

A Study on Variational Translation Strategies in the Documentary *Festive China*

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Abstract:

In recent years, China has attached growing importance to the translation and international dissemination of its traditional culture. Documentaries have increasingly played a crucial role in cross-cultural communication. This study takes the bilingual documentary *Festive China* produced by *China Daily* as its research object, analyzing its subtitle translation within the theoretical framework of Huang Zhonglian's Variational Translation Theory. By adopting a mixed method of statistical analysis and case study, the research investigates the application and motivations of seven adaptation techniques: Amplification, Omission, Edition, Narration, Condensation, Combination, and Rewriting in the translation process. The findings reveal that Amplification is the most frequently used strategy, accounting for 38.46%, primarily compensating for cultural absence and facilitating intercultural understanding. Omission and Rewriting rank second and third, serving to refine information and reconstruct discourse structures to enhance communicative efficiency and acceptability for target audience. The study demonstrates that subtitle translation in cultural documentaries must not only convey linguistic information but also achieve cultural interpretation within limited textual space. It further confirms the applicability of Variational Translation Theory to the external communication of Chinese culture and provides a referential paradigm for similar translation practices.

Keywords:

Variational Translation Theory, Documentary Translation, Cultural Communication, *Festive China*, Subtitle Translation

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed China's growing commitment to the global promotion of its traditional culture. The development of Chinese traditional culture embodies the virtues of the Chinese people, taking forms on language, writing, folk customs, and festivals [1]. Nowadays, mainstream media has become an important carrier for disseminating excellent Chinese traditional culture. In the context of global digitalization, effectively utilizing digital communication platforms has become a key

approach to enhancing the international influence of Chinese culture [2]. Short videos, characterized by their brevity, originality, flexibility, and personalized expression, have emerged as one of the most widely used and frequently consumed media forms in the era of omni-media [3]. As a type of short video, documentaries serve as a medium through which modern society can connect with history and tradition, becoming an important means of preserving national spirit and strengthening cultural memory [4]. The documentary *Festive China* consists of twelve short episodes. Each episode features a large number of culture-loaded terms, festival customs, folktales, and historical allusions, all of which increase both the difficulty of comprehension and translation. Therefore, how to translate such content appropriately is of vital importance. The study takes *Festive China* as its research corpus, and adopts the theoretical perspective of Huang Zhonglian's Variational Translation Theory to explore how flexible translation strategies can be applied to cultural texts. It further aims to provide insights for subtitle translation of other Chinese cultural documentaries so as to achieve optimal results in the external communication of Chinese traditional culture.

2. Corpus Selection

Festive China is a bilingual (Chinese-English) documentary produced by *China Daily*, introducing China's traditional festivals and celebrations. The series consists of twelve episodes with a total duration of 45 minutes. Each episode presents a different festival or celebration, such as the 24 Solar Terms, Spring Festival and Double Ninth Festival [5]. As an important form of cultural promotion, the documentary showcases the richness and depth of Chinese traditional culture alongside its modern development, offering audiences a vivid picture of China's diverse cultural world. The documentary employs an innovative combination of animation and live-action footage to present the historical background, cultural origins, and traditional customs of Chinese festivals. With its high-quality production and engaging bilingual subtitles, *Festive China* captivates audiences while fostering a deeper understanding of Chinese traditional culture. The twelve episodes are titled: 24 Solar Terms, Spring, Qingming, Summer, Dragon Boat Festival, Qixi Festival, Autumn, Mid-Autumn Festival, The Double Ninth Festival, Winter, Spring Festival, and Lantern Festival.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Overview of Variational Translation Theory

Variational Translation Theory, as an emerging translation theory, was proposed by Professor Huang Zhonglian of Central China Normal University in the late 1990s. Drawing on extensive translation practice and numerous translation cases, Huang summarized and extracted general translation principles. In 1999, he introduced the concept of "Variational Translation" [6], and in 2002 he further elaborated seven adaptation techniques: Amplification, Omission, Edition, Narration, Condensation, Combination, and Rewriting, as well as eleven variational translation methods [7]. Eventually, these ideas were systematically expounded in his book *Variational Translation Theory*, forming a complete theoretical framework [8]. Later, Huang supplemented his theory in the article *A Comparative Study of Variational Translation Methods*, where he formally added Imitation as the eighth adaptation technique [9]. According to Huang, Variational Translation Theory is a theoretical system derived from translation practice, reflecting the essence and regularities of

variational translation. It takes variational translation as its object of study, focusing on the general characteristics and laws of variation in the translation process, and seeks universal principles and methods applicable to all adaptation techniques. The key lies in the character “variation”, which, as Huang explained, refers to adaptation and flexibility. Variation implies a compromise or balanced solution acceptable to different parties. It is a skill and an art, requiring sensitivity to context and flexible application. First, the translator must evaluate the information to determine whether variation is possible and under what conditions. Second, the translator must choose what to vary, how to vary it, and for whom the variation is made. Finally, timing and operational control are crucial for effective application. Therefore, variation is never arbitrary; its effective use represents a sophisticated art. From Huang’s explanation, it is clear that variational translation refers to the flexible adaptation of the source text in order to meet the specific needs of particular conditions and target readers.

3.2. Eight Adaptation Techniques

Variational translation comprises eight adaptation techniques: Amplification, Omission, Edition, Narration, Condensation, Combination, Rewriting, and Imitation [10]. Their definitions are as follows:

(1) Amplification: Including explanation, commentary, or elaboration. It refers to adding interpretive information in the target text to clarify certain parts of the source text.

(2) Omission: Omitting information deemed unnecessary for target readers. The purpose is to highlight the essential and valuable information while eliminating redundancy.

(3) Edition: Editing or restructuring the original content to improve its clarity, coherence, and functionality. This includes selection, arrangement, rewriting, or adjustment.

(4) Narration: Retelling or paraphrasing the content in the target language, often at the expense of the original form. It may involve indirect or directed reformulation.

(5) Condensation: Compressing the source content into a more concise form. The target text becomes shorter and more compact while retaining the core meaning.

(6) Combination: This technique merges thematically or logically connected source text segments into one integrated unit.

(7) Rewriting: Making changes to the content or form of the original text, including substitution, adaptation, or transformation.

(8) Imitation: Modeling the form or content of the source text to produce a new translation that reflects its style or essence.

From the definitions above, it is evident that Variational Translation Theory is characterized by great flexibility, representing a deepened understanding of translation and reflecting a reader-centered approach. The eight adaptation techniques are not mutually exclusive but interconnected and often overlap in practical application.

4. Analysis of Variational Translation Strategies in *Festive China*

4.1. Statistical analysis

Before proceeding to textual analysis, this study conducts a systematic statistical examination of the adaptation techniques employed in the English translation of the documentary series *Festive China*, within the framework of Huang Zhonglian's Variational Translation Theory. By quantitatively calculating the distribution frequency of different variation strategies, this analysis demonstrates the applicability of Variational Translation Theory in guiding the external communication of Chinese traditional culture. At the same time, it reveals the patterns of variation techniques adopted in cultural documentaries to facilitate the dissemination of Chinese culture. The statistical data are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. *Frequency of Adaptation techniques.*

Adaptation Techniques	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Bar Chart
Amplification	15	38.46	
Omission	7	17.95	
Rewriting	6	15.38	
Edition	5	12.82	
Narration	3	7.69	
Condensation	2	5.13	
Combination	1	2.56	
Imitation	0	0	—

Note: One  represents 1 unit; total frequency = 39.

As can be seen from Table 1, two sets of data stand out prominently. The adaptation technique of Amplification was used most frequently in the documentary, occurring 15 times and accounting for 38.46 %. This high frequency reflects the distinctive nature of the cultural text: it involves a large amount of background knowledge, connotations, historical allusions, and folk proverbs. Consequently, the translation often resorts to “Amplification” in order to supplement information that might otherwise hinder audience comprehension. By contrast, the technique of Imitation was not employed (0 times), indicating that the documentary prioritizes innovative forms of expression to achieve effective cultural communication rather than relying on literal imitation. The second most frequently used strategy is Omission (7 times, 17.95%). This can be explained by the inherent complexity of Chinese traditional culture, which cannot be fully conveyed within the limited space of subtitles. In such cases, Omission helps distill the text by retaining only the most essential information, ensuring that the audience grasps the core meaning within the constraints of subtitle length.

The third and fourth most common strategies are Rewriting (6 times, 15.38%) and Edition (5 times, 12.82%). Both involve restructuring or reshaping the original form. Since the narration of the documentary frequently employs semantically rich, paratactic sentences, it is often necessary to restructure the discourse according to the cultural expectations of the target audience. This may involve altering the order of clauses or extracting logical relations. When expressions might otherwise confuse international viewers, Rewriting is adopted to clarify meaning and facilitate cultural interpretation. Finally, given that Imitation was not employed in the documentary, the subsequent case analysis focuses on the other seven adaptation techniques.

4.2. Case Analysis of Adaptation Techniques in *Festive China*

After conducting preliminary statistical analysis and interpretation of the data, this section turns to case studies in order to examine the motivations behind the application of various adaptation techniques. The study focuses on how strategic variation can effectively facilitate the communication of cultural information. Finally, this section summarizes how to employ optimal models of variation in translating Chinese cultural documentaries for cross-cultural communication, thereby achieving the dual goals of preserving cultural characteristics while ensuring accessibility for international audiences.

4.2.1. Amplification

Amplification refers to the deliberate supplementation, expansion, or reinforcement of information on the basis of the original text so that the translation better conforms to the cognitive needs and cultural context of the target audience.

Example 1

ST: 贴春联等。

TT: and put up Spring Festival couplets (blessing words posted on door frames).

Episode 11 introduces China's grandest festival—the Spring Festival, where putting up couplets is a traditional custom. In this case, the translator adds an explanatory note “blessing words posted on door frames” to overcome the cultural barrier posed by the culture-specific item “春联”. The value of this strategy lies in retaining the culturally significant term Spring Festival couplets while simultaneously conveying its material form (texts posted on door frames) and cultural function (carrying blessings). This approach is not mere expansion but a cultural reconstruction based on the cognitive needs of the target audience. It avoids cultural estrangement caused by literal translation and prevents cultural distortion from excessive domestication, thereby achieving an optimal balance between intelligibility and authenticity within the limited space of subtitles. By concretizing an abstract cultural symbol into a tangible and emotionally resonant image (blessing words), the translation successfully builds a bridge of cultural understanding.

Example 2

ST: 玉帝得知后震怒，强行拆散了这对夫妻。

TT: The Jade Emperor strongly objected to the couple's union and forcibly separated them by the Milky Way.

Episode 6 recounts the legend of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, associated with the Qixi Festival (Chinese Valentine's Day). The addition of “by the Milky Way” makes explicit a crucial cultural reference implicit in the source text, namely the role of the Milky Way in separating the couple. This addition is essential, since the Milky Way forms the spatial foundation for the later motif of “The Magpie Bridge Rendezvous.” It establishes narrative coherence for international audiences unfamiliar with the Chinese Mythological stories. Compared with literal translation, which might leave cultural gaps, the explicit mention of the Milky Way connects with Western astronomical imagery while highlighting the uniqueness of Chinese mythology. This culturally compensatory addition achieves equivalent transmission of the myth's deep structure and exemplifies a typical strategy for addressing cultural defaults in external communication.

Example 3

ST: 到“霜降”时，天气比以前冷得多。

TT: Starting with Frost's Descent, the weather turns much colder and the first frost comes.

Episode 7 discusses seasonal changes in autumn. The translation retains the culture-specific term “Frost's Descent” while adding “and the first frost comes”. This amplification serves two communicative purposes: conceptually, it links the solar term to a recognizable natural phenomenon, enabling target audiences to grasp the abstract calendrical concept through observable changes; culturally, it converts a symbolic temporal marker into a universally perceivable climatic event. This approach both preserves cultural authenticity and enhances cross-cultural intelligibility, demonstrating the effective strategy of combining term retention with feature explanation for the external dissemination of intangible cultural heritage such as the 24 Solar Terms.

4.2.2. Omission

Omission refers to the purposeful deletion, compression, or omission of redundant, secondary, or culturally opaque content, thereby improving communicative efficiency and adapting to the needs of the target audience.

Example 4

ST: 而北方则吃饺子，有“喜庆团圆”和“吉祥如意”的寓意。

TT: Those in north China often eat dumplings which symbolize “reunion” and “fortune”.

Episode 11 explains the different food traditions of northern and southern China during the Spring Festival. In the source text, the two four-character idioms are reduced to two concise English words. This reflects the principle of functional priority in Variational Translation Theory. The translation distills the key cultural connotations: “reunion” conveys the emotional essence of family togetherness, while “fortune” captures the cultural expectation of auspiciousness. By omitting the less critical modifiers (“joyful” and “wishful”), the translation avoids overloading the audience with redundant cultural nuances while ensuring immediate comprehension of the dumplings' symbolic meaning. The concise word choices also conform to English rhetorical conventions, producing a smoother subtitle rhythm.

Example 5

ST: 软糯弹牙的外皮带着悠长的艾草香味，细腻的豆沙馅甜而不腻。

TT: The combination of its soft and chewy dough, with sweet and smooth fillings makes it a delicious light snack.

Episode 3 describes Qingtuan, a traditional Qingming Festival delicacy. The phrase “带着悠长的艾草香味” (carrying the lingering aroma of mugwort) is omitted in translation. This reflects the principles of purposefulness and economy. Since the preparation of Qingtuan with mugwort juice had already been emphasized earlier, repeating the aroma would be redundant. Instead, the translator highlights texture and taste which are more relatable to English-speaking audiences and align with conventional English descriptions of food. This reduction ensures that the translation conveys the core message of Qingtuan's distinctive flavor while adapting expression for cross-cultural accessibility.

4.2.3. *Rewriting*

Rewriting involves adjusting, reorganizing, or changing the form or content of the source text to overcome cultural barriers and suit the cognitive habits of the target audience.

Example 6

ST: 中国人通过观察太阳的运动轨迹，创立了二十四节气这个古老而科学的时间制度。

TT: Ancient Chinese people created an overall framework to mark the annual passage of time based on observation of the sun's motion, called "the 24 solar terms."

Here, "这个古老而科学的时间制度" is altered to "an overall framework to mark the annual passage of time". The phrase "overall framework" better emphasizes the integrative function of the system, while "mark the annual passage of time" recasts a static "system" into a dynamic process more in line with English readers' perception of natural phenomena. This rewriting faithfully conveys the core function of the 24 Solar Terms while enhancing clarity and accessibility.

Example 7

ST: 因为它承载着关于牛郎和织女的古老爱情传说故事。

TT: Many different stories lay claim to being the origin of the festival.

Episode 6 tells the legend of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl during the Qixi Festival. In contrast, the translation generalizes this to "many different stories." This alteration avoids privileging a single narrative, allowing space for a pluralistic understanding of the festival's origins. The phrase "lay claim to being the origin" maintains the idea of cultural derivation while aligning with Western traditions of multi-source mythologies. This strategy prevents potential cultural estrangement by reframing the festival as rooted in diverse stories, ensuring both cultural validity and cross-cultural acceptability.

4.2.4. *Edition*

Edition refers to the systematic rearrangement or restructuring of the original content in order to enhance communicative effectiveness. Its core lies in breaking the linearity of the source text and re-creating the discourse according to the cognitive patterns of the target audience.

Example 8

ST: 它通过特殊的节令食物和文化仪式提示人们顺应季节的交替。

TT: They remind people to adapt to the changes in the seasons through suitable foods and cultural rituals.

Episode 1 tells about the 24 Solar Terms, demonstrates a shift in weather order. The original causal chain "food + rituals → seasonal change" is reorganized into "seasonal change → food + rituals." This corresponds to English information flow conventions, where known information precedes new information. Moreover, the active phrasing "adapt to" replaces the passive "remind," emphasizing human agency in responding to nature, which resonates with Western ecological perspectives. The reorganization preserves the core cultural concept of "following the seasons" while ensuring more natural comprehension for the target audience.

4.2.5. Narration

Narration refers to the indirect transmission of the source text through paraphrasing, explanation, or summarization. Its purpose is to transcend literal constraints and flexibly convey cultural meaning.

Example 9

ST: 他们将惜别团聚，满怀乡思。

TT: It is time to bid farewell to their families.

Episode 12 describes young people leaving home again after the Lantern Festival. The poetic and condensed expression “惜别团聚，满怀乡思” is restated as the more concrete action “bid farewell to their families”. This makes the abstract sentiment of parting sorrow more tangible and accessible. Furthermore, the addition of “it is time” makes explicit the implied temporal context of post-festival departure, compensating for background knowledge that target audiences may lack. This narration preserves the emotional core while optimizing cross-cultural communicability.

4.2.6. Condensation

Condensation is the process of compressing or summarizing the source text to retain its essential meaning while significantly reducing length.

Example 10

ST: 全家带着祭品前往墓地，清理坟墓周围的杂草以表达对逝者的敬意和缅怀，把美好的心愿告诉祖辈，保佑家族兴盛发展。

TT: Most of the time the whole family will go to the cemeteries with offerings, clean up weeds around the tombs and pray for family prosperity.

Episode 3 relates to the Qingming Festival custom of tomb sweeping. Since earlier narration had already conveyed that tomb sweeping is an act of respect and remembrance, the information of “以表达对逝者的敬意和缅怀” is deleted in the translation. Similarly, “把美好的心愿告诉祖辈” is omitted in the translated text. The culturally loaded phrase “保佑家族兴盛发展” is neutralized to “pray for family prosperity”, which conveys the core function of blessing while avoiding potential misinterpretations of ancestor worship. Such condensation is not simple omission but a selective refinement that ensures effective transmission of essential cultural information while optimizing brevity and clarity.

4.2.7. Combination

Combination refers to merging or integrating related or repetitive elements of the source text into a unified expression in the target text, thereby improving efficiency and conforming to the cognitive habits of the target audience.

Example 11

ST: 阳光灿烂 万物复苏 这正是欣赏春景的最好时机。

TT: The spring sunshine brings everything back to life, and the time is best to enjoy the beautiful scenes outside.

Episode 3 describes the clear weather during Qingming as an ideal time for outings. The original Chinese text presents three short parallel clauses to depict spring scenes, with loose structure but coherent imagery. The translation merges them into a single

and coherent English sentence, explicitly establishing causality while conforming to English's hierarchical syntax. “阳光灿烂” and “万物复苏” are integrated as “The spring sunshine brings everything back to life”, establishing a causal relationship between weather and nature in line with English preferences for logical connection. “欣赏春景的最好时机” is rendered as “the time is best to enjoy the beautiful scenes outside”, linked with the previous clause by “and” to create progression and avoid fragmentation.

5. Conclusions

Through a systematic analysis of the subtitle translation of *Festive China*, it can be observed that Variational Translation Theory provides flexible and effective strategic support for the foreign translation of cultural documentaries. Firstly, the statistical results show that the high frequency of the Amplification strategy highlights the importance of cultural information compensation. Given the film's extensive coverage of festival customs, historical allusions, and cultural symbols, translators often need to supplement background information or functional explanations in subtitles so that international audiences can establish a cognitive framework and accurately grasp the cultural connotations. This technique reflects the cultural interpretation function in cross-cultural communication. Secondly, the widespread use of Omission and Rewriting demonstrates the heavy reliance of subtitle translation on “economy” and “readability”. Due to limited subtitle space, redundant or overly rhetorical information must be omitted, while obscure or complex expressions require modification to achieve logical smoothness and cultural adaptation, ensuring that the translation is both expressive and easily comprehensible. Moreover, the flexible application of strategies such as Edition, Narration, Condensation, Combination further indicates that subtitle translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but a reorganization and recreation of source-language culture, reflecting the translator's agency and creativity.

Overall, the principle of flexible adaptation emphasized by Variational Translation Theory offers a solution that balances fidelity and communicative effectiveness in documentary translation. Its core value lies in preserving the uniqueness of Chinese culture while achieving effectiveness and acceptance in foreign communication. This study not only validates the practical value of Variational Translation Theory but also provides a reference pathway for the translation of other cultural documentaries.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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