

Research on the Subtitle Translation of The Legend of Sealed Book from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: With the innovation of multimedia technology, a vast array of Chinese films has been rapidly translated and disseminated internationally, significantly enhancing the soft power of Chinese culture. As a quintessential multimodal text, the subtitling of films necessitates an analysis and interpretation of the multimodal discourse within them. The theory of multimodal discourse analysis, which takes multimodal discourse as its subject, provides a scientific analytical framework and practical guidance for the multimodal translation of film subtitles. Therefore, this paper employs the framework of multimodal discourse analysis theory, drawing on Zhang Delu's proposed dimensions of cultural, contextual, content, and expression levels, to conduct an in-depth analysis of the subtitle translation of the film *The Legend of Sealed Book*. The aim is to offer insights into the practice of film subtitle translation and to further the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Subtitle Translations; *The Legend of Sealed Book*.

1. Introduction

“In the fervent development of discourse analysis theory, it has been recognized that a purely linguistic perspective is insufficient for an in-depth and comprehensive analysis and study of discourse, as a significant portion of the meaning of discourse is conveyed through non-linguistic factors” (Zhang Delu, 2009). With the continuous innovation of multimedia technology, the medium of information dissemination has evolved from a single text to a rich variety. This has led to an increasing focus on multimodal discourse. “Multimodality refers to composite discourse that includes not only text but also images, diagrams, etc., or any text that realizes meaning through more than one type of symbolic encoding” (Li Zhanzi, 2003). Films, with their sound, imagery, movement, and emotion, are clearly multimodal, possessing a variety of non-linguistic symbols. Therefore, when translating film subtitles, translators can utilize multimodal discourse analysis theory to integrate non-linguistic factors with subtitle translation, assisting the audience in gaining a deeper understanding of the film's content and promoting cross-cultural communication of the film.

Film serves as an important channel for cultural dissemination, and excellent subtitle translation plays an extraordinary role in enhancing national image, cultural connotations, and international influence. With technological innovation, some old films have been restored and re-released, gaining widespread popularity among younger audiences in Chinese market and subsequently entering the international market after subtitle translation. *The Legend of Sealed Book* is a film adapted from parts of *Ping Yao Zhuan*, compiled by Luo Guanzhong and Feng Menglong in Ming dynasty, produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio in China in 1983, and re-released on the big screen in 2021 after restoration. The 1983 version of *The Legend of Sealed Book* was not translated, while the 2021 version was equipped with subtitle translations to cater to an international audience. Despite being re-released after 40 years, the film's core theme of pursuing justice and saving the common people remains

widely welcomed today. The reason is that the film not only focuses on the inheritance of national traditions but also fully utilizes modern elements to highlight the entertainment function of animated films (Wang Xuemei, 2015).

This paper will apply the framework of multimodal discourse analysis theory to analyze the subtitle translation of *The Legend of Sealed Book* from the cultural, contextual, content, and expression levels. By examining the various translation methods of the film's subtitle language in different situations, the paper aims to promote the translator's understanding of subtitle translation and enhance the ability to create subtitles that are more easily understood by the target language audience.

2. The Theory of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The primary theory of multimodal discourse analysis is Systemic Functional Linguistics, founded by Halliday, which can be studied at five levels: culture, context, discourse meaning, grammar, form, and medium (Martin, 1992). Specifically, multimodal discourse analysis adopts the perspective from Systemic Functional Linguistics that language is a social semiotic and a potential for meaning, and it posits that other semiotic systems beyond language are also sources of meaning (Zhu Yongsheng, 2007). Zhang Delu concretizes the concept of “other semiotic systems”, suggesting that multimodal discourse refers to the phenomenon of communication that employs a variety of sensory modalities, such as auditory, visual, and tactile senses, and utilizes multiple means and semiotic resources, including language, images, sounds, and gestures (2009). Zhang Delu divides multimodal discourse analysis theory into four dimensions: the cultural level, the contextual level, the content level, and the expression level. Subtitle translation, as a translation practice that has emerged with new modes of communication, differs from traditional translation practices. Li Yunxing proposes that the criterion for evaluating subtitle translation lies in its ability to provide the most relevant information in a limited space and time, in coordination with

the visuals and audio (2001). Thus, it is evident that subtitle translation is inseparable from the theory of multimodal discourse analysis.

In 1977, R. Barthes, a pioneer in the field of multimodal discourse analysis, published a paper titled "Rhetoric of the Image", which delved into the interplay between images and language in the process of constructing meaning. In China, Li Zhanzi initiated multimodal discourse analysis in 2003, and Wei Qinhong published the first monograph on the subject, *Studies on Multimodality and Multimodal Discourse Research in the Visual Environment*, in 2009. Subsequently, the theory of multimodal discourse analysis has been extensively studied by scholars such as Hu Zhuanglin and Zhang Delu (Xu Xiaocui, 2019).

3. A Study on the Subtitle Translation of The Legend of Sealed Book from the Multimodal Discourse Analysis Perspective

The Legend of Sealed Book narrates a tale of immortals, spirits, and monsters rooted in traditional Chinese culture, closely associated with Taoism and Buddhism. In the story, Yuan Gong, the guardian of the Heavenly Book, steals it and inscribes its contents within a cave. Born from a swan's egg and turned into a human, Dansheng, was guided by Yuan Gong and took Yuan Gong as his mentor, engraving the heavenly books and studying them. However, the book is stolen by three fox spirits who, assuming human form, reside in a temple, pretending to be divine, and defraud money from the local people. Ultimately, Dansheng and Yuan Gong join forces to eliminate the fox spirits, reclaim the heavenly book, and Yuan Gong is punished by the heavenly court for the disclosure of the book. Given the story's profound Chinese cultural background, the subtitling translation of the film for international audiences will inevitably involve transformations across cultural, contextual, content, and expressive dimensions.

(1) Cultural Dimension

"The cultural dimension is the key dimension that enables multimodal communication. The traditions, forms, and techniques of communication are determined by this dimension" (Zhang Delu, 2009). The cultural dimension encompasses ideology and genre, including specific cultural customs and habits at the individual level, as well as societal values, ideologies, and social norms at the societal level. In films, subtitle translations related to the cultural dimension often leave a profound impression on the target audience and evoke a knowing smile, so translators must first understand and learn about the cultural background of the target audience. They should then consider whether the audience can comprehend the cultural background of the film and construct subtitle translations that align with the cultural and linguistic habits of the audience.

1) Translation of "天" in *The Legend of Sealed Book*

Example 1: 天书奇谭

Translation: The Legend of Sealed Book

Example 2: 要好好看守天书

Translation: You will stay here and guard the Heavenly Book.

Example 3: 天道无私，留存后世，为什么又密封起来不让凡人看到呢？

Translation: Heavenly laws are selfless and ought to be left

behind for future generations. Why is the Book sealed and no one is allowed to read it?

Example 4: 泄露天机

Translation: revealing the secrets of heaven

The film's prologue illustrates Yuan Gong's ethereal ascent to a celestial banquet amidst a throng of immortals and celestial dancers, establishing a fantastical and divine milieu. This initial portrayal primes the audience for a narrative steeped in the supernatural, transcending a mere "sky" and encapsulating a divine essence. In this context, "tian" is anthropomorphized as a deity, diverging from its literal translation to reflect a sacred construct akin to "heaven" or "God," aligning with Christian terminology to resonate with the target audience's religious framework. "In religious shrines, the highest belief is 'tian' or God" (Ding Peiren, 2022).

The translation strategy for "天书" in the film is deliberate, eschewing the literal "The Book of Contentment" on the book cover for a more contextually relevant "Heavenly Book" or "Sealed Book". This choice is pivotal, as the book's initial presentation is titled "如意宝册" (Ru Yi Bao Ce), yet characters only refer to it as "天书". The subtitle's "Heavenly Book" not only aligns with the narrative's thematic emphasis on the book's secrecy and Yuan Gong's custodianship but also guides the audience through the plot's unfolding mystery. The book's inscription, "天道无私，留存后世"(Heavenly laws are selfless and ought to be left behind for future generations), prompts Yuan Gong's contemplation and underscores the film's central conflict regarding the book's sealed fate. This scene is instrumental in justifying the title "The Legend of Sealed Book," averting cultural misinterpretation and preserving the narrative's integrity.

Consistently, "天书" is rendered as "Heavenly Book", paralleling "天道" (Heavenly laws) and "天机" (secrets of heaven), ensuring translational congruence and aiding the target audience's understanding. This approach ensures cultural fidelity, leveraging visual context to elucidate the translated terms and maintaining the film's intended thematic depth without redundancy.

2) Translation of Buddhist-Related Terms in *The Legend of Sealed Book*

Example 5: 小师傅请开门

Translation: Please open the door, little monk!

Example 6: 出家人慈悲为怀

Translation: We monks are merciful folk.

Within the cinematic context, the fox spirits requests asylum from inclement weather by knocking on a temple door and inquire about temporary residence. Encountering a monk adorned in traditional Buddhist vestments and the monastic tonsure with six dots, indicative of his religious order, the fox spirit utilizes the salutation "小师傅". The translator, cognizant of cultural nuances, opts for "little monk" over a direct translation of "little master", thereby imparting a more accurate representation for an audience potentially unaware of the term's cultural significance. The monk, in an act of reverence, closes his eyes, folds his hands, and with a bow, utters, "we monks are merciful folk," extending hospitality to the fox spirit. The Chinese phrase "出家人", referring to those who have renounced secular life in favor of monasticism, is translated succinctly as "monk", aligning with the film's consistent portrayal of the character. The expression "慈悲为怀", which encapsulates the principle of benevolence and is suggestive of agreement within Chinese cultural

semantics, is translated as “We monks are merciful folk”. Despite potential cultural discrepancies in the understanding of this phrase, the visual narrative provided by the monk's non-verbal communication aids in the audience's interpretative process. This targeted translation enables the audience to grasp the implied consent, thus enhancing cross-cultural communication without compromising the film's inherent logic or repeating information.

Example 7: 袁公、银子

Translation: Grandpa Yuan; money

In the film, the characters Yuan Gong, Dansheng, and the fox spirits are central to the narrative. “Yuan Gong”, with “Gong” in Chinese signifying veneration and age, is portrayed as an elder donning a white robe, red hair, and an impressive beard. The protagonist, Dansheng, initially refers to him as “老公公”(old man), highlighting his benevolent seniority rather than social rank. To reflect this, translators have selected “Grandpa Yuan”, underscored his venerable age and aligned with his visual depiction. When the fox spirits feign divinity to defraud the populace of their wealth, the Chinese audience discerns from the imagery of silver ingots and dialogue that “银子” signifies currency. A literal translation to silver could be ambiguous to the target audience, who may not associate the metal's form with its historical use as money. Consequently, the translator has directly rendered “银子” as “money”, a decision supported by the visual narrative and ensuring clarity for the audience. This translational choice is both pragmatic and culturally sensitive, facilitating comprehension without compromising the story's integrity or redundancy.

(2) Contextual Dimension

The contextual dimension involves the situational context based on cultural context, encompassing the field of discourse, the tenor of discourse, and the mode of discourse. These three elements are the variables of the situational context as proposed by the systemic functional linguistics representative, Halliday, in 1964, commonly referred to as the field, tenor, and mode. Specifically, the field of discourse refers to the socially recognized activities in which the speakers are engaged. The mode of discourse refers to the channel of communication chosen for the discourse activity, that is, whether it is spoken or written language. “The relationship between speakers refers to the social roles of the participants and their roles within the discourse, that is, whether they are the speaker or the listener, the questioner or the respondent” (Wang Yuanxin, 2006: 310). To better convey the original subtitle's reflection of the field, tenor, and mode of discourse within the original context, translators often employ interpretative translation, selecting expressions that are more aligned with the target context to embody the field, tenor, and mode of discourse.

Example 8: 不可大意

Translation: Understood?

At the film's commencement, the Jade Emperor orchestrates the Feast of the Immortals at the Jade Pool, while Yuan Gong is forbidden to go for the role of guardian for the Heavenly Book with the directive “不可大意” (do not be careless). The translator eschews a direct translation, opting instead for “Understood?” to underscore Yuan Gong's subordinate status and the dismissive attitude of his superior. This nuanced translation paves the way for Yuan Gong's subsequent transgression of stealing a glance at the forbidden text, motivated by a sense of injustice after his long and

unfulfilled guardianship. Yuan Gong's resolve to inscribe the Heavenly Book within a mountain cave, with the goal of aiding the populace, is a pivotal decision that stems from this initial interaction.

Example 9: 徒儿，快去打扫客房

Translation: Go tidy the guest room! Chop chop!

In the film, the abbot's reception of the three fox spirits into the temple is followed by an instruction to his disciple to prepare the guestroom. The abbot's behavior intimates a temple with concealed, potentially nefarious intentions. The translator employs the colloquialism “chop chop” to convey haste, a choice reflecting the original's sense of urgency. The term “chop,” with its primary definition of “to cut,” is recontextualized in English as an imperative urging quick action, frequently utilized by superiors in a hierarchical context. Its onomatopoeic quality echoes the character's expressed urgency within the film, aligning seamlessly with the narrative's requirements. This translation effectively captures the abbot's avaricious intent to exploit the fox spirits financially, delineates the hierarchical power dynamic, and foreshadows the impending monetary dispute between the disciple and the abbot, all without redundant exposition.

(3) Content Dimension

The content dimension encompasses the semantic level and the formal level. The semantic level refers to the meaning of discourse, including conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. The formal level includes form and relation, with form encompassing language, visual, auditory, and sensory aspects, while relations include complementary and non-complementary relations. “A typical multimodal discourse pattern is one where a single modality's discourse is insufficient to fully convey its meaning, or cannot express its entirety, necessitating the supplementation by another modality. We refer to the relationship between these modalities as a ‘complementary relationship’, while others are termed as ‘non-complementary relationships’” (Zhang Delu, 2009).

Example 10: 能弄下来就好了

Translation: If only I could somehow chip it off...

When the fox spirits discover that an immortal resides on the mountain, they stealthily infiltrate the cave with the intention of stealing treasures. They first steal an egg and then notice the Heavenly Book inscribed on the stone wall by Yuan Gong. One of the fox spirits muses, “If only I could somehow chip it off”. The translator did not simply translate ‘弄下来’ as ‘get it off’, but instead used ‘chip it off’, emphasizing the action of chiseling or scraping. This corresponds to the depiction of the Heavenly Book on the stone wall, indicating that it is inscribed and would require a specific action to be removed. The translation reflects the complementary relationship between the visual and textual elements, as the film previously showed Yuan Gong chiseling the book onto the stone wall.

Example 11: 你还偷了一颗蛋呢?

Translation: Hang on...did you just steal an egg?

Upon discovering a swan's egg, Yuan Gong secures it within the cave's furnace, but the fox spirits covertly steal it. Despite Yuan Gong's swift response, the spirits elude him with the egg in tow. One, overcome by hunger, recalls the theft and requests the egg to quell his appetite. The film captures a moment of epiphany as the fox spirit utters “诶”(ei), a spontaneous exclamation indicative of a sudden realization. This interjection, while implicit in the subtitles, is

culturally nuanced and may elude non-native speakers. To bridge this gap, the translator introduces “Hang on...”, a colloquialism that conveys the spirit's abrupt recollection and augments narrative coherence. This strategic addition aligns with the visual cues and auditory expression, fostering a harmonious interplay between text and image that accentuates the fox spirit's avarice and naivety for the target audience.

Example 12: 要等香炉飘起彩烟

Translation: However, when the smoke rises from the burner...

The fox spirits bury the egg in the ground for unable to handle it, where it is found and dug up by an old woman passing by for, she was attracted by the crying. After being unearthed, the egg cracks open to reveal a child who, after thanking the old woman, makes his way to Yuan Gong's cave of his own accord. Yuan Gong appears, masked, names him Dansheng, and instructs him to copy the Heavenly Book in the cave to help the people, but only when the smoke rises from the burner. The translator did not render it as “colorful smoke” because, within the film, the audience can clearly see that the smoke from the burner is white, not colorful. The translator processed the translation content based on the visual, reducing confusion for the target audience and aligning more closely with the visual expression, achieving a complementarity between text and image.

(4) Expression Dimension

The expression dimension, also known as the medium dimension, includes both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects. The linguistic aspect encompasses paralinguistic and pure language, while the non-linguistic includes both bodily and non-bodily content. Specifically, paralinguistic refers to sound, tone, typography, and layout. Pure language pertains to voice and text. The bodily aspect of non-linguistic communication is self-evident, involving gestures and facial expressions. The non-bodily aspect refers to tools and the environment, such as PowerPoint, audio equipment, and the internet.

Example 13: 阿弥陀佛

Translation: God bless you!

Both phrases occur in the dialogue between the abbot and the fox spirits in the temple. After finding the egg, the abbot is deceived by the fox into believing that misfortune will occur. Both the abbot and the young monk shirk responsibility, and when the fox spirit takes on the task, the abbot says ‘阿弥陀佛’ and bows with his hands folded to express his gratitude. ‘阿弥陀佛’ translates to ‘Amitabha’ and signifies ‘immeasurable life’ in Buddhism (Zhang Chuangong, 1986). The translator did not adhere to the original Buddhist meaning but instead combined the abbot's gesture to convey his gratitude, aligning with the most widely recognized religion among the target audience, opting for the common expression of gratitude, “God bless you”.

Example 14: 哦善哉

Translation: oh, God bless you!

After dealing with the egg that makes noise, the young monk hints to the fox spirit about the offering money and instructs her to come to him at midnight. This is overheard by the abbot, and the fox spirit tells the abbot that the young monk asked her to bring the offering money at midnight. Upon hearing this, the abbot says ‘善哉’, which translates to “good”, and performs the gesture of folding his hands and bowing to express approval and gratitude for being informed. The pious actions and behaviors, however, represent greed and a fear of death, allowing the audience to fully understand

that neither monk is genuinely devoted to Buddhism and are instead colluding. When uttering these phrases, the abbot is expressing gratitude. Although the Chinese expressions differ during these actions, the same iconic gesture—folding hands and bowing—is present in both instances. This gesture conveys the same meaning in both contexts and is closely related to religious connotations. To avoid conflict with Western religions, the translator rendered it as the more commonly used Western expression of gratitude, “God bless you”.

In both examples, the translator has chosen to prioritize the cultural and religious resonance with the target audience over a literal translation of the religious terms. This approach ensures that the target audience can relate to the sentiment being expressed, even if the specific religious context differs from their own.

4. Conclusion

Film and television subtitles represent a quintessential form of multimodal text, and the process of subtitling inherently involves the analysis of such texts. Therefore, subtitle translation can be informed by multimodal discourse analysis theory, considering the selection of appropriate translation expressions from four dimensions: culture, context, content, and expression. This approach can more clearly convey the intended meaning of the film, thereby assisting the target audience in understanding the plot and cultural connotations of the movie. By applying multimodal discourse analysis theory to the subtitle translation of the film, it can be observed that the translator made various translation decisions based on different situations, effectively conveying the film's significance in a manner more accessible to the target audience. Translators, when working on similar films, can also choose appropriate translation strategies under the guidance of multimodal discourse analysis to enhance the quality of subtitle translation and contribute to the dissemination of Chinese culture. The analysis of subtitle translation from the perspectives of culture, context, content, and expression has shed light on the translator's decisions throughout the process of translating *The Legend of Sealed Book*. These decisions were made with the aim of making the film's meaning more comprehensible to the target audience, thus facilitating a deeper understanding of the film's narrative and its cultural essence. It is through such meticulous and culturally sensitive translation practices that the richness of Chinese cinema can be effectively communicated to an international audience, enriching global cultural exchange, and promoting a greater appreciation for Chinese cultural works.

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