieves the dual objective of precisely transmitting the semantic content of the source material while also maintaining its cultural nuances and symbolic significance.

### 3.3 Application of the Coherence Rule in Translation Practice

Under the guidance of the coherence rule, in order to make the translation easier to be accepted and understood by the listener or reader of the translated language, the translation should be adjusted appropriately so as to make it consistent with the linguistic and expressive cultural background, mode of thinking and communicative situation of the listener or reader of the translated language.

Sample 2:

SL: Dou jiu shi qian zi huan xue.

TL: Wine flowed like water.

In this translation version, the description of the specific quantity of “dou jiu shi qian” is omitted and directly simplified to “Wine flowed like water”, which is more in

line with the English expression habit, avoids the cultural gap that may be brought about by direct translation, and preserves the joyful atmosphere of the original text, while making the translation more vivid and graphic.

From the imaging depicting level, this translation version also conveys the poet's heroic and unconventional character in the original poem. Through the depiction of "Wine flowed like water", the viewers can further appreciate the poet's bold personality and emotion.

This translation embodies the coherence rule because it not only conforms to English language habits and expressions, but also has an inherent logic and coherence that can be understood and accepted by target language readers. Although it does not directly translate every word in the original text, it conveys the core meaning of the original text, i.e. the bravado and joy of drinking, through the overall context and expression.

### 3.4 Application of the Fidelity Rule in Translation Practice

The fidelity rule emphasizes the importance of adhering to the original text in translation, advocating for a nuanced interpretation that captures the essence of the original, grounded in an analysis of the source text's context, cultural nuances, and the author's intent.[3]

Sample 3:

SL: Long tan hu xue.

TL: Dragon's pool, tiger's lair.

In Chinese dictionary, "long tan hu xue" is interpreted as "a deep pond where a dragon lives and a cave where a tiger hides, which is a metaphor for a dangerous place". Here it is translated as "dragon's pool and tiger's lair", which reflects the fidelity rule because there is no equivalent of "dragon's pool and tiger's lair" in the English context, the viewers can still associate danger with "dragon" and "tiger" and understand the meaning of the original text.

From a semantic point of view, "dragon's pool and tiger's lair" does convey the dangerous and mysterious meaning of "long tan hu xue". In Chinese, "long tan" and "hu xue" both refer to dangerous places, while "dragon" and "tiger" are often used in English, especially "tiger" is often used to symbolize power and danger, and "dragon" is acknowledged to be a Chinese symbol of mysterious power. Through the expression, it can be imaginable that how hard it is to survive in or escape from such two intimidating objects' habitats, which is faithful to the original semantic meaning.

From a cultural point of view, although the symbolic meanings of "dragon" and "tiger" are not wholly passed on by literal translation, it will not cause misunderstanding or confusion in this context because the viewers can understand the meaning through the context but also be attracted by the mysterious charm. Thus the foreign viewers may get further involvement in Chinese culture. Therefore, from this point of view, the translation is also faithful to the original text.

## 4 Application of Translation Strategies in “Chang'An”

The Skopos Theory is closely linked to the strategies of domestication and foreignization. As a theoretical framework for translation, the Skopos Theory suggests that translation activities should have specific goals in mind. The strategies of domestication and foreignization are practical applications of this theory. The domestication strategy involves adapting the translated text to the target culture in order to meet the reading habits and cultural expectations of the target readers. On the other hand, the foreignization strategy retains certain features of the source language text to allow the target language readers to experience the uniqueness and differences of the source language culture. The Skopos Theory guides translators to use domestication or foreignization strategies flexibly, depending on the specific purpose of the translation and the needs of the target readers to promote cultural exchange. When translating Chinese poetry into English, translators often adopt different strategies depending on their intended purpose.

### 4.1 Domestication Translation Strategy

#### 4.1.1 Free Translation.

Free translation advocates transforming the linguistic expressions of the original text and retaining the information content of the original text. In other words, free translation is to retain the meaning of the original on the premise of not excusing the original language form. This translation method asks more stringent requirements for translators, as Chinese and Western cultures have their own characteristics, which requires translators to be familiar with the cultural connotations of the source language and the target language, and to be able to understand not only the literal meaning of the original text, but also its deeper cultural significance.

Sample 4:

SL: Shi wo bu de kai xin yan.

TL: Steals all the joy from my heart.

From a semantic point of view, “kai xin yan” refers to the expression of inner joy and pleasure on the face. The phrase “steals all the joy from my heart” vividly expresses the feeling of being deprived of the joy in one's heart, which is a straightforward expression that has a strong emotional impact in English.

“Steals all the joy from my heart” is more in line with the expression habits and emotional experience of English viewers. It avoids the stiffness and unnaturalness that may be brought by literal translation, and makes the translation more fluent and easy to understand. This kind of translation plays the role of a bridge in cross-cultural communication, helping readers with different cultural backgrounds to understand and feel the emotions of the original text.

#### 4.1.2 Corresponding Translation.

Corresponding translation is a technique within the realm of translation where idiomatic expressions from the source language are rendered in the target language by employing equivalent idiomatic phrases. This method aims to replicate the figurative

meaning, stylistic impact, and cultural resonance of the original idioms while ensuring they are understandable and resonate with the target audience.

Sample 5:

SL: Wo fu qin wen wu shuang quan.

TL: My father was a warrior-scholar

From a semantic point of view, corresponding translation here cleverly combines the English words “warrior” and “scholar”, which correspond to the Chinese words “wu” and “wen” respectively. This version of translation not only conveys the meaning of the original words, but also makes the translation easy to be understood and accepted by English viewers through the combination of common words in English.

From the cultural communicating level, the phrase “wen wu shuang quan” in Chinese is rich in cultural connotations, which means that a person has excellent attainments in both culture and martial arts. The words “warrior” and “scholar” have distinct imagery and specific cultural connotations in English, which represent the qualities of being brave, strong in battle and knowledgeable and cultivated respectively. Corresponding translation perfectly combines the two different but equally important qualities of “wen wu shuang quan” and conveys the deeper meaning of the original text.

In addition, this version of translation also reflects the fusion and collision of Chinese and Western cultures. In Chinese, “wen wu shuang quan” is an ideal personality image, while in English, “warrior-scholar” is a unique cultural phenomenon. Through the set translation method, this cultural exchange and integration can be realized in translation, so that readers from different cultural backgrounds can have a deep understanding of the concept of “warrior-scholar”.

To sum up, the translation of “wen wu shuang quan” into “a warrior-scholar” not only accurately conveys the meaning of the original text, but also demonstrates its unique advantages and charms through clever lexical combinations and cultural fusion.

## 4.2 Foreignization Translation Strategy

### 4.2.1 Literal Translation.

Literal translation is characterized by two main points: in the treatment of lexical meaning and rhetoric, no transitive techniques are used; in the treatment of linguistic form (i.e., lexical-syntactic structure), appropriate changes or conversions (e.g., word order conversions) are permitted in order to make the translated text conform to the lexical-syntactic norms of the target language.

Sample 6:

SL: Qiang jin jiu, bei mo ting.

TL: Drink and don't put down your cups.

“Qiang jin jiu” is directly translated as “drink”, which simplifies the emotional and cultural connotations of the original, but does capture the action of drinking itself. The phrase “bei mo ting” has been directly translated as “don't put down your cups”, which directly retains the words “bei” and “ting” in the original. The core meaning of the words “bei” and “ting” in the original text is directly retained here, i.e., don't stop drinking.

The names of people and places in the film are often directly translated due to the limitation of the length of the subtitles, which does not explain the allusions behind them in detail, but does not leave the viewers in doubt.

#### 4.2.2 Word-for-word Translation.

Word-for-word translation is an approach where each word of the source text is directly translated into the target language one by one. This method always does not take the variations in vocabulary, grammar, and meaning that may exist between the source and target languages into consideration, and thus may potentially leads to translation that is not idiomatic or may not convey the original message effectively.

Sample 7:

SL: Peng yang zai niu qie wei le, hui xu yi yin san bai bei,

TL: Stew the lamb, prepare the ox, let us feast. Tonight we'll drink three hundred cups at least

From a syntactic point of view, “Peng yang zai niu qie wei le” is translated as “Stew the lamb, prepare the ox,” where “peng” and “zai” are directly translated as “stew” and “prepare”, although “prepare” may not exactly correspond to the meaning of “zai”, it basically retains the verb structure of the original text. Meanwhile, the phrase “qie wei le” has been translated as “let us feast”, which is closer to the meaning of the original. “Feast” as a verb can mean “to enjoy”, “to eat and drink”, which aptly expresses Li Bai's cheerfulness at the banquet. “hui xu yi yin san bai bei” is translated as “Tonight we'll drink three hundred cups at least”. “hui xu” is translated as “we will”, while “yi yin san bai bei” is directly translated as “drink three hundred cups at least”, retaining the quantifier and verb structure of the original. In the original text, “peng niu zai yang qie wei le” and “hui xu yi yin san bai bei” are two independent verses, but in the translation, the translator connects them into a complete sentence by adding “Tonight” and “let us feast” to make the translation smoother and more fluent.

Overall, this translation uses word-for-word translation to a certain extent, but some grammatical adjustments have been made during the translation process in order to make the translation more in line with the expression habits of the target language and the understanding of the readers.

#### 4.2.3 Zero Translation.

Zero translation, i.e. the deliberate omission of words from the source text, refers to adjustments made by the translator for differences in syntactic structure between the two languages, such as omission.

Sample 8:

SL: Qian jin san jin huan fu lai.

TL: Spend now, riches return in season.

“Qian jin san jin” is a poetic and philosophical expression in Chinese, implying the loss of wealth or generous giving. When translating it as “spend now”, the zero translation strategy is actually applied, which directly extracts the core meaning of the original text without translating it word by word.

From the syntactic level, the translation “spend now” directly conveys the meaning of “qian jin san jin” in the original text, which is concise and not redundant. This way of translation is in line with the English expression habit, which makes the translation easier to be understood and accepted by English readers.

From the cultural communicating level, although the poetic and cultural connotations contained in the phrase “qian jin san jin” cannot be fully reflected in the translation of “spend now”, the translation conveys an attitude of instant consumption and enjoyment of life through simple words. To a certain extent, this attitude echoes the open-mindedness and chicness of the original, so that the translation retains the core meaning while preserving the emotional meaning of the original as much as possible.

Importantly, zero translation tends to achieve cultural integration in a more natural and flexible way when dealing with cultural differences. Here, although the expression “spend now” cannot fully show the cultural connotation of “qian jin san jin”, it is a way closer to modern life, so that readers of different cultural backgrounds can feel the openness and freedom conveyed by the original text.

## 5 Conclusion

Through this research, it can be concluded that the Skopos Theory is important in guiding the subtitle translation for traditional Chinese cultural film works. The application of the three rules of the Skopos Theory and the translation strategy of domestication and foreignization allows subtitle translation to convey the cultural meaning of the original text in the best possible way, and at the same time makes it easy for foreign viewers to understand and appreciate the connotations of Chinese culture.

However, it cannot be denied that although the Skopos Theory emphasizes the purposefulness of translation, in practice, it is a challenge to balance the characteristics of the source culture with the acceptability of the target culture.[4] Traditional culture contains rich historical, philosophical and artistic elements, which are difficult to correspond directly to the target language culture in the translation process.[5] And it is still a task for translators to convey totally accurate information with the constraints of space and time in the process of subtitling.

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