The Untranslatability in Chinese-English Translation of Film Subtitles under the Perspective of Cultural Limitation—A Case Study of Empresses in the Palace

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Abstract. Promoting national TV dramas to the overseas markets becomes a new means to spread Chinese five-thousand-year culture and history, and broadcasting costume TV dramas in foreign countries in particular. Therefore, the importance of the precise and appropriate subtitle translation cannot be overemphasized. This thesis, from the cultural limitation perspective, takes the US version of Zhen Huan Zhuan, also called Empresses in the Palace, as an example and its lines as corpus to analyze the Chinese-English subtitles translations and expects to interpret the cultural untranslatability caused by cultural limitation.

Introduction

With the economic and cultural communication getting closer with foreign countries, more and more TV dramas such as Empresses in the Palace entered the international cultural market. However, due to the different historical backgrounds, social conditions, local customs, religions, language structures and thinking patterns, the cultural differences are resulted. To some extent, it is the cultural limitation that leads to the untranslatability and forms a barrier of the communication between different people with different cultures. Thus, the accuracy and high quality of subtitles as key tools to output our Chinese culture are highly required. To adapt to American audiences appreciate habits, US version Empresses in the Palace had a proper deletion of the original plot to make the story more compact, but it still retains the original Chinese characteristics, accompanied by English subtitles. After its release being unpopular in America, it's official English subtitles translation caused a lot of disputes and controversies at home and abroad.

In recent years, Culture Turn theory has arrested the attention of many translators, which is mainly used to aim at cultural shocks in translation and solve the untranslatable problem. Therefore, this thesis will combine the untranslatability of culture, culture turn theory and characteristics of subtitle translation together, and take some specific examples from Empresses in the Palace to analyze its Chinese-English subtitle translations strategies.

Culture Turn Theory and the Cultural Untranslatability

Sussan Bassnett and André Lefevere in 1990 firstly and formally put forward "Culture Turn", which marked a shift of emphasis from linguistic elements to cultural elements and placed translation activity into concrete cultural context and brought intercultural communication and sociology into translation. Meanwhile, in recent decades, it also has arrested the attention of many translators in China. Xu Yuanchong declares that translation is a re-creation. Liu Miqing established the theoretical framework of cultranslation in his book An Outlined Theory of Cultranslation which symbolized that the theoretical system of cultranslation came into being.

As Nida (2001: 82) pointed out, "For truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism, since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function"[1]. Jin (2003) suggests that every language has so-called culturally-loaded terms, which are
the symbolic representation of the value system, history, religion, customs, thinking patterns and life styles of that peculiar culture. Jin also points out not all culturally-loaded words have completely equivalent words to express the same meaning owing to the difference on culture[2]. Thus there is no valid way to realize one-to-one translation. They are mainly represented as follows: "the lack of expression, the different semantic association, and the different pragmatic meaning, which is the so-called "cultural untranslatability" (Yuan, 2010: 110)[3]. The social distance between Chinese culture and English culture is quite far away, which results in a huge difficulty in C-E and E-C translation (Li, 2010) [4].

**Characteristics of Subtitles Translation**

Subtitles is a kind of "constraint translation", regarding its limitations in time and space. It can only "consist of one or two lines of an average maximum length of 35 characters" (Gottlieb, 1998)[5]. Since people generally speak much faster than they read, subtitling inevitably involves textual constraints such as the need to reduce the original message as well as the technical constraints of shortage of screen space and lack of time. The subtitler endeavors to retain as much as possible of the original but has the usual translation problems of transfer between two languages and cultures compounded by the specific constraints. These constraints will affect the quality of subtitle translation.

In a sum, limited time, limited Space and cultural difference are three main characteristics of subtitle translation. Film subtitle often appears on the screen in a flash, the average time is between one and two seconds, so it is better to use short and familiar words, and the sentence should be simple and clear. The key point of subtitling translation is to be concise and appropriate. For the reason of cultural differences, the translator must take a full consideration to the environment of target language in the problem of cultural differences.

**The Untranslatability of Culture in Empresses in the Palace**

The interlocking, coherent and exciting plot and gorgeously graceful and beautiful vision of Empresses in the Palace attract numbers of audiences. Meaningful poetic drama lines and mixed literary and simple Chinese sentences increase the connotation and charm of this TV drama. Meanwhile it also reflects Chinese traditional costume, architecture, landscape, recreation, food, medicine, vessel, official, regulation system, title, customs, philosophy, poetry, verse, drama, music, painting, historical figures, etc., showing and representing well the profound beauty of Chinese tradition culture. In the process of external communication of this classic costume drama, although the 76 original drama set has been compressed into 6 episodes, which led to some cultural discount, it still contains thick Chinese culture no matter in background or in content. Therefore, the untranslatability could be seen everywhere in this whole work.

**The Untranslatability Caused by the Vacancy of Cultural Loaded Words**

"Empresses in the Palace" tells the story of love and hatred and power seizing and disputing at court during the Yong Zheng years of the Qing Dynasty in ancient China. Large amounts of court vocabularies are applied into this drama such as cultural loaded words of traditional Chinese medicine, perfume, spices and classical music. Among them, the court words are typical especially. The title of those imperial concubines, appellation, palace decoration, jewelry, food, etc. are totally vacant in English and American culture, which lead to untranslatability.

For instance, the identity change of Zhen Huan from "Chang zai, Gui ren, Pin, Fei and Gui fei" does not exist in the English medieval royal palace. In addition, in this play, the emperor declares himself as "Zhen", brothers of the emperor (Wang ye) declares themselves as "Ben wang", and officials claims themselves "Ben guan". Harem and concubines who are in "Fei" or above this level could call themselves as "Ben gong", to people who are in higher position like emperor and empress they call themselves as "Chen qie", and servants and maids call them "Niang niang". Concubines in "Pin" level
could call themselves as "Ben pin", to higher people call themselves as "Pin qie", and servants and maids call them "Xiao zhu". Concubines in lower level than "Pin" call themselves as "Wo", to higher ones call themselves as "Qie shen", and servants and maids call them "Xiao zhu". In English, people usually address noble woman as "My Lady" or "Madam". If the person is a member of the royal family, people usually use "Your Highness". Those complex titles are completely vacant in the western culture, so that we cannot find equivalent words in English.

In the drama, when imperial doctor intends to give a jade to Zhen Huan to show his love, he says, "Yi pian bing xin zai yu hu". The translation of it in Empresses in the Palace is "A jade vessel is the symbol of a pure heart." In Chinese, "Yu hu" means true, pure and faithful love. However, in English culture, jade does not refers to that.

Moreover, since western countries have different historical and cultural backgrounds from the ancient China, ways of greeting are also significantly different. For example, we can often hear "Huang shang wan fu jin an" in the drama. If we translate it literally like "Hope you 10000 luck and safety with gold", foreign audiences will feel confused. They may wonder what it matters with ten thousand and gold.

The Untranslatability Caused by the Language Structure Differences

The language used in Empresses in the Palace has its own style such as meaningful poetic drama lines and mixed literary and simple Chinese sentences. Some dialects using, poem re-writing and directly citing are also applied into this drama. However, due to the unique characteristics of each language, these two languages cannot be converted easily sometimes in voice, text, rhythm, rhetoric, etc.. As a result, it is hard to reproduce ancient Chinese poetry like five or seven characters poetry in English. When the paratactic language is converted to hypotactic language, on account of adding articles, prepositions, conjunctions and verbs based on the characteristics of English, it may result in lack of Chinese concrete imagery, meanwhile the mood and beauty in the poetry will disappear, too. In addition, it is also neither suitable for English grammar nor the aesthetic orientation of the foreign audiences.

This hit show in China also makes "Zhen Huan Style" popular and imitated by the majority of the audience for its retro style. For example, "zhe hui zi", "zhen zhen", "ba le", "xiang lai", "ruo shi... xiang bi shi ji hao de, dan... dao ye bu en ze", etc.. These antique charm is difficult to reproduce if these languages are translated into English. In a sum, this is the untranslatability.

The Untranslatability Caused by the Religion and Faith Differences

In traditional Chinese culture, the people have deep faith in the existence of the Buddha and heavens. If they desire something or have some wishes to achieve, they usually go to the temple to "burn incense and worship Buddha". The emperor in this play should carry it out every few years, to pray "Heaven" for peace, prosperity, and seasonable weather for crop raising. In addition, as the rulers in the ancient times, the emperor always self-proclaimed the son of Heaven to the people by means of the people’s faith to Heaven to consolidate his regime.

Westerners believe in Christianity, and God is their spiritual sustenance. However, more Chinese people believe in Buddhism. When westerners encounter some unexpected situations, they usually say "Oh, my god!" Chinese people are fond of saying "Heven" (tian’a) or "My Good Heaven!" (wo de lao tian ye).

At the beginning of "Empresses in the Palace", Zhen Huan is kneeling down in the temple and praying for not being elected into the palace and marrying the emperor. In this play, it is also often to see scenes of burning incense and asking Heaven’s blessing on all wishes coming true. In the ancient Chinese traditional culture, there are many superstitious traditions, such as in the drama, Zhen Huan makes use of the Eclipse Observations (Qin Tian Jian) who get conversant with chronometer and geography and can cleanse and exorcise evil to dispose of An Lingrong. Furthermore, Zhen Huan voluntarily leaves the harem for temple to practice and refine herself and accept the Buddhist thoughts and ethics in the episode 4. In the episode 6, the emperor desires longevity so that he recruits two
Taoists to make some elixir of life for him. This is about Taoism in this drama. In the Christian prevalent America these traditional Chinese culture is unable to be passed through subtitling translation, which results in the cultural untranslatability.

**Translation Strategy**

The cultural untranslatability exists, but it doesn’t mean we cannot translate our culture into foreign language. In the "An Outlined Theory of Cultranslation" Liu (2006) says that the culture in the translation perspective, must represent distinctive subject-oriented features. On the one hand, language is the main part of the culture in the translation perspective. The culture in translation perspective is still relying on the language, but not limited to the language level. On the other hand, the culture in the translation perspective also has the ontological characteristics of culture, including the nationality, inheritance, theology and compatibility. Liu also disagrees about the dispute of the "alienation" or "domestication". He says that the translator must abandon the "either-or" monism cultural translation theory, and he proposed a concept of "cultural adaptability"[6]. It means that neither the source language culture need to adapt to the target language culture nor the target language culture adapt to the source language culture, but in a view of integrated balance and an analysis way of case by case. Thus, we can achieve the appropriate point.

Additionally, regarding the characteristics of subtitling like limitations in time and space, this thesis finds three ways to translate subtitles as follows: Information explicitation, appropriate omission, and information re-creation.

**Information Explicitation**

The most important thing of translation is the transmission of cultural information. The main task of the translator is to help the target language audience cross the wide gap between two cultures and try his best to make the audience get closer to the source language culture. Thus translators need not only to understand the original meaning, but also to learn how will the recipients understand the translation. Because of the cultural differences they often do not understand the specific meaning of certain words in different contexts. Therefore, this way could make the reference and meanings of some words are easier to identify, the logical relations of some sentences are clearer, and the translation as a whole is less difficult to understand.

E.g. 1 "Long feng tai" "a dragon and a phoenix of good fortune"

In this situation, it is unnecessary to highlight dragon and phoenix to show their imperial identity. The translations like "twins: a boy and a girl" or "a pigeon pair" will be clearer, shorter and better.

E.g. 2 "Zhe ye shi ge zhong kan bu zhong yong de xiu hua zhen tou." "As she lacks resolve, her beauty is vain and useless."

In Chinese, pillows with embroidery refer to some people who are good looking but useless. Because of the vacancy of cultural meaning, foreign audiences cannot understand this metaphor well. Therefore, it is better to translate the core information "her beauty is vain and useless" instead of beautiful pillow.

**Appropriate Omission**

Generally speaking, omission means omitting the useless, superfluous words and even the words that will be a stumbling block in the target language in translation to make your version not just accessible to recipients, but easily understood; not only expressive, but also impressive.

E.g. 1 "Qian mian jiu shi piao miao feng, xiao wang de qing liang tai jiu zai na er. Mei yue wo zong hui you shi lai ri zhu zai na. Ri hou ru guo niang zi you shen me shi qing xu yao bang zhu, pai ren guo lai tong bao yi sheng jiu shi. Xiao wang yi ding jin li."

"In front of you is Mount Piaomiao, where my pavilion is located. Each month I stay there for some ten days. Do inform me if you are in need of anything. I will do all I can."

E.g. 2 "Huang hou hou ai, hai rang gu gu qin zi song lai, zhen shi rong xing."
"I’m flattered. The Empress sent you to bring the gifts personally. It’s an honor."
E.g. 3 "Cheng meng sheng en." "I’m deeply grateful to your kindness."

It is obvious to see that all the complex Chinese self-callings are replaced by simple English personal pronouns except for the necessary and important title, because the referents are clearly to see in the scene. If the connotations of these titles are translated, it will be superfluous. Meanwhile, the missing of different identities caused by omission will be made up by the scene.

**Information Re-creation**

Information re-creation is a translation way that reproduces the general meaning of the original text. It may or may not closely follow the form or organization of the original, but the translation would also be fluent and natural. Thus, translators must consider the original text carefully, know its stress, translate it naturally, and express the meaning more understandable.

E.g. 1 "Shang ni yi zhang hong." "Award the scarlet red."
"Yi zhang hong" is a Chinese cultural loaded word, which refers to an extremely cruel death penalty. The translation in *Empresses in the Palace* as "award the scarlet red" can neither express her fierce enough nor the cruel death penalty. Thus, the language should be re-created and translated into "Enjoy the torture of the scarlet red to death".

E.g. 2 "Huan huan yi niao chu gong yao" "The slim waist of the concubines of the Chu palace"
If the audience do not know Chinese culture well, they cannot understand how Chu palace is related to the drama. At the same time, the grace and beauty of "Huan huan" in Chinese has been lost. Therefore, in order to eliminate the confusion, the translation should be reproduced like "As my name, Huanhuan, means graceful women with slim waist". And then, the foreign audience will understand it better.

**Conclusion**

In a sum, from the thesis we can find that the cultural untranslatability in Chinese-English translation of film subtitles is not absolute and the appropriate translation point between the source language culture and the target language culture can be reached if the suitable translation strategies are involved. The author hopes that this thesis can be helpful to spread traditional Chinese culture outside, open the overseas film markets and provide a reference for future research in this field.

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