

# A Study on Subtitles Translation of Cantonese Opera Movie “The Legend of White Snake” from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

Yang Sun, Jing Wang

College of Foreign Languages, Southwest Petroleum University Chengdu,610500,Sichuan

---

**Abstract:** Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core has attached great importance to promoting Chinese culture abroad and strengthening China’s discourse power and influence internationally. Chinese traditional drama, as the quintessence of Chinese culture, is worthwhile to spread overseas to enhance the soft power of our culture. Domestic films involving profound culture are effective channels for cross-culture communication. However, many factors still restrain the export of Chinese films, especially subtitles translation. Therefore, how to achieve appropriate subtitles translation is crucial for Chinese culture to go global. Taking eco-translatology as the theoretical basis, this paper aims to analyze the subtitles translation of the Cantonese opera film “The Legend of White Snake” from the perspective of three-dimensional transformation: language, culture and communication, so as to provide practical suggestions for subtitles translation and promote the dissemination of drama culture in English-speaking countries.

**Keywords:** Eco-translatology; Three-dimensional transformation; The Legend of White Snake; Subtitle translation

---

Chinese drama, with a history of over 800 years and variations of over 300 dramatic forms, is not only the treasure of Chinese traditional culture but also a unique art with a distinctive style. It incorporates modern drama and traditional opera (Xiqu), now growing up as a major dramatic art form with national influence. In order to make more people in English-speaking countries appreciate Chinese opera, the translation of the corresponding subtitles is crucial. “The Legend of White Snake” is a Cantonese opera film, a traditional form of opera, which derives from the Chinese folktale “The Immortal White Snake”. With rich culture, the subtitles of “The Legend of White Snake” cover more complex language expressions and cultural implications than that of daily films. Therefore, translators should properly handle various elements in their translational eco-environment, so as to realize effective translation of source language culture and art to the target language society. Based on the theory of eco-translatology, this paper takes the subtitle translation in the Cantonese opera film “The Legend of White Snake” as the research object, and analyzes the subtitle translation from the perspective of linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions, in order to better present this opera film’s rich culture.

## 1. Eco-translatology

### 1.1 Overview of Eco-translatology

Eco-translatology was “something that did not exist in the world” before Chinese scholars proposed it, which can be called a theory “out of nothing”. At the same time, eco-translatology, which encompasses a lot of new terms and concepts, is a systematic overview and discussion of translation from a new perspective that is very different from previous studies. Therefore, the whole research could be viewed as “scholars’ self-talk”<sup>[1]</sup>. This is the introduction to eco-translatology by Professor Hu Gengshen in his book *Eco-Translatology: Construction & Interpretation*. In 2001, Hu Gengshen, who was studying as a Ph.D. student at Hong Kong Baptist University, began his research on translation from the ecological perspective. His lecture entitled “From Darwinian Principle of Adaptation and Selection to Translation Studies” explained to scholars his initial idea of establishing the theory of “Translation as Adaptation and Selection” on the basis of Darwin’s “Natural Selection”. In the same year, the publication of

his paper *A Tentative Study of Translation as Adaptation and Selection* conveyed his new definition of the translation process, translation principle and translation method from the perspective of “adaptation” and “selection”, which set up the framework of the theory of translation as adaptation and selection and laid a solid foundation for the further development of eco-translatology. In 2004, Professor Hu Gengshen elaborated on Eco-translatology’s basic concept and terms in his book *An Approach to Translation as Adaptation and Selection*.

According to Professor Hu Gengshen, the translational eco-environment is the total environment constituted by all ecological relationships. The socio-historical background in which the source language text, the original author, the translator, and the target readers exist makes up the translational eco-environment. The ecological translation community can be divided into three categories: producer, i.e., the translator in the core position; consumer, i.e., the reader of the translation; and decomposer, i.e., the relevant translation researchers, including translation reviewers, translation critics, etc. All these people are interrelated and restricted to each other, forming the ecosystem of a “translation community”.

## **1.2 Principle of “Three-dimensional Transformation”**

According to the theory of eco-translatology, translation is the process of translators seeking the ecological balance between the source and target language. “Balance” requires a combination of eco-environmental factors to make “optimal” choices in translation. How can the translator make the best choice? There is a principle of “multi-dimensionality” in eco-translatology, which notes that translators should transform the source text from linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions and adapt to the target language during translation. Translation is the conversion of languages, language is the carrier of culture, and culture is the accumulation of communication<sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, translators should give full play to their subjectivity and properly handle the relationship between linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions.

As for the linguistic dimension, translators should understand the source text’s language style and convey it in translation by using the right translation strategies. To avoid readers’ reading difficulties, the cultural dimension calls for translators to grasp the cultural nuances between the source language and the target language and adapt to the target language when doing a translation. From the perspective of the communicative dimension, translators must consider whether the author’s communicative intention is conveyed in translation and whether the translation can resonate with audiences.

## **2. Characteristics and Problems of Subtitles Translation**

### **2.1 Characteristics of Subtitles Translation**

Subtitle translation is the art of translating one video language into another through written text subtitles presented at the bottom of a screen, which is characterized by instantaneity, popularity, and synchronization<sup>[4]</sup>. Tifford (1982) proposed that subtitling is a constrained translation as it is restricted by the timing, length of lines, and the loss of information through the semiotic switch from spoken to written language. As different audiences vary in age and literacy, subtitles translation should cater to the public, and be terse so as not to affect the audience’s understanding and sense of experience. Various translational strategies are also encouraged to break the limit of space, time, and information losses in the movies. The Cantonese opera film “The Legend of White Snake” contains rich cultural information like Chinese four-character idioms, religious beliefs, and folktales, which must be handled with care. Otherwise, audiences might misinterpret the film, the film’s artistic integrity would be compromised, and fine Chinese traditional culture’s influence would be diminished.

### **2.2 Problems in Subtitles Translation**

#### **2.2.1 Cultural default**

Language is the carrier of culture. Different cultural information from different countries and regions interacts through language, thus drawing a colorful world with rich culture. However, due to the great differences in history, culture, religion, legal systems and customs between the Orient and the West, cultural default is sometimes inevitable in Chinese-English translation. Cultural default is defined as the absence of relevant cultural background knowledge shared by the writer and his intended readers<sup>[5]</sup>. In subtitles translation, it refers to the disproportion between the original text and the translation version because of disparities between different languages and cultures. With the development of China’s “Going Global Strategy”, translators have the obligation to make great efforts in the promotion of fine traditional Chinese culture. A good translator is expected to both retain the essence of the original text and adapt to the target audience’s language style. Therefore, how to preserve and make the intended audiences understand the cultural characteristics of the source text through subtitling is worth exploring and considering.

#### **2.2.2 Balance between literal translation and free translation**

On the one hand, the rigid literal translation method only leaves the translation boring and hard to attract foreign audiences

as some translators fail to study the cultural background and context of the original text. On the other hand, the excess of adopting free translation because translators pay too much attention to the needs of target viewers will definitely diminish the characteristics and influence of our culture. Chinese cultural output cannot achieve without natural and well-accepted subtitles translation. Therefore, translators should strive to strike a balance between literal translation and free translation methods to get the optimal translation.

### **3. Three-Dimensional Analysis of Subtitles Translation of Cantonese Opera Film “The Legend of White Snake”**

Cantonese opera, also known as “Guangdong Opera”, was formed in the Ming Dynasty, between 1522 and 1566 to be exact. Sung in Cantonese, it is a kind of art form that combines the performance characteristics of the local folk songs of Guangdong and Guangxi with other Chinese opera genres. Cantonese opera is regarded as representative of the culture of Lingnan territories, which possesses rich contents and high artistic value. In September 2009, Cantonese opera was included in the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity<sup>[6]</sup>.

As China’s first 4K panoramic Cantonese opera film, the Legend of the White Snake incorporates cutting-edge film technology and expression methods to show the Chinese special ink style, preserving the aesthetic and traditional cultural characteristics of Cantonese opera<sup>[7]</sup>. After the release of this movie, it attracted a large number of people and its view counts in big network platforms proliferated. It not only retains the essence of Cantonese opera culture but also innovates the form, which makes people deeply sigh the artistic charm of Cantonese opera. Many viewers expressed their love and appreciation for Cantonese opera, and they hope that more opera films will be produced to break the barriers of theatres, like fixed places and followers, thus promoting Chinese excellent opera culture overseas.

According to Professor Hu Gengshen’s theory of translation as adaptation and selection, translators should strive to maintain and transform the original text’s ecology, and adapt the transformed text to the target linguistic, cultural, and communicative ecology following the principle of selective adaptation and adaptive selection, especially when translating such opera film with rich culture like The Legend of White Snake, so as to fully present the charm reflected in this film.

#### **A. Transformation from Linguistic Dimension**

Adaptive selection in the linguistic dimension refers to the adaptive selection and transformation of language forms by translators during translation. In the process of translation, in order to enable target audiences to grasp the film, translators should choose and modify the language forms in a way consistent with the audience’s language style. Specifically, translators are expected to comprehend the original text’s story background, and thus select appropriate expressions in translation, making the source text and the target translation version basically equivalent and allowing viewers to feel the charm and aesthetic of this traditional art.

The language forms or expressions mentioned above include words and phrases, sentence structure, rhetoric style, and literary style. Language differences between Chinese and English result in different expression styles in daily communication. For example, Chinese is paratactic and the logical meaning of a group of sentences is conveyed in context instead of presented by the use of connectives. Nevertheless, English is more hypotactic and various kinds of cohesive ties like connectives are used to make the writing coherent. Therefore, it is necessary to adapt to the target language style and choose the optimal expressions in translation.

Example 1

Excerpt:

Xian tong (xiān tóng)

But because my husband’s life is hanging by a thread, (mìng xuán yī xiàn)

Only Lingzhi immortal grass can extend his life.

Translation:

Immortal guardian,

But my husband’s life is in danger,

Only the Lingzhi mushroom can save him.

Xu Xian fainted after seeing Bai Suzhen’s normal snake form and then Bai went to Kunlun Mountain to pick the Lingzhi mushroom (a kind of immortal herb) to save Xu Xian. However, the Lingzhi mushroom was guarded by two “xiān tóng”. Bai Suzhen failed to defeat them and then said this line in order to beg them for the herb. As this whole story is adapted from a Chinese traditional

folktale, there are many culture-loaded words. In Chinese folklore, “xiān tóng” often refers to young immortals trained under the hand of the old immortals, who are often responsible for guarding the immortals’ treasures like herbs and weapons. Considering that “xiān tóng” is used to move the plot, it’s unnecessary to show all the cultural background of this term in a movie with restrictions on the length of lines. Moreover, as “xiān tóng” has no equivalent in English, translators adopted the free translation strategy and translated it as “Immortal guardian” which is more convenient for the intended viewers to grasp the meaning and the plot.

In addition, the four-character idiom “mìng xuán yī xiàn” in Example 1 means that one’s life may be lost at any time. Normally, “mìng xuán yī xiàn” is translated as “one’s life is on the line” according to the dictionary. Yet considering the instantaneous feature of subtitles, the translation should be oriented to the oral expression and be as terse as possible because of the limited length of lines. Therefore, translators chose another translation in English- “in danger”, which not only retains its original meaning and matches the length limitation but also meets the demand of adaptive selection from the linguistic dimension.

#### Example 2

Excerpt:

They love each other voluntarily.

They did not bother anyone! (ài le)

Or break the restrictions of religion! (guān le)

Or violate the divine law! (nì le)

Translation:

They love whoever they like.

How can it be wrong in someone else’s eyes!

How is that any Buddha’s business!

How does it violate any law!

The context of this line is that Xiaoqing was indignant about Fahai’s apathetic behavior that he along with his disciples discouraged Xiaoqing and her sister Bai Suzhen from rescuing Xu Xian who had been persuaded by Fahai into converting to Buddhism in the Jinshan Temple and then Xiaoqing delivered this line to express her anger and aversion towards Fahai. The three parallel verbs of “ài le”, “guān le” and “nì le” make the line sound powerful and amplify the audiences’ sense of experience. Considering the hypotactic feature of English, translators translated the three parallel sentences into “How can it be wrong in someone else’s eyes! How is that any Buddha’s business! How does it violate any law!”, which not only echoes the parallel structure of the original text but also makes the translation more consistent with the expression habits of the English-speaking audiences.

It can be seen from the above examples that translators convey the appropriate meaning and reproduce the performance effect of the original lines by selecting the right expressions and using the same rhetoric techniques, which meets the requirements of eco-translatology in the “linguistic dimension” and maintains the balance and harmony of the translational ecology.

## B. Transformation from Cultural Dimension

Due to the cultural disparities in different countries, the cultural dimension asks translators to bear in mind the source text’s cultural connotations and adapt to the eco-environment of the target language in translation. Chinese drama is an elegant art with a rich history, and the translation of the work related to it should actively select and transform the words and expressions to avoid distortion of cultural connotations, thus boosting Chinese traditional opera culture going global.

#### Example 3

Excerpt:

You must break the fate of iniquity, forget the past. (niè yuán)

And embrace Buddhism, only then can you experience the tribulation. (jié)

Translation:

You should cut off the evil fate, forget the past.

And take the refuge, then you will be able to get through the cataclysm.

This line is said by Fahai a Buddhist to tell Xu Xian the fact that Bai Suzhen is a snake demon and the romance between snake and human is against the divine law and will inevitably cause disasters, ending up hurting the wrong people. Then Fahai persuaded Xu Xian to embrace Buddhism to hold back the appearance of disasters. The words “niè yuán” and “jié” in this sentence are culture-loaded words that are hard to find the corresponding expressions in English. Therefore, translators adopted the domestication method to translate them and retain their cultural connotations, so that foreign audiences can better understand the culture behind such words.

“niè yuán” in Chinese refers to bad destiny, that is, two people who have a good beginning, however, are doomed to a tragic end. Translators translated it as “evil fate”, which helps the audience to understand Fahai’s rejection and condemnation of the romantic relationship between the human Xu Xian and the snake demon Bai Suzhen. The original meaning of “jié” is plunderage and then it could also refer to the disaster which is what this line tries to convey. Hence, translators translated it as “cataclysm”, which can not only directly transplant the original meaning but also present the seriousness of the consequences of this relationship and the tense atmosphere of the plot.

#### Example 4

Excerpt:

If you continue to annoy people for your own personal interest,  
I will surely take you away with my magic wand of Vajra. (jīn gāng fú mó zhàng)

Translation:

If you disturb the world again only to fulfill your selfish desire.  
My demon-suppress mace will definitely subdue you.

In this line, “jīn gāng fú mó zhàng” is Fahai’s magic weapon used to subdue Bai Suzhen who tried to flood the Jishan Temple to force Fahai to release Xu Xian. “jīn gāng fú mó zhàng” originates from Tibetan Buddhism and is capable of subduing demons, while the Trident is the weapon of the Greek sea god Poseidon, possessing the same function and being well known to the target audiences. In order to convey the deterrent power of the weapon and retain its original meaning, translators translated “jīn gāng fú mó zhàng” as “Demon-suppress Mace” and attached the annotation “the Chinese Trident”, helping the English-speaking countries to better understand the religious culture behind it.

As there are plenty of culture-loaded words in Chinese opera works, it is necessary for translators to grasp the cultural connotations and take foreign viewers’ acceptance into account. Various translation strategies such as literal translation and annotation are encouraged in translation to compensate for the cultural default of intended audiences in Chinese opera films and to realize the adaptive selection in the cultural dimension.

### C. Transformation from Communicative Dimension

Adaptive selection from the communicative dimension is the translator’s adaptation and choice of communicative intention in translation. In the process of translation, besides considering the transformation of linguistic forms and cultural connotations, translators should focus on whether the communicative intention in the original text can be embodied in the target language<sup>[3]</sup>. Achieving communication is the ultimate goal of translation, and translators shall not be restricted by the original text and make active adaptations and selections to ensure a smooth translation without failing to convey its communicative intentions.

#### Example 5

Excerpt:

During a rainy day in West Lake,  
You hold up a sunny day for me.  
Under the umbrella, we are both shy. (xiū de yān rán)

Translation:

In a drizzling rain at West Lake,  
Blocking the rain with an umbrella in your hand.  
Hiding in the shade, smile rises up my face and flushes crimson.

When Bai Suzhen and Xiaoqing were visiting the West Lake, Bai fell in love with Xu Xian at first sight. Then she cast a spell to make it rain so as to use the same umbrella with Xu Xian. This line describes Bai Suzhen’s inner activities when Bai and Xu met each other. The words are sung in Cantonese in this film and are more classical and subtler than in modern Chinese. Therefore, translators should choose appropriate expressions in translation. “xiū de yān rán” conveys Bai’s joy and crush on Xu Xian to the audience, and also vividly shows her shy and reserved personality. In order to touch the intended viewers, the translator chose the strategy of literal translation and amplification, translating this sentence as “smile rises up my face and flushes crimson”. “Smile rises up my face” is the information added by the translator in order to show Bai Suzhen’s delight and to enable English-speaking viewers to understand the following encounter plot.

#### Example 6

Excerpt:

They love each other voluntarily. (nǐ qíng wǒ yuàn)

They did not bother anyone!

Translation:

They love whoever they like.

How can it be wrong in someone else's eyes!

“nǐ qíng wǒ yuàn” in the first sentence of Example 6 is a common Chinese phrase, which means mutual consent in the dictionary. It is often used to describe an action or behavior between two people who are both willing to do that, especially referring to the romantic relationship of one couple. In the context of this line, it signifies that Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen love each other voluntarily and Xiaoqing deemed it none of Fahai's business. As there are no equivalent expressions in English, translators follow the free translation. Due to the angry emotion of this line's speaker Xiaoqing, “nǐ qíng wǒ yuàn” is translated into “they love whoever they like” instead of “mutual consent” or “it's none of your business”. The pronoun “whoever” makes the former expression more straightforward and crisper than the latter two expressions, which perfectly conveys the meaning and communicative intention in this line to target viewers, enabling audiences to feel the character's indignance and frankness.

The translation is a cross-lingual and cross-cultural communicative event, so translators should properly pay attention to adaptive selection and selective adaptation in translation in the communicative dimension. Flexible translators are required in order to convey the communicative intention contained in the original text to the greatest extent by adopting different translation strategies, so as to help foreign audiences understand the wonderful connotation of Chinese drama culture better.

#### 4. Conclusion

Recent years witness a boom in China's domestic film industry. The first Cantonese opera film adapted from the traditional opera “The Legend of White Snake” has been well-received by people. Through multi-level modern shooting techniques, the film showcases the unique and profound connotation of Chinese drama, which provides new ways and injects momentum for the spread of traditional Chinese drama culture. For foreign audiences who do not know Chinese and Chinese culture, subtitles translation is one of the most important bridges for them to understand the films. Therefore, there's an urgent need for proper subtitle translation which could help excellent Chinese films and fine traditional Chinese culture behind them to walk on the global stage. In the process of translation, translators should fully adapt to the translational eco-environment and make the best transformation of languages and selection of various translation strategies from the dimensions of language, culture and communication. Only a faithful and natural translation can enable foreign viewers to understand the films and arouse their curiosity towards related Chinese culture, boosting fine Chinese culture going global.

#### References:

- [1] Hu, Gengshen. (2013). *Eco-Translatology: Construction & Interpretation*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- [2] Hu, Gengshen. (2004). *An Approach to Translation as Adaptation and Selection*. Wuhan: Hubei Education Press.
- [3] Hu, Gengshen. (2011). Research Focus and Theoretical Perspectives on Eco-Translatology. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (2):5-9+95.
- [4] Wen, Huimin & Wan, Tao. (2021). Cultural Default and Compensation Strategies in Subtitle Translation of the Documentary “Masters in the Forbidden City” from the Perspective of Eco-translatology. *Journal of Science and Education*, (6):188-189.
- [5] Wang, Dongfeng. (1997). Cultural Default and Reconstruction of Textual Coherence. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, (6):56-61.
- [6] Tu, Yuzheng. (2020). Analysis of the Role of Film Art in Cantonese Opera Culture Dissemination. *Home Drama*, (35):30-31
- [7] Tang, Ding & Liu, Nanyang. (2022). Study on the Modernization of Cantonese Opera from the Perspective of Cultural Ecology: Taking the Cantonese Opera Film “The legend of the White Snake” as an Example. *Home Drama*, (3):5-6.