

A Study on Subtitle Translation Strategies of *Farewell My Concubine* under the Cultural Translation Theory

Rui Fu^{1*}

¹ College of Foreign Studies, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, China

Email Address

1048812535@qq.com (Rui Fu)

*Correspondence: 1048812535@qq.com

Received: 1 September 2023; **Accepted:** 23 September 2023; **Published:** 18 October 2023

Abstract:

With the rapid development of new media and other communication methods, film and television productions have become crucial avenues for cultural expression and dissemination. “Farewell My Concubine,” directed by Chen Kaige and released in 1993, is an artistic cinematic masterpiece. This film was screened in multiple countries and regions worldwide, garnering the prestigious Golden Palm Award at the Cannes Film Festival. Throughout this process, the quality of subtitle translation directly determined the success of cultural exportation. Susan Bassnett’s perspective on cultural translation underscores the significance of culture in the translation process. This paper, employing a literature review approach, investigates the strategies employed in the subtitle translation of “Farewell My Concubine,” including omission, addition, and free translation. The aim is to provide insights for the translation of Chinese films into English, while also encouraging more scholars to focus on the field of English translation of Chinese cinema.

Keywords:

Cultural Translation, Subtitle Translation, *Farewell, My Concubine*

1. Introduction

The film “Farewell, My Concubine,” directed by Chen Kaige and released in 1993, stands as a significant piece of cinematic artistry. Through the narrative of the iconic Peking opera actors Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, the film not only showcases the traditional Chinese Peking opera culture but also delves into the intricacies of human existence within a specific historical context, prompting contemplation on the essence of humanity. The translator behind this cinematic masterpiece is the Australian sinologist and translation expert, Jia Peilin. The global success of “Farewell My Concubine” owes much to her exceptional subtitling translations.

Subtitling translation sets itself apart from other forms of textual translation due to the constraints of time, space, and culture. These constraints necessitate that translators navigate their unique challenges while preserving the essence of the original content. This paper, guided by Susan Bassnett’s perspective on cultural

translation, analyzes the translation strategies employed in the English subtitles of “Farewell, My Concubine.” These strategies encompass methods such as omission, addition, and free translation, all of which contribute to providing a reference for the translation of Chinese-language cinema. It is hoped that an increasing number of scholars will direct their attention to the realm of Chinese film subtitle translation, thereby enabling the world to savor the richness of Chinese culture.

2. Materials and Methods

This article primarily adopts the research method of literature review. Upon conducting a keyword search for “film subtitle translation,” a total of 1248 relevant journal articles and papers were retrieved. Within the domestic academic landscape, scholars predominantly approach the study of film subtitle translation from the perspectives of translation theory and practice. [1] Research encompasses various facets of film translation, including linguistic characteristics, instances of mistranslation, and translation strategies. [2]

However, with the elevation of China’s cultural soft power and the bolstering of national cultural confidence, an increasing number of scholars are turning their attention to the domain of English translation of Chinese films. It’s noteworthy that, under the current keyword search, as many as 29 research articles solely from the year 2023 have emerged, delving into the English translation of Chinese films. These articles encompass highly distinctive Chinese cultural films like “Mulan,” “The Chinese Doctor,” “Me and My Father,” and meticulously examine their subtitle translation.

Yet, it’s worth noting that when utilizing the keyword “Farewell, My Concubine subtitles,” the search reveals only 11 academic journal articles and 10 master’s theses over the past decade dedicated to the English translation of this film. [4] Consequently, the academic community also needs to fortify research efforts concerning such immensely insightful film subtitle translation. This endeavor will ultimately facilitate enhanced guidance for the English translation of a wider spectrum of cinematic works.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Translation Strategies within the Framework of Cultural Translation Theories:

Since its inception, Bassnett’s cultural translation theories have garnered substantial global recognition, prompting a reconsideration of the discipline of translation studies. Cultural translation theories posit that translation is far from a mere linguistic conversion; rather, it constitutes an action deeply rooted in culture, seeking to achieve functional equivalence between source and target languages. Firstly, translation must be approached as a cultural unit, as language is intricately interwoven within culture, forming an inseparable bond. Secondly, translation is a communicative process; it transcends a mere transmutation between languages. Moreover, translation involves cultural transformation, necessitating the discovery of expressions in the target language that correspond equivalently to those in the source language—a pivotal aspect. Ultimately, the objective of translation is to meet the cultural demands of various time periods and diverse groups. In light of these principles, it becomes evident that, in order to achieve the objectives of intercultural communication, translators must accomplish equivalence at both linguistic and cultural levels throughout the translation process.

3.1.1 Omission

The strategy operates on the consideration of time and space limitations inherent to film subtitles. It entails the judicious reduction of the source dialogue during translation, capturing the essential meaning of extended lines. This approach facilitates swift comprehension for the audience within a brief span, ensuring alignment with the narrative flow.

Example 1

Original line: 角儿来了，角儿来了！这儿有近道，走近道！

Translation: the stars have arrived! Here, come this way.

At the beginning of the film, when the young Cheng Dieyi and his friend Xiaolaizi encounter a street performance troupe on their way, the road is congested to the point of being impassable. Xiaolaizi points to a shortcut and remarks, indicating a repetition in the original lines. However, the translator did not render it as “the stars have arrived! the stars have arrived! here is a shortcut, and Let’s go this way!” The omitted translation not only accurately conveys the meaning but also maintains visual parallelism with the original text.

Example 2

Original line: 什么下三滥玩意儿！敢给我在这人露脸？

Translation: Trash! how dare you show yourself around here?

This line is spoken by an audience member during the street performance of the opera troupe’s children. The translator rendered “什么下三滥玩意儿！” as “trash” instead of a literal translation like “What the hell is it.” In doing so, the translator succinctly captures the essence of “下三滥,” conveying its core meaning straightforwardly by transforming a short sentence into a single word, maintaining simplicity while retaining the intended message.

Example 3

Original line: 扔出去的 可都是白花花响当当的大洋啊

Translation: spend lots of money.

This line is spoken when Duan Xiaolou goes to the brothel to resolve a matter for Miss Juxian, and others attempt to corner him. In the translation process, the adjectives “白花花” and “响当当” were omitted by the translator. Instead, the core meaning of the sentence, “花了很多钱”(spent a lot of money), was directly translated. This approach not only circumvented the complexities of Chinese reduplicated words but also allowed native English-speaking viewers to immediately grasp the intended meaning. Therefore, in handling subtitle translation, it’s appropriate to judiciously omit some figurative modifiers.

Example 4

Original line: 没学过啊？那就别洒狗血了

Translation: Just the way you’re overplaying your part.

The scene for this line is when Juxian comes to the theater with the intention of having Duan Xiaolou marry her. They perform a “tragic drama,” and at this moment, Dieyi slightly sarcastically addresses her with this line. The translator chose not to

render it as “You did not learn how to perform. So...” Instead, the expression “没学过啊？” was omitted, yet the translation retains the original line’s meaning intact. Thus, in subtitle translation, it is appropriate to judiciously omit certain colloquial expressions that do not affect the meaning or the narrative, ensuring that the translation remains concise.

Example 5

Original line: 你可真是不疯魔不成活啊

Translation: You really are obsessed.

The context for this line is that Duan Xiaolou is compelled to perform a play with Xiao Si, who was a child they rescued but later betrayed them, taking the role that was originally meant for Dieyi. Dieyi feels tormented, and Xiaolou believes he’s still living within the confines of the opera. In translating this line, the translator used “obsessed” to convey the notion of “不疯魔不成活” (literally, “won’t live if not act the role”), allowing the target language audience to understand Dieyi’s continued existence “within the opera.” The translation of this line is well-handled and to some extent achieves cultural equivalence.

3.1.2 Addition

The addition strategy refers to the process in which the translator needs to augment the translation with additional layers of meaning present in the original dialogue and information lost in translation. Jia Peilin mentioned during an interview, “English subtitles serve to supplement the information conveyed by the Chinese subtitles. If something isn’t expressed in the Chinese subtitles, it should be appropriately supplemented to aid international viewers’ comprehension” [3]. As Chinese is a contextual language, the lines spoken by characters often require a degree of inference. Therefore, during the translation process, the translator should introduce supplementary vocabulary to help the target audience grasp the narrative effectively.

Example 6

Original line: 都是下九流，谁嫌弃谁呀？

Translation: Prostitutes and actors are equally despised by society .

When Dieyi and Xiaodouzi were young, Dieyi’s mother sent them to the opera troupe to learn singing, hoping the master wouldn’t reject them and would take them in. At this moment, the master spoke this line to their mother. The translator didn’t translate “we are both despised by society, so I...” directly. Instead, she added “Prostitutes and actors,” accurately indicating the identities of the two characters in the conversation, as well as the societal disapproval of these identities at that time. This translation approach, to some extent, supplements the lost information, enabling the target language audience to better understand the plot.

Example 7

Original line: 实在是男孩大了留不住 这才来投奔您来了

Translation: but he’s going too big to keep at the brothel

The dialogue occurs when Xiaodouzi’s mother brings him to the opera troupe, seeking for the master to accept Xiaodouzi. The translator supplemented the original phrase “keep at the brothel.” While this sentence is easily comprehensible for a

Chinese audience, native English speakers might struggle to grasp the meaning of “留不住” (literally, “cannot keep”). This addition provides necessary context, aiding viewers in swiftly understanding the plot, especially considering the cultural background that might be missing for English-speaking audiences.

Example 8

Original line: 呦，我哪儿学过戏呀？

Translation: Me, study opera? What makes you think I studied opera?

The scenario for this line is when Juxian urges Duan Xiaolou to marry her and they enact a “play” backstage at the theater. In a slightly sardonic tone, Dieyi asks her if she’s learned opera, to which Juxian responds with a line. The translator didn’t render this as “I never studied opera.” Instead, she introduced an interrogative sentence, which, in fact, contributes to the coherence of the preceding and following plot. Immediately after, Dieyi expresses his attitude towards Juxian. Thus, the addition of this interrogative sentence in the translation supplements the original information, enhancing narrative continuity and facilitating smoother comprehension for English-speaking audiences.

Example 9

Original line: 你忙你的去吧

Translation: Go help Dieyi if he’s more important to you.

The dialogue takes place when Duan Xiaolou and Dieyi are performing on the theater stage. A group of Nationalist soldiers causes a disturbance, leading to a brawl between the two sides. Dieyi is arrested, and Juxian suffers a miscarriage after being pushed down while trying to reach Xiaolou on stage. In this context, the line isn’t simply translated the line into “you can deal with your own business.” Translating it in this way would cause confusion among the audience, as it wouldn’t make sense for her to say that while facing a miscarriage. The translator handled it as “Go help Dieyi if he’s more important to you.” When both Dieyi and Juxian are simultaneously in distress, Juxian’s expression conveys a sense of grievance and disappointment. This translation choice is quite logical, allowing native English-speaking viewers to instantly understand the characters’ emotions and situations depicted on screen, thus compensating for the original line’s ambiguity.

Example 10

Original line: 不顺着他能成吗？

Translation: You have to get along with it! What else can you do?

This line occurs in the context of Scene 3.1, Example 5, where Duan Xiaolou apologizes to Cheng Dieyi, explaining that he had no choice but to perform with Xiaosi. Following this line, the translator added, “what else can you do?” to convey Xiaolou’s sense of helplessness and desperation. This addition subtly encapsulates the societal changes of the time, where individuals had to conform to circumstances beyond their control. It strongly evokes emotional resonance in the audience, while also echoing Xiaolou’s innocent expression in the scene, effectively supplementing the original text’s meaning.

3.1.3 Free Translation

Free translation refers to the practice of reshaping the language and structure of a text to better align with the linguistic norms and cultural nuances of the target language readers. This approach is applied when there exists significant cultural disparity between the source and target languages. Particularly prevalent when dealing with idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and sayings in Chinese, which are diverse and intricate, free translation aims to ensure cultural equivalence and facilitate cultural dissemination by departing from the literal form of the source text. This strategy is essential for bridging cultural gaps and promoting effective cross-cultural communication in translation.

Example 11

Original line: 人得自个人成全自个儿

Translation: Each person is responsible for his or her own fate

This line occurs when the master of the opera troupe is instructing the children that if they want to become skilled performers, they must practice diligently and not be afraid of hardships. The term “成全” carries a distinct Chinese cultural connotation. The translator did not confine themselves to a literal rendering but instead sought an expression in English that aligns with the intended meaning. “Be responsible for one’s action” signifies that you contribute to every situation and consequently bear some degree of responsibility for the outcomes or consequences. [5] From the perspective of an English-speaking audience, this line implies that regardless of whether one becomes a skilled performer or fades into the crowd, one must seek reasons within oneself. In this context, the translation effectively achieves cultural equivalence.

Example 12

Original line: 急急风催半天了

Translation: The orchestra’s been warming up for ages.

This line occurs when Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi are preparing backstage for their performance, and the theater staff rushes Xiaolou. “急急风” is a percussive technique used in traditional Chinese opera, specifically in Peking opera, to signal actors to go on stage. If translated literally as “急急风,” the term wouldn’t be understandable for the target audience, and due to time and space constraints, providing annotations like other texts might not be feasible. Thus, a process of free translation is necessary. In this case, the translator rendered it as “The orchestra,” achieving cultural equivalence.

Example 13

Original line: 要不是你在楼底下接着 我早就入土了

Translation: If you hadn’t caught me, I’d be six feet under by now.

This line is spoken by Juxian to Duan Xiaolou. The original phrase “入土” carries a distinct Chinese cultural connotation, representing a euphemism for “death.” In this context, the translator chose to render it as “be six feet under,” which in English means “dead and buried.” [6] This usage of the phrase effectively achieves cultural equivalence.

Example 14

Original line: 那杯定亲酒 可是你先喝了一半

Translation: Remember, it was you who proposed to me.

This dialogue comes from the same storyline as Example 3 in Scene 3.3. The original term “定亲酒” holds a distinct Chinese cultural imagery, referring to the wine consumed during the engagement ceremony, signifying that the marriage arrangement has been settled. In translation, the term is rendered as “propose to me,” [7] which in English means “ask that person to marry you.” This choice of phrasing successfully achieves cultural equivalence.

4. Conclusions

The global popularity of “Farewell My Concubine” hinges not only on the film’s visual presentation, exceptional performances by the actors, and profound themes, but also on the outstanding translation of its dialogues. In the era of new media development, the translation of dialogue in cinematic works should garner extensive scholarly attention. Susan Bassnett’s cultural translation perspective has played a crucial guiding role in various forms of cultural exchange and dissemination, emphasizing the translator’s role as a bridge between two cultures to achieve cultural equivalence and facilitate linguistic communication.

This paper, from the standpoint of cultural translation theory, analyzes the translation work of Jia Peilin for the film “Farewell My Concubine,” outlining three primary translation strategies for film dialogues: omission, addition, and free translation. These strategies offer feasible approaches for film subtitle translation. The intention of this paper is to provide substantial insights into the study of subtitle translation strategies, with the hope that more scholars will engage in research on subtitle translation for Chinese domestic films, further promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture abroad.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Ai, T.Z.; Li, X.B. A Study of Translation Strategies for Peking Opera from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics: A Case Study of the English Translation of “Farewell My Concubine.” *Chinese Character Culture*, 2022, 20, 146-148.
- [2] Jin, H.N. From “Farewell My Concubine” to “The Grandmaster”: An Interview with Film Translator Linda Jaivin. *Chinese Translation*, 2013, 04.
- [3] Hu, Z.H. A Contrastive Analysis of Subtitle Translation in the Film “Farewell My Concubine from the Perspective of Domestication. *Overseas English*, 09, 99-100.
- [4] Yang, Y. A Review of Film Subtitle Translation. *Journal of Southwest Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2006, 04, 93-97.
- [5] Available online: <https://www.niagarainstitute.com/blog/take-responsibility-for-your-actions> (accessed on 20 September 2023).

- [6] Available online: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/be-six-feet-under> (accessed on 20 September 2023).
- [7] Available online: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/propose> (accessed on 20 September 2023).



© 2023 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)