

A Multi-modal Analysis of the Impact of Subtitle Translation in the American Version of "Empresses in the Palace" on Cultural Dissemination

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Abstract: In the context of globalization, the rise of Chinese historical dramas on the world stage offers rich material for studying the multi-modal role of subtitle translation, exemplified by the American version of "Empresses in the Palace." This paper delves into the impact of subtitle translation strategies on cultural dissemination within this drama using multi-modal theory. The drama, set against the backdrop of the imperial harem of the Qing Dynasty, chronicles the growth of Zhen Huan. Following its success in Asia, adjustments were made to the American version to align with the viewing preferences of American audiences. Through multi-modal analysis, it is revealed that within the visual modality, costumes and settings facilitate translation comprehension. In the auditory modality, synchronization challenges need addressing, while the voice characteristics of characters influence subtitle choices. Furthermore, translators must prioritize cultural differences when considering the interplay between textual and cultural modalities. Subtitle translation exerts a positive influence on cultural dissemination, facilitating the promotion of traditional Chinese culture, the spread of the Mandarin language, and the fostering of cultural self-confidence. Nevertheless, this study acknowledges its limitations. Future research endeavors can further advance the globalization of Chinese culture by deepening the exploration of cultural elements, broadening the sample scope, and incorporating quantitative analysis.

Keywords: "Empresses in the Palace"; Multi-modal; Subtitle Translation; Cultural Dissemination.

1. Introduction

With the deepening of globalization, film and television culture, as a key tool for cultural dissemination, plays an increasingly important role in international cultural exchange. Moreover, in the current era, returning to the value and aesthetic traditions of film and television as cultural artifacts and re-exploring the humanistic spirit in daily life is seen as a way for Chinese film and television to overcome current challenges.[1] Chinese historical dramas, with their unique cultural connotations and artistic charm, are gradually gaining recognition on the global stage, with *Empresses in the Palace* being one of the most well-known. The adaptation and broadcast of this drama in the United States not only provide American audiences with a way to understand traditional Chinese culture but also offer rich material for studying the multi-modal role of subtitle translation in cultural dissemination.

Empresses in the Palace is a grand historical palace drama directed by Zheng Xiaolong and starring Sun Li, among others. Set in the Qing Dynasty's imperial harem, the drama uses visual, auditory, and textual techniques to create a palace environment filled with intrigue and power struggles. The protagonist, Zhen Huan, evolves from an innocent young girl into a shrewd empress dowager. Her legendary story is vividly portrayed through intricate plotlines, distinct characterizations, exquisite costumes, and rich cultural elements. The drama achieved great success in China and Asia, attracting a large and loyal audience. In the production of the American version, the production team carefully considered the viewing habits and cultural differences of American audiences, making appropriate adjustments to the content. For example, the original 76-episode series was condensed into 6 episodes to suit American preferences for shorter, faster-paced dramas.[2] The drama was also released

on mainstream American streaming platforms, laying the foundation for its widespread dissemination. After its release, the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* garnered significant attention from American audiences. Despite cultural differences, the drama's compelling plot, unique cultural elements, and exquisite visuals attracted a large viewership. This phenomenon demonstrates that through multi-modal presentation, even in different cultural contexts, excellent film and television works can transcend cultural barriers and become hot topics in cultural exchange between China and the United States.

Therefore, from the perspective of multi-modal theory, the adaptation and broadcast of *Empresses in the Palace* is not only a practice of cultural dissemination but also a model of multi-modal interaction and integration. It demonstrates how the synergy of visual, auditory, and textual modalities can vividly present ancient Chinese court culture to American audiences, thereby promoting cultural exchange and understanding between China and the United States.

This paper will explore the subtitle translation strategies of the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* based on multi-modal theory, analyzing how these strategies effectively convey the cultural connotations and artistic charm of the original drama. Additionally, the paper will evaluate the effectiveness of these translation strategies in promoting cross-cultural communication and the challenges they face when addressing audiences from different cultural backgrounds.

2. Multi-Modal Theoretical Framework

Modality refers to the semiotic resources used in discourse or events, including language, visual elements, and sound. [3] Multi-modal translation theory constructs a unique theoretical framework that focuses on the interaction and collaboration

of various modalities—such as language, visuals, sound, and gestures—in the translation process. [4] This theory is explanatory, descriptive, and systematic, providing methodological support for the analysis and exploration of translation phenomena. It breaks the boundaries of traditional language-focused translation by expanding the scope to include non-linguistic modalities such as images, sound, and gestures, deeply exploring the roles and impacts of these modalities in translation practice. This approach offers a more comprehensive and systematic presentation of the full picture and inherent complexity of translation activities. Furthermore, the theory emphasizes the importance of considering the interaction between different modalities and their collaborative construction of meaning during the translation process to achieve more comprehensive and accurate translation results.[5]

3. Literature References

3.1. Visual Modality Analysis

In the drama *Empresses in the Palace*, the exquisite and luxurious costumes, as well as the realistic and detailed settings, greatly facilitate the translation process. These details help translators select vocabulary that better fits the plot and character images to convey information. For example, the culturally rich court punishment "一丈红" (yī zhàng hóng) was not simply translated into a rigid English term. Instead, the translator cleverly combined the tense atmosphere of the scene, the domineering attitude of Consort Hua, and the frightened expression of the punished person to translate "一丈红" as "The Scarlet Red." Here, "Scarlet" not only conveys the severity and cruelty of the punishment but also allows the audience to quickly grasp Consort Hua's cold-heartedness and the hardships of survival in the palace. Therefore, the rapid scene changes and rich content also pose challenges for subtitle translation, requiring the translation to be concise and powerful, accurately conveying key information in a fleeting moment.[6]

3.2. Auditory Modality Analysis

The American version of *Empresses in the Palace* retains the original Chinese audio, which provides multidimensional clues such as tone, pitch, and speed for subtitle translation. Translators can select vocabulary and expressions that better reflect the characters' personalities based on the emotional tone of their dialogues. For example, Consort Hua's tone is generally arrogant and disdainful, so the translator chooses more representative language to emphasize this aspect. Consort Hua's classic line "贱人就是矫情" is translated as "Bitch is so pretentious," where the word "bitch" carries strong derogatory and discriminatory connotations, effectively conveying Consort Hua's arrogant and domineering tone. However, retaining the original Chinese audio also presents challenges for subtitle translation. Translators must ensure perfect synchronization between subtitles and audio, as well as harmony in rhythm, to prevent disconnection between subtitles and audio, which could weaken the audience's viewing experience.[7]

3.3. Auditory Modality Analysis

In the American version of *Empresses in the Palace*, the unique voice characteristics and linguistic styles of the characters have a significant impact on the selection and presentation of subtitle text. For example, Consort Hua's

sharp, high-pitched, and slightly provocative tone influences the choice of words when she says, "哼, 她还想与本宫争夺圣宠?" (Hmph. Does she really think she can compete with me for the emperor's favor?). The translator chooses more challenging and disdainful words to reflect her tone, such as "Humph. Does she really think she can compete with me for the emperor's favor?" Here, the use of "me" not only conveys the competitive nature of the situation but also reinforces Consort Hua's self-centered and superior attitude. Another example is Zhen Huan's line, "本宫乏了, 你们且退下罢" (I am feeling weary. You may all withdraw now.), which is translated as "I am feeling weary. You may all withdraw now." This not only accurately conveys the original meaning but also maintains Zhen Huan's dignified, reserved, and implicit speech style as a palace concubine. Therefore, while enjoying the original Chinese audio, the audience can also deeply appreciate the etiquette norms and unique charm of ancient Chinese court culture through the subtitles, as if transcending language and cultural barriers to experience the elegance and solemnity of the distant Eastern court.

3.4. Textual and Cultural Modality Relationship

When *Empresses in the Palace* is communicated to foreign audiences, translators must clearly understand the cultural differences between China and the West, ensuring that the original work's characteristics are preserved while helping overseas audiences understand the content. [8] This is because any work's communication and dissemination must consider the cultural differences and preferences of the target audience. *Empresses in the Palace* contains many cultural elements and vocabulary that resonate with Chinese audiences, so in subtitle translation, translators must select appropriate translation methods based on the cultural background and cognitive abilities of the target language audience. For example, in the third episode, the phrase "走水啦! 快呀!" (Fire! Hurry!) is translated as "Fire! Hurry!" In ancient times, people referred to a fire as "走水" (zǒu shuǐ), reflecting both reverence for fire and the urgency of the situation. In the American version of *Empresses in the Palace*, considering the timeliness and universality of subtitles, "走水" is translated as "fire," accurately conveying the cultural meaning while allowing the audience to quickly understand the plot and feel the panic of the characters, thereby aiding their comprehension of subsequent plot developments.[9]

At the same time, the translation work in the costume modality aims to vividly present the essence of Chinese clothing culture through a multisensory experience of visuals, sound, and touch. It helps people from different cultural backgrounds experience and appreciate the extraordinary charm of this culture. In this way, translation work not only promotes the integration of aesthetic concepts but also deepens mutual understanding and communication between different ethnic groups.[10]

4. The Impact of Subtitle Translation in the American Version of *Empresses in the Palace*

4.1. Dissemination of Traditional Chinese Culture

Empresses in the Palace reflects many aspects of traditional Chinese culture, with the representation of traditional culture being particularly prominent. Under the dual influence of visual and auditory elements, it appears profound and endlessly fascinating. The unique hierarchical system of ancient China, the integration of Manchu and Han cultures during the Qing Dynasty, and the witty language arts are skillfully presented, reflecting the essence of traditional culture. On one hand, the external dissemination of this drama can reveal the hierarchical system of ancient China; on the other hand, it can also help foreigners understand the integration of Manchu and Han cultures. Deepening the depth of cultural dissemination: Comparing the two English translations can also study how to deepen the international dissemination of Chinese culture through translation strategies. For the philosophical thoughts and aesthetic concepts embedded in the drama, appropriate translation strategies can effectively convey these deep cultural elements. The "freehand" style of traditional Chinese aesthetics displayed in *Empresses in the Palace*, if translated in a way that guides foreign audiences to deeply understand this aesthetic concept, can allow them to experience the unique charm of Chinese culture more profoundly, rather than merely staying at the surface level of the storyline.[11] At the same time, the traditional Chinese language and culture in *Empresses in the Palace* are fully displayed, with its artistic style being subtle and delicate. Therefore, through its dissemination, traditional Chinese culture can be promoted and developed.

4.2. International Promotion of the Chinese Language

Today, learning Chinese has become a trend, and for many young foreigners who love China, mastering a few Chinese phrases is not only a skill but also an honor. Observing China's teaching of Chinese as a foreign language, some universities have specifically established Chinese courses for foreign students. Foreign students greatly enjoy these courses and show great enthusiasm for learning Chinese.

Some television stations and news media have also made significant efforts in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. For example, a domestic TV program called "Chinese Bridge" focuses on foreign friends showcasing their Chinese language skills and exchanging methods and experiences of learning Chinese. This program has, to some extent, stimulated foreigners' enthusiasm for learning Chinese. On the other hand, Confucius Institutes have established Chinese learning institutions in over 70 countries worldwide, leading to the widespread dissemination of Chinese. This also reflects the increasing attention of foreign countries to China and the enthusiasm for learning Chinese. Additionally, some top global universities have established Chinese courses. Although Chinese is not yet a global lingua franca, with China's growing influence worldwide, it is foreseeable that Chinese may become another mainstream language in the world after English in the near future. Therefore, through the subtitle translation and multi-modal dissemination

of *Empresses in the Palace*, which involves many traditional poems and songs, a strong interest in Chinese will be generated among many people.

4.3. Expansion of Cultural Confidence

In the wave of globalization, cultural dissemination has become a bridge for exchange between different countries and regions. Through film and television works, literature, music, art, and other forms, the cultures of various countries can cross borders, allowing for mutual understanding and learning. *Empresses in the Palace*, as a TV drama that integrates elements of ancient Chinese court culture, clothing, etiquette, poetry, and songs, has not only been widely popular domestically but has also achieved significant success in overseas markets, becoming a bright business card for Chinese culture. Successful international dissemination helps enhance the understanding and respect of other countries for Chinese culture. By watching cultural products such as *Empresses in the Palace*, overseas audiences can directly experience the charm and depth of Chinese culture, thereby developing a more comprehensive and objective understanding of China. This understanding helps break down cultural barriers and prejudices, promoting equal exchange and mutual respect between different cultures. Cultural dissemination is also an important way to shape a country's international image. By spreading China's voice and stories globally, the world can see a more authentic, three-dimensional, and comprehensive China. The successful export of cultural products such as *Empresses in the Palace* not only showcases the unique charm of Chinese culture but also conveys the values and spiritual outlook of Chinese society, helping to enhance China's international image and soft power. With the widespread dissemination of Chinese culture, the Chinese language, as an important carrier of culture, has also received increasing attention. More and more overseas individuals are beginning to learn Chinese, hoping to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture through the bridge of language. The subtitles, dubbing, and other language forms of cultural products such as *Empresses in the Palace* provide overseas audiences with opportunities and ways to learn Chinese, promoting the global dissemination of Chinese language and culture. This is because only when culture is recognized by the world can it have an impact globally. Successful international dissemination can enhance the understanding and absorption of Chinese culture by other countries, spreading China's voice globally and shaping China's international image.[12]

5. Conclusion

In the practice of multi-modal translation, a close and effective interactive relationship is established between text, images, and sound. In terms of images, they provide rich contextual background information for subtitle translation, helping translators select vocabulary and expressions that match the visuals of *Empresses in the Palace* and align with the background of ancient Chinese traditional culture. At the same time, images also assist in the efficiency of subtitle translation, pushing the translation work towards greater precision and accuracy. In terms of sound, the tone, speed, and emotional nuances of *Empresses in the Palace* help translators capture the stylistic features of the dialogue, influencing vocabulary selection and sentence structure, thereby enabling foreign audiences to better understand the content the characters wish to convey. Subtitles not only

accurately record the spoken content of the original Chinese audio but also transform it into written language that conforms to English expression habits while retaining cultural essence. In this way, while enjoying the original Chinese audio, the audience can gain a deeper understanding of the plot and its cultural connotations through the subtitles. For example, when translating emotionally charged lines or culturally specific expressions, the relationship between these three modalities is fully considered. Taking the line "本宫乏了，你们且退下罢" (I am feeling weary. You may all withdraw now.), which showcases court etiquette and character identity, as an example, appropriate English translation achieves effective multi-modal collaboration.

Although this study has achieved some results, there are still some shortcomings. First, when analyzing the subtitle translation of the American version of *Empresses in the Palace*, we mainly focused on the more obvious and easily identifiable cultural elements and their interactions, potentially overlooking some subtler and less obvious cultural information and their impact in multi-modal translation. Second, the American version of *Empresses in the Palace* is rooted in ancient Chinese court culture, and the social customs, historical background, and cultural concepts it contains are difficult to find counterparts in Western culture. Translators must adhere to the original intent of the drama, using cultural adaptation and background explanation to help Western audiences understand ancient Chinese court culture. Finally, our research method primarily involves text analysis and case interpretation, lacking specific data to more objectively and accurately evaluate the effectiveness of subtitle translation in cultural dissemination and multi-modal practice.

Looking to the future, we can continue to deepen our efforts in the following areas. First, we need to explore cultural elements more deeply, not only focusing on the obvious cultural symbols but also digging into the cultural details hidden in the plot and character relationships, observing their manifestations in multi-modal translation. This will help us more comprehensively present the true face of Chinese culture in cross-cultural dissemination. Second, we should expand the scope of research samples, selecting more diverse plots, character dialogues, and scenes for analysis. This will make our conclusions more representative and allow us to more accurately grasp the overall picture of subtitle translation in the American version of *Empresses in the Palace*. Finally, introducing quantitative analysis methods, such as through questionnaires and audience feedback, can help us understand the degree of comprehension and cultural acceptance of subtitle translation among overseas audiences. Combining textual analysis, we can more scientifically evaluate the effectiveness of multi-modal translation from both qualitative and quantitative dimensions.[13] At the same time, by comparing the subtitle translation of other Chinese film and television works in overseas dissemination, we can

discover more universally applicable multi-modal translation strategies and cultural dissemination models, thereby helping Chinese culture more effectively reach the world.

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