

A Study of Subtitling in the American Version of *Zhen Huan Zhuan, Empresses in the Palace*

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Abstract: Under the background of economic globalization, Chinese film and television works, as an important part of cultural soft power, play an increasingly important role in cross-cultural communication. As a pivotal element in cross-cultural communication, subtitle translation for film and television dramas must effectively convey the source text to the target audience within the constraints of time and space, ensuring that viewers can accurately decode narrative information and achieve cognitive synchronization. Taking Newmark's communicative translation theory and semantic translation theory as the theoretical framework, this study adopts the case study method and takes the subtitle translation of the American version of *Zhen Huan Zhuan* (甄嬛传) as the object of study, especially the translation of the title and the translation of the cultural-exclusive items. It explores whether the translation achieves a balance between cultural fidelity and audience reception. This study not only helps to deepen the understanding of the compensation strategy of cultural default in film and television translation, but also provides a practical paradigm for the translation for foreign dissemination of Chinese classical film and television works.

Keywords: *Zhen Huan Zhuan*, Empresses in the Palace, Semantic Translation, Communicative Translation, Subtitling.

1. Introduction

The original novel *Zhen Huan Zhuan*, authored by Liu Lianzi, traces the transformative journey of the protagonist, Zhen Huan, from an innocent young woman to a figure of immense power, offering a profound exploration of the power dynamics within the feudal court and the fate of women. The literary value of the novel lies in its meticulous excavation of historical context and its deep reflection on the plight of women, themes that have resonated widely, particularly among female readers, and have sparked significant social discussion.

The 2011 television series adaptation of the same name represents a creative reimagining of the source material, elevating its artistic value. While remaining faithful to the original narrative, the series employs a grand narrative structure spanning 76 episodes (totaling 3,420 minutes), complemented by masterful performances, meticulously designed costumes and sets, and nuanced cinematography. This adaptation not only preserves the core plotlines of the novel but also enhances the thematic depth of court intrigue and female empowerment through the unique expressive power of the visual medium. As a result, the series has achieved enduring artistic significance and is regarded as a classic in Chinese television.

The American Version of *Zhen Huan Zhuan, Empresses in the Palace*, serves as a notable case study in cross-cultural reinterpretation, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges inherent in the global dissemination of Chinese culture. This version adopts a condensed narrative structure of six 90-minute episodes, a strategy tailored to international viewing habits. However, this approach introduces limitations in narrative density and emotional resonance: firstly, the omission of numerous subplots results in oversimplified character relationships; secondly, the compression of cultural symbols diminishes the historical depth and aesthetic richness of the original work. From the perspective of reception theory, international audiences have expressed polarized views. While some have praised the adaptation for its incorporation

of Eastern aesthetics and its portrayal of political intrigue, others have criticized its inability to fully capture the narrative complexity and cultural depth of the source material. Nevertheless, this adaptation represents a significant effort in promoting Chinese cultural exports, contributing meaningfully to cross-cultural understanding and dialogue.

2. Theoretical Analysis

2.1 Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation

Peter Newmark's theoretical framework of communicative translation and semantic translation has exerted a profound influence on the field of translation studies. Newmark defines communicative translation as a method that emphasizes the content and readability of the target text, aiming to reproduce the context of the source text while ensuring comprehensibility for the target-language reader, and he further emphasizes that communicative translation strives to produce an effect on the target-language reader as close as possible to that obtained on the source-language reader (Newmark, 2002). This theoretical approach prioritizes functional equivalence in translation, focusing on the effective transmission of linguistic effects and pursuing conciseness and accuracy in language. Consequently, it is particularly well-suited for the translation of informative texts and vocative texts. In the context of the *Empresses in the Palace*, the principles of communicative translation have been extensively applied. This choice is primarily based on two considerations: firstly, the theory's emphasis on effect equivalence facilitates the achievement of emotional resonance similar to that experienced by the source-language audience within a cross-cultural context; secondly, its characteristic conciseness aligns well with the spatial and temporal constraints inherent in subtitle translation.

From a functionalist perspective, the core value of communicative translation lies in its focus on the effective transmission of linguistic information and the reception experience of the target audience. This translation method

allows translators to adapt the form of the text to suit the cognitive habits of the target-language readers, provided that the core meaning of the source text is not compromised. Research indicates that, compared to semantic translation, communicative translation often demonstrates significant advantages in terms of linguistic fluency, cultural adaptability, and reader acceptance (Zhou, 2020). These advantages are fully manifested in the cross-cultural dissemination of *Empresses in the Palace*, although certain limitations remain in the transmission of cultural depth and emotional intensity.

In contrast, semantic translation seeks to accurately reproduce the meaning expressed by the original author within the constraints of the target language (Newmark, 2002). Semantic translation places greater emphasis on the source text and its author, striving to preserve the author's unique linguistic expressions without alteration. This method prioritizes the author and the source language, typically resulting in translations that are precise and objective. Explanatory adjustments are made only when necessary, such as in cases of ambiguity or dispute (Zhou, 2020). The original series *Zhen Huan Zhuan* is imbued with a classical aesthetic, characterized by elegant and refined language. Employing semantic translation for such expressions helps to retain the antiquated charm of the original dialogue, preserving the distinctive linguistic style of the series. This approach allows international audiences to appreciate the unique allure of the original production, fostering a deeper understanding of its cultural and artistic value.

2.2 Subtitle Translation

With the deepening development of economic globalization, subtitle translation has emerged as a crucial medium for cross-cultural audiovisual communication, playing a pivotal role in facilitating audience comprehension of film content and enabling the experience of foreign cultures. *Zhen Huan Zhuan*, as a historical drama set in the Qing Dynasty's imperial harem, features dialogue with distinct classical characteristics, which presents unique challenges for translation practice. The intricate hierarchical system within the drama is reflected in its complex system of character appellations, encompassing specific forms of address between masters and servants, emperors and concubines, concubines of different ranks, and those of equal status. These appellations not only carry the cultural connotations of the feudal hierarchy but also constitute significant difficulties in translation practice.

From a technical perspective, subtitle translation is subject to multiple constraints imposed by the nature of audiovisual media. Subtitle translation requires synchronization between language and visuals, meaning that the display time of English subtitles must closely align with the output time of the source language dialogue (Li, 2001). This necessitates the effective transmission of information by translators within a limited timeframe. Furthermore, as subtitle translation primarily deals with colloquial dialogue, translators must strive for clarity and simplicity while ensuring the integrity of the information. In the translation practice of *Empresses in the Palace*, these technical requirements manifest in the following ways: English subtitles must align with the reading habits of the target audience, maintaining linguistic conciseness while

allowing sufficient cognitive processing time to enhance the audience's understanding and reception of the plot.

3. Translation Analysis

3.1 The Title

The American version title *Empresses in the Palace* reflects a strategic choice in cross-cultural adaptation. Unlike the original Chinese title *Zhen Huan Zhuan* (*The Legend of Zhen Huan*), which emphasizes the biographical nature of the protagonist's journey, the American version title adopts an ensemble narrative perspective, a shift that carries significant cultural adaptation implications. From a narratological standpoint, the original title focuses on the protagonist Zhen Huan alone, while the English title expands the narrative focus to the collective experiences of the imperial harem. This broader perspective aligns more closely with Western audiences' expectations for palace dramas.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, this adaptation offers notable advantages. Firstly, the title *Empresses in the Palace* intuitively conveys the historical setting and core themes of the series, enabling target audiences to quickly establish a cognitive framework. In contrast, a literal translation such as *The Legend of Zhen Huan* might create cognitive barriers due to cultural gaps, as international audiences lack familiarity with the cultural significance of Zhen Huan. Secondly, this adaptation embodies the core principles of Newmark's communicative translation theory, prioritizing the reception effect on target-language readers over formal equivalence. By reconstructing the title, the translators have lowered the cultural comprehension threshold, thereby enhancing the viewing experience for international audiences.

In terms of translation strategy, this adaptation demonstrates a high degree of translator subjectivity and creativity. Rather than adhering strictly to the literal meaning of the original title, the translators strategically recontextualized the text based on the cultural characteristics and audience expectations of the target market. While this adaptation somewhat deviates from the biographical focus of the original title, it better meets the demands of the international market. It is worth noting, however, that this adaptation also entails a degree of cultural loss, as the original title's emphasis on individual growth and its distinct Eastern aesthetic qualities are somewhat diluted in the process.

From a market dissemination perspective, this adaptation reflects clear commercial considerations. By shifting the narrative focus from an individual to a collective perspective, the series appeals to a broader audience and lays the groundwork for subsequent cross-cultural dissemination. Although this strategic adaptation carries certain risks, it has proven effective in achieving favorable reception in international markets.

3.2 *Yi Zhang Hong* (一文红)

The translation strategy for "the scarlet Red" (一文红), a highly symbolic form of imperial punishment in *Zhen Huan Zhuan*, reflects multiple considerations in cross-cultural

communication. From the perspective of semantic translation, the rendering “the scarlet Red” not only preserves the cultural imagery of the source language but also skillfully leverages the cultural connotations of the target language. The term “scarlet” in English not only denotes a vivid red color but also carries deeper implications of sinfulness and moral corruption (Yang, 2017). This translation maintains the literary quality of the original text while reinforcing the brutality of the punishment through the cultural connotations of the target language, thereby achieving the cultural fidelity pursued by semantic translation.

From the viewpoint of communicative translation, the translator opted to retain the unique cultural imagery of “Yi Zhang Hong” rather than simplifying it to more common terms such as “flogging” or “caning”, which is faithful to the original text (Meng, 2021). Although this approach increases the comprehension difficulty for the target audience, it aligns organically with the narrative structure of the drama: just as the concubines in the drama require an explanation of “Yi Zhang Hong” from the eunuch, the target audience also needs to understand the specifics of this punishment through subsequent plot developments. This narrative strategy avoids the potential logical disjunction that communicative translation might cause and enhances the audience’s cultural exploration experience.

In terms of the technical constraints of subtitle translation, the concise rendering “the scarlet Red” offers significant advantages. Firstly, it adheres to the spatial limitations of subtitle translation, with the three English words roughly matching the character length of the original “Yi Zhang Hong”, ensuring harmony between the subtitles and the visuals. Secondly, this translation avoids the information overload that might result from lengthy explanatory translations, preserving the necessary narrative space for the eunuch’s explanatory dialogue. According to Li Yunxing (2001), subtitle translation must achieve optimal information delivery within limited space and time, and “the scarlet Red” exemplifies this principle.

Furthermore, this translation strategy creates a unique dramatic effect. By preserving the cultural imagery of the source language, the translator achieves a sense of cultural defamiliarization, allowing the target audience to empathize with the uninformed concubines in the drama and share their emotional journey from confusion to shock. This approach not only enhances the dramatic tension of the plot but also deepens the audience’s understanding of the feudal imperial culture of China.

It is worth noting that while this translation strategy sacrifices immediate comprehensibility to some extent, it achieves complete cultural information transmission through supplementary explanations in subsequent plot developments. This phased approach to information delivery meets the technical requirements of subtitle translation while maintaining narrative coherence, demonstrating the translator’s balanced consideration of cultural fidelity and audience reception.

3.3 Appellations

The system of appellations in *Empresses in the Palace* serves as a crucial cultural symbol, constructing the historical context and social relational network of the series. In order to show respect to others, ancient people often used the form of respecting others and belittling themselves to refer to themselves (Dai & Zhu., 2020). The appellations in the drama not only reflect the feudal hierarchical system but also carry specific cultural values (Shi & Fu, 2016). For instance, the self-designation “Nubi (奴婢)” by palace maids and the address “Xiaozhu (小主)” for concubines of specific ranks constitute a comprehensive representation of feudal etiquette. However, in the American adaptation, this system is simplified into generic pronouns such as “I” and “you,” resulting in a significant loss of cultural information.

From the perspective of cultural translation theory, this simplification exemplifies the typical characteristics of communicative translation strategies. For example:

奴婢是心疼小主。 I’m so sorry for you.

While this translation ensures effective information delivery and immediate comprehension for the audience, it overlooks the cultural connotations embedded in the appellations. The sense of humility and submission conveyed by “Nubi (奴婢)” is entirely lost in the translation “I,” and the vast hierarchical gap between “Nubi (奴婢)” and “Xiaozhu (小主)” is also erased. Although this translation strategy aligns with Newmark’s principle of communicative translation, which prioritizes the reception effect on target-language readers, it inevitably leads to the erosion of cultural significance.

From the standpoint of the technical constraints of subtitle translation, this simplification is somewhat justified. As Li Yunxing (2001) notes, subtitle translation must achieve optimal information delivery within limited space and time. The simplification of the appellation system indeed enhances translation efficiency, ensures synchronization between subtitles and visuals, and reduces the comprehension difficulty for the target audience. For instance, in the case of translating “来人” as “Xia Yi”(the person the emperor wants to call) this approach not only clarifies the contextual information but also aids in character identification, helping international audiences establish a clear cognitive framework within the complex web of character relationships.

However, this translation strategy also raises important questions about cultural fidelity. While the simplification of the appellation system improves comprehensibility, it diminishes the historical authenticity and cultural depth of the series. The challenge of balancing technical constraints with cultural preservation remains a critical issue in cross-cultural audiovisual translation. Future translation practices might consider incorporating annotations or supplementary subtitles to preserve essential cultural information while maintaining viewing fluency.

4. Conclusion

Under the constraints of time and space, audiovisual subtitle translation plays a pivotal role in effectively conveying information to audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds,

enabling them to better comprehend and appreciate film and television works while fostering cross-cultural exchange and dissemination. *Zhen Huan Zhuan*, as a television series deeply imbued with classical elements, features dialogue characterized by distinct classical Chinese linguistic features. This stylistic register not only encapsulates the essence of traditional Chinese culture but also presents significant challenges in translation.

Empresses in the Palace employs a translation strategy that integrates both communicative and semantic translation approaches. From the perspective of functionalist translation theory, this adaptation aligns with the particular constraints of subtitle translation, wherein translators extensively adopt communicative translation strategies—such as simplification and adaptation—to ensure that target-language audiences can accurately follow the narrative and grasp character dynamics. While this approach inevitably involves a degree of cultural simplification and partial loss of the source text's cultural integrity, it facilitates the international transmission of Chinese culture by enhancing accessibility and comprehension for global audiences.

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