

A Study on the Translation Strategies of English-Chinese Subtitles in Intangible Cultural Heritage Documentaries: A Case Study of Inheritance on the Fingertips

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Abstract:

Amid globalization and cross-cultural communication, ICH-themed documentaries have emerged as pivotal carriers for international Chinese cultural dissemination, bridging linguistic and cultural gaps effectively. This study takes *Inheritance on Fingertips*—which spotlights three quintessential Chinese crafts: Zisha pottery, gold-painted wood carving, and Su embroidery—as its research corpus, conducting an in-depth analysis from four core dimensions: terminology accuracy, translation of culture-specific items, handling of colloquial expressions, and adaptation to video time constraints. Findings reveal that subtitle translation for such documentaries must adopt an “art form-tailored strategy”: For Zisha pottery, priority should be given to balancing technical details and cultural symbolism; for gold-painted wood carving, the focus lies in conveying both craftsmanship expertise and folkloric connotations; for Su embroidery, a multidimensional expression integrating technical standards, emotional heritage, and innovative concepts is essential. Additionally, a “layered decoding” method is recommended for culture-specific elements to ensure cultural essence is retained, while the “core information priority” principle must be strictly followed to fit video time limits and guarantee audience comprehension.

Keywords: ICH documentaries; subtitle translation; cross-cultural communication; translation strategies; *Inheritance on Fingertips*

1. Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter referred to

as “ICH”) is not only a carrier of traditional crafts passed down from generation to generation, but also embodies the historical memories, aesthetic para-

digns, and collective cultural identity of specific regions. UNESCO clearly defines it as a “vivid expression of human wisdom” in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. China has also strengthened the value of ICH in cultural inheritance and international communication through the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People’s Republic of China. In this context, the subtitle translation of ICH-themed documentaries has become a key link in breaking barriers to cross-cultural communication - in addition to language conversion, it also serves as a medium for conveying connotations of culture [1].

Inheritance on Fingertips is concerned with representative ICH crafts such as Zisha (purple clay) pottery, gold-painted wood carving and Su embroidery. Its subtitle translation faces the following key challenges at least three:

First, crafts professionalism issues such as “dazi xiu” (seed stitch embroidery, a technique where small, dense “seed-like” stitches are used to create textured patterns) of Su embroidery or “niliào zhēnxuǎn” (clay material selection, a process where purple clay is identified, screened and blended together in certain proportion to guarantee quality of Zisha pottery) should not be translated literally. Otherwise, overseas audiences may find it hard to understand the core of crafts [2].

Second, ICH is oriented to reflect the oriental aesthetic logic and social-cultural symbols. As a result, it is likely to experience “information loss” due to differences in cultural cognition. For example, if the symbolic meaning of certain patterns on gold-painted wood carving (believed to be closely related to traditional Chinese concepts of “fortune”, “longevity” and “prosperity”) is not properly conveyed to overseas audiences, they may fail to understand the cultural background of these concepts, which may also be missing in their cultural experiences.

Third, video communication. Information amount and degree of acceptability should be properly balanced given the limited time. If subtitles are too long or contain too many technical details, audiences may focus on subtitles and miss visual information; if subtitles are too simplified, they may fail to convey the core of crafts - therefore, it is necessary to select proper information and express them in a concise way [3].

Taking specific translation cases from China Intercontinental Communication Center as the starting point, this study analyzes and decomposes translation strategies and practical approaches under different ICH craft scenarios. Its purpose is to provide actionable reference models for the cross-cultural communication of similar ICH content, avoid the weakening of craft value and aesthetic misunderstandings caused by cultural barriers or information oversimplification, and facilitate the realization of effective

cross-cultural transmission and value resonance of traditional Oriental crafts.

2. Research Design

2.1 Corpus Selection

The research takes the core segments of the three chapters “Millennium Zisha”, “Gold-Painted Wood Carving”, and “Su Embroidery” in the documentary Inheritance on Fingertips as the research objects, and extracts the lines and their corresponding English subtitles around the entire production process and cultural connotations of each craft. [4]The corpus is analyzed according to four dimensions: professional terms, culture-specific items, artisans’ colloquial expressions, and subtitle translation affected by video duration limitations.

2.2 Analytical Methods

A mixed method of “text comparison + effect evaluation” is adopted in this study, with the specific implementation steps as follows: First, text comparison. By conducting a sentence-by-sentence comparison between the original lines of the documentary and their English subtitles, the study records the specific application of translation strategies (e.g., literal translation, free translation, domestication, foreignization)^[2]. For instance, when translating culture-specific terms like “Zisha clay”, the strategy of “foreignization with explanatory notes” is documented; when dealing with artisans’ colloquial expressions such as “this stuff has to be pure”, the shift from colloquial Chinese to natural English conversational language is categorized as “free translation adapted to oral style”. Second, effect evaluation: Drawing on the “Multimodal Communication Effect Evaluation Framework” [5].

3. Subtitle Translation Strategies and Case Studies of Three Major Intangible Cultural Heritage Techniques

3.1 Translation Strategies for Technical Terminology

3.1.1 Zisha Pottery Craft

Translation of specialized terminology should closely align with the core links of the craft while ensuring the transmission of cultural connotations. Taking terms in Zisha pottery as an example:

In the phrase “烧制好的祥和壶” (the fired Xianghe Teapot), the term “烧制” is translated as “firing process”

rather than a simple verb like „fired“. This choice is accurate in reflecting the high-temperature firing stage of Zisha pottery - it clearly indicates that it is a systematic and technical procedure (with technical requirements of temperature control, firing duration and kiln atmosphere) rather than a casual heating process, therefore, crafts professionalism is preserved. We do not translate „auspicious teapot“ literally. [6] As a matter of fact, „auspicious“ in Western culture often becomes a religious symbol or a ritualistic mascot. If translating it literally, it is possible that audiences may have misassociation (for instance, associating it with certain religious totem) and deviate from the original cultural meaning of „xiang he“ (a secular wish for peace, harmony and good luck in traditional Chinese daily life). The author use „teapot of luckiness“ instead. By expressing „luckiness“ in a more universal and culturally neutral way, this domestication strategy helps to convey the Eastern cultural imagery of „praying for blessings“ without causing cultural misunderstandings. This practice is also in line with the „Cultural“ Concept Adaptation Principle that the translation of terminology should adapt to the cognitive cultural context of target audience in order to transmit cross-cultural meaning effectively [7].

3.1.2 Gold-Painted Wood Carving

In this case, literal translation is taken as the main strategy to build a solid technical knowledge background for overseas audiences to understand the craft. By directly describing with internationally popular terminology or simply giving audiences an obvious understanding of technical features, the audiences will build a technical knowledge system with clear and unambiguous technical information without lowering the precision of Chaozhou gold-painted wood carving’s technical process [8].

3.1.3 Su Embroidery

For the specialized terminology of Su embroidery, the core idea is to define the process of a craft operation accurately and connect the technical description of crafts to the emotional value. That is, it avoids translating terminology in a cold and technical way but puts the „human meaning“ of the craft (for example, recognition of parent and child, pursuit of perfect work) into technical translation, connecting to the „Terminology-Emotion Linkage Principle“ [9].

3.2 Translation Strategies for Culturally Specific Items

It is converting abstract eastern aesthetics into perceivable expressions. Descriptions like „delicate material, simplicity over complexity“ and „concise lines, vitality-laden charm“ are rooted in traditional eastern aesthetic prin-

ciples. Since these abstract aesthetic concepts may pose understanding challenges to overseas audience—who generally expect perceivable visual features in arts—if the description needs to cater to these audiences, the translation should transform the untouchable cultural connotations into perceivable expressions in a way consistent with western audience’s aesthetic cognitive features.

3.3 Translation Strategies for Colloquial Expressions

To restore the authenticity of the craft’s production scenes and ensure that subtitles align with natural conversational logic (both in the original context and the target language), colloquial expressions from artisans require context-specific adjustments—avoiding overly literal or rigid translations while preserving the sincerity of on-site dialogue. Below is an analysis of representative cases, which aligns with the „Contextualized Translation of Colloquial Language“ concept [10].

3.4 Translation Adjustments Under Time Constraints

Video communication also needs to convey information in a concise subtitle context within limited screen time. Excessively lengthy or redundant translations can cause audiences to miss visual content (e.g., craft operations, artisan movements) or struggle to keep up with the video’s rhythm. Therefore, subtitle translation for ICH documentaries must prioritize „core information extraction + logical streamlining“ to align with the efficient, fast-paced nature of video transmission. Below are representative case analyses [3]:

Original line: „要始终保证温度在 1200 度左右, 添加木柴“ (Literally: „Must always keep the temperature around 1200 degrees; add firewood“). Translated as: „In order to make a Zisha teapot of top quality, the temperature needs to be kept at 1200 Celsius degrees“.

The translation abandons the literal superimposition of „temperature value + action“ and instead extracts the implicit core goal of „making high-quality Zisha pottery“ (a key context omitted in the original colloquial line). By using the logical connector „In order to,“ it clarifies the causal relationship between „adding firewood“ (implied action) and „maintaining temperature for top-quality products,“ helping audiences instantly grasp: „Why is temperature control important?“ rather than just receiving isolated information about „temperature“ and „firewood.“ This compression not only makes the subtitle shorter, but also enhances audience understanding of the craft’s precision - a requirement in video scenes [11].

4. Conclusion

Taking *Inheritance on Fingertips* as an example, this paper explores the subtitle translation strategies of the personalized translation strategies of three kinds of ICH crafts, namely Zisha pottery, gold-painted wood carving and Su embroidery, based on cross-cultural communication theory, Skopos theory and cultural linguistics theory. The research findings show that subtitle translation of ICH documentary should implement personalized strategies of crafts. That is to say, the “hierarchical decoding” method should be used to process culture-specific items according to the value dimensions of different crafts, and the content related to history, folk customs and application scene should be distinguished. At the same time, under the limitation of video duration, the strategy of “priority to core information” should be implemented to extract key objectives and simplify redundant logic. These strategies can effectively balance the crafts, culture and communication objectives, and provide an operable practice way for the cross-cultural transmission of ICH.

This study also has some limitations. First of all, the research corpus comes from the key clips of *Inheritance on Fingertips* about three crafts. Therefore, the universality of research conclusions may be limited. That is to say, the translation characteristics of other ICH categories, such as traditional music, dance and folk literature, may not be covered. Second, the analysis of translation strategies focuses on textual strategies. There is no empirical verification from the actual overseas audience. For example, a survey or interview is needed to prove whether the translated subtitles really bridge the cultural gap and improve understanding.

This study also has certain limitations. First, the research corpus is derived from core clips of *Inheritance on Fingertips* focusing on three crafts, which may restrict the universality of the conclusions—they may not fully cover the translation characteristics of other ICH categories such as traditional music, dance, or folk literature. Second, the analysis primarily centers on textual translation strategies, lacking empirical verification from actual overseas audiences, such as surveys or interviews to confirm whether the translated subtitles truly bridge cultural gaps and improve understanding.

In the future, the research can be extended in two directions. On the one hand, the scope of the corpus can be extended to more kinds of ICH themed documentary. This will refine and supplement the framework of translation strategy and make it more adaptable. On the other hand, the empirical research method can be introduced. That is to say, the overseas viewers can be invited to evaluate the translated subtitles and collect the feedback of overseas viewers on the extent to which they can understand the

subtitles after being translated, so as to perfect the strategies according to the understanding and acceptance of viewers and make them more consistent with the actual needs of cross-cultural communication, and promote the accurate and effective global transmission of Chinese ICH.

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