



Eco-Translatology: A Study of the English Translation of Chinese Elements in American Films

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Abstract: In recent years, many Hollywood blockbusters full of Chinese elements are quite popular in both western and eastern world. In cultural exchange, the essential translation remains a tough task for most translators. Especially for the profound and mysterious Chinese elements, we often see mistranslation, cultural vacancies and excessive use of domesticating strategies. Translation theories widely applied in the translation of Chinese culture, such as functionalist theory and relevance theory, are also not quite suitable for film translation, which is different from book translation that can be read back and forth with annotation. Under these circumstances, the newly proposed eco-translatology provides us with a good perspective. This article aims to prove the applicability of eco-translatology by analyzing three typical American films with Chinese elements, *Mulan*, *Kung Fu Panda 3* and *The Forbidden Kingdom*. Some translation examples are cited to see how the translator adapts to the ecological environment and transform Chinese elements from multi-dimensions. The result shows that eco-translatology has a good adaptability and a strong explanatory power to the translation of Chinese elements in films.

Keywords: Film translation, Chinese elements, eco-translatology, three-Dimensional transformation



1. Introduction

Film is determined to be one important communication means since they are created. Due to the cultural and historical differences, it has been being difficult for translators to translate the time-honored Chinese elements with special and complex meaning accurately and clearly in films. Many problems especially cultural vacancies and excessive use of domesticating strategies have already emerged in the translation process. Eco-translatology, put forward by Hu Gengsheng in 2001 has been gradually recognized. It can be applied to history, literature, translation ethics, applied translation studies, translation education and so on. Just as Marion Boers (Jiang, Song, and Meng, 2011), the chairman of the International Federation of Translators, pointed out in 2010, “The new translation research paradigm of eco-translatology is booming and flourishing.” It advocates that the translator needs first adapt to the ecological environment and then make the best selection of it.

However, many articles have explored either Chinese elements in film translation or eco-translatology. Chinese elements in film translation have been studied from functionalist theory, relevance theory, cultural turn, etc. The book *Evolution and Ethics* and Chinese allegorical saying have been explored respectively by Jiao (2010) and Zhang (2014) based on the overall translational eco-environment. However, the researches on the translation of Chinese elements or Chinese culture in films from the perspective of eco-translatology are relatively few. This article will combine film translation and Chinese elements together to see how the translator achieves multi-dimensional transformation based on linguistic, cultural and communicative dimension.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Chinese elements in films

A film is a kind of audio-visual art, where dialogues work together with visual images, sound and music (Chang, 2012). Film translation can be defined as the conversion of audio-visual products from the original oral or written content into target written text by adding the original images at the screen bottom (Gambier and Gottlieb, 2001). Ding (2016) proposed three criteria for film translation: (1) target language-oriented; (2) beautiful; (3) consistent with the movie content .

Gao (2013) stated that the Chinese elements refer to the images, symbols and customs embodying national dignity and interests that are recognized by the majority of Chinese (including overseas Chinese). It can be divided into China's natural, traditional and modern cultural elements, such as country image, famous landmarks, folk customs, clothing, specialty, moral consciousness and so on (Gao, 2013). There are three main types to use Chinese elements in American films: China's local scenery, Chinese culture such as folk tales and opera, and Chinese actors or directors (Cai, 2011).

2.2 Research on Eco-translatology

Eco-translatology focuses on the integrity of translation and adheres to translator-centeredness (Wang, 2011). Professor Hu Gengshen defines translational eco-environment as the 'world' presented by the original text, the source language and the translated language, namely the overall interaction of language, communication, culture, society and authors, readers, and commissioners (Hu, 2008). The original and the target language are two different text ecosystems. The greater the difference between the two ecological environment is, the smaller the translatability will be. And the translation process can be interpreted as the translator's adaptation and selection. Firstly, the translator enters and adapts to the original ecological environment to fully grasp the original text and gain a new identity. Secondly, the translator enters the context of the target language with his new identity and selects the appropriate expressions according to his understanding of the original culture so that the translation can adapt to the ecological environment of the translated language. The translator shuttles between the two languages to complete the alternating cycle of adaptation and re-adaptation. The translation principle is "multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection", and the translation method is "three-dimensional transformation": linguistic dimension, cultural dimension and communicative dimension, which pays attention to language forms, cultural connotation and communicative intention respectively.

Wang (2017) published an article about *A Bite of China*, a documentary with abundant Chinese food culture, concluding that eco-translatology provides a totally new and practical theoretical perspective for the study of documentary translation and can effectively guide translation practice, improve translation quality and promote communicative efficacy. Jiao (2010) used comparative analysis of two translations of *Evolution and Ethics* from the perspective of eco-translatology and concluded that Yanfu's translated version *Tian Yan Theory* is better than that of Science Press. Zhou's (2018) study has shown that successful film translation relies on the translator's "adaptation" and "selection" to maximize the conversion and exchange of historical and humanistic information in the film. Cao (2017) pointed out that the translator needs to use different translation techniques to realize the transformation and compensation of communicative dimension on the basis of linguistic and cultural dimension. From the previous reviews, we can see that eco-translatology has a strong explanatory power to the translation of Chinese culture and can offer a new angle to study the Chinese elements in films.

3. Multi-dimensional Analysis of the Chinese Element Translation

3.1 Linguistic Dimension

The adaptive selection transformation of linguistic dimension is the translator's adaptation to the linguistic form in the translation process (Hu, 2011). It focuses on the linguistic form such as sentence structure, rhetorical style and literary style. When translating, the translator needs not only to understand the original text, but also to take into account the target language habits and the acceptance of the target audience.

[1] 气的修炼需要自我修炼。 Master of chi requires master of yourself.

---- *Kung Fu Panda 3*

The orderly symmetry pattern of example [1] gives the audience a rhythm and a sense of sound beauty, easy to remember. There are two connotations of the Chinese characters “修炼”. One refers to the religious firing of making elixir. The other means the way of learning and practicing, resisting the outside temptation to cultivate oneself. Paul was eager to grasp martial arts to protect his village but produced little effect and Mater Oog way used example [1] to enlighten him. Therefore, “修炼” here belongs to the second meaning and the translator uses the noun “master” to describe the high command of something, which is quite suitable and avoids the complex and lengthy explanations.

[2] 你就不再受招式的困扰，武功也才能变得出神入化。

Learn it all, then forget it all. Learn the way, then find your own way.

---- *The Forbidden Kingdom*

Parallelism in example [2] attached to a deep tone easily gives the audience a sensation of reading something profound. With two "all" and two "way", it explains the true meaning of Chinese Gong fu well: learning, absorbing and internalizing. "招式" and "出神入化" are distinct Chinese elements. Since it shows in a very short period of time, if adding annotation or explaining in long sentences, the effect will be destroyed. The translation shows the translator's good understanding of "出神入化", which means the technique has reached a high level.

3.2 Cultural Dimension

Cultural dimension pays attention to the cultural connotation differences of the original culture and the target culture to avoid misinterpretation. The film and culture are inseparable, and film translation is inevitably permeated with strong national spirit and rich cultural heritage. How to convey Chinese culture and help foreign audience know about the original cultural connotation is the key of successful film translation. To achieve this aim, domestication or foreignization methods are often adopted.

[3] 轻功 fly through air

---- *The Forbidden Kingdom*

Those who get the hang of “轻功” in example [3] look like flying in the air when moving. So drawing this intuitive image and taking domestication method to translate it into "fly through air" is better than those words like Qing Kung or acrobatics in the way of foreignization. “轻功” is a real Chinese Kung fu. Practicing it does not make weight loss, but can help people greatly improve running, jumping, dodging and moving ability, even stand or walk on tiny things. Most foreigners are learning Taekwondo and boxing, the main physical training way of which is running, rope skipping and sticking sandbags. These two physical training methods are quite different, so it is very difficult for the westerners to imagine and understand “轻功”. From the perspective of cultural dimension, the translator tries to convey its cultural connotation.

[4] 冤冤相报何时了。 Vengeance has a way of rebounding upon oneself.

---- *The Forbidden Kingdom*

The translator uses a figurative rhetorical technique and translates the verb “冤” in example [4] into a noun "vengeance" and the verb “报” into "rebound", showing that the vengeance is like a ball rebounding to oneself. If translated in the way of foreignization, it would be quite ordinary: “When will the vengeance end?” This Chinese idiom appears when Jin Yanzi saw Jade General killing innocent people, she scolded him and wanted to kill him for revenge. But the monk advised her to give up her own hatred and told her that killing each other never has the end. Domestication here helps readers understand the Chinese idiom better as well as enhances the readability and appreciation.

[5] 春卷特工队，送外卖咯！ Spring roll squad. Time for takeout!

---- *Kung Fu Panda 3*

In example [5], translating the Chinese food “春卷” into “Spring roll” completely adopts foreignization method. It is a signal to call out the pandas in a rolling queue to fight against their enemy. “春卷” is a traditional Chinese food for folk festival, which is quite popular in the whole country, especially in southern China. “春卷” has a long history, evolving from ancient spring pancake. It has fillings like vegetables, meat or vermicelli inside the fried thin piece of flour skin, usually in the shape of rectangular. In the movie scene, the panda villagers rolled together, looking like the shape of “春卷”. Although there are sandwiches in English, their difference is relatively large and there is no corresponding expression of “春卷” in English. Foreignization conserves the exotic color of Chinese elements, and "roll" shows the action very vividly.

[6] 一山不能容二虎。 Two tigers cannot live on the same mountain.

---- *The Forbidden Kingdom*

Direct translation of example [6] is completely faithful to the original text. Since the sentence meaning is straightforward, foreignization strategy can help the audience understand and appreciate the cultural connotation of Chinese proverb, strengthening the whole film effects. Example [6] appeared in the scene that Micheal's two Gong fu teachers, Lu yan and the monk disputed about martial arts. This Chinese proverb means that two strong people can not be compatible and tend to make conflicts. From this example, we can see that foreignization is a good translation strategy when the images are the same or similar in the two cultural contexts at the same time.

3.3 Communicative Dimension

Language is born for communication. The adaptive transformation of communicative dimension is the translator's adaptation and selection of communicative intention in the translation process (Hu, 2011). The translated version aims to supply the audience with the same or similar feelings and expectations to achieve successive communication. In this dimension, the realization of communicative intention is the basis and communicative effect requires a higher level.

[7] 她真是花容月貌，她真是美若天仙！ She is amazing. She is so beautiful!

[8] 你真是让我丢尽颜面！ You dishonor me!

[9] 我自有分寸！ I know my place!

---- *Mulan*

Appropriate omission in film translation can give the audience a better understanding as long as following the progression of conversation. In the above three cases, limited by time and space of the film scene, the translator cannot interpret Chinese elements "花容月貌", "美若天仙", "颜面" and "分寸" in details. The translator accurately grasps the adaptability of communicative dimension, get the profound understanding of the source language lines, then translates them into highly-used English words “amazing”, ”beautiful”, ”dishonor”, “place”. Example [7] was said to show Mulan's beauty in front of everyone. Example [8] was said by Mulan's father when he knew Mulan was

discovered being dressed as a man in the army. And Example [9] was said by Mulan when she was misunderstood by others. Here the translator gives priority to the communicative intention instead of cultural connotation to help the foreigners understand its communicative meaning.

[10] 难道就是让你耍耍花拳绣腿，满镇子乱跑跟兔子耍帅吗？

So you can spend your day kicking butt? And running through town high-fiving bunnies?

---- *Kung Fu Panda 3*

“花拳绣腿” refers to good-looking but useless fighting postures, a metaphor to nice-looking but trashy work. Master Oog way asked Po to teach five kung fu Masters in "Peaceful Valley", but Po slacked off and was just addicted to his Dragon Warrior glory. So Master used example [10] to criticize him. The translator translates “花拳绣腿” into “kicking butt”, lively showing Po’s making trouble and idling about, which is easy for western audience to understand. What’s more, it adds a sense of humor so that the communicative effect is well realized.

4. Conclusion

The process of translation is the process of translator's selection and adaptation. A translator should not only adapt to the eco-environment, including all factors like the language, culture, society, but also make a good balance between the three dimensions by using his bilingual conversion of the two languages. What needs to pay attention to is that there is no absolute bound in the three dimensions. The translator chooses the optimal dimension according to the overall effect of the film scene. The evaluation criterion depends on the degree of holistic adaptation and selection, which consists of three aspects: degree of multi-dimensional transformation, reader’s feedback and translator quality. The more dimensions the translated text realizes, the higher the translation quality will be. Only by selecting the appropriate expression can the original text, the translated text and the translator survive in the ecological environment of the whole translation.

From the above analysis, we conclude that eco-translatology has a good adaptability to the translation of Chinese elements in American movies and a strong explanatory power to the translation of Chinese traditional culture. It can serve as a good guidance on the translation of Chinese elements in films. The translator should make adaptive selections in the three dimensions and choose the best translation strategy in order to ensure the high quality and level of translation.

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