

Subtitle Translation of the Live Action Film *Mulan*: From a Cross Cultural Perspective

Junkai Wang*

School of Foreign Languages,
Renmin University of China,
Beijing, 100872, China

*Corresponding author: wjk4869@
ruc.edu.cn

Abstract:

As an important tool in intercultural communication, the function of intercultural film subtitle translation is vital. Disney's *Mulan* live-action film is an IP conversion with Eastern and Western culture as well as back translation elements. The research value of its subtitle translation is enormous. However, most of the current research focus on the comparison between English version and Chinese version, few studies systematically analyze the differences between Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan subtitle versions. Therefore, taking *Mulan* subtitles as the object, this study aims to explore how the narrative intent of different versions is conveyed in this paper. Combining Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, Bassnett's Cultural Translation Theory and Skopos Theory, the research method adopted in this paper is multiversion comparative analysis in semantic and culture field. By studying these three different Chinese subtitle versions, this study explores how different translation strategies influence the conveyed meaning and cultural context in the process of intercultural communication. It is hoped that this study can help enhance intercultural communication by producing more accurate and intercultural sensitive subtitle translation.

Keywords: *Mulan*; Subtitle Translation; Crosscultural Comparison

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Disney's liveaction *Mulan* is adapted from the Chinese folk ballad *The Ballad of Mulan* in the Northern Dynasties. Because there are great conflicts between its Westernized narrative perspective and Chinese traditional culture, it has become a typical example of crosscultural communication. The uniqueness of

this movie lies in the conflicts between its globalized narrative strategy and the domestic nature. The film tries to introduce a metaphysical concept, i.e. Qi, which has been first popular among the world due to the previous spread of Chinese philosophy. However, the original core of the story is collectivism from taking her father's place to join the army. The mode of decontextualization is rare, since other films such as *Kung Fu Panda* use Chinese symbols to tell a brand new American story, or traditional films that focus on

martial arts as a single cultural export, It attempts to use Chinese classic narratives as a carrier to output a universal narrative that has been transformed by magic. This active replacement of the source culture is hardly seen in other Hollywood films whose themes are from China.

Its subtitle translation needs to cope with three kinds of problems at the same time: language conversion, cultural adaptation and ideological adjustment. Currently, the related researches on film subtitle translation haven't formed an integrated theoretical system but still rely on single-version analysis, and there is few comparison within the same language. In addition, under the background of globalization, the cultural communication strategy of film should have more scientific evaluation. Referring to the previous studies, translation should take the target audience's cultural understanding into consideration, and choose the appropriate strategy of literal translation or free translation according to the type of text [1].

1.2 Research Gap

In the existing translation studies of liveaction *Mulan*, most of the comparison is between English version and Chinese version, and there is few analysis of differences between versions within Chinese subregions. The main gap is that there is no systematic linguistic comparison among the three regional versions, and it is hard to find out how the balance between cultural fidelity and regional differences is achieved in crosscultural film subtitle translation.

1.3 Research Significance

The core differences between *Mulan* and other films are the complexity of crosscultural adaptation and the specificity of its secondary cultural translation, which constitute the innovative value of studying its subtitles.

First, the theme has two cultural attributes. It is a traditional Chinese IP adapted by Disney, which contains core value symbols such as loyalty, filial piety and martial arts culture on one hand, and has elements of Western Hollywood heroism on the other hand, making its characteristic Chinese-American mix different from the single cultural context of original films. In addition, the subtitles possess a unique backtranslation attribute. Since the story originated in China, the English version of the film already underwent one cross-cultural translation. Translating the subtitles back into Chinese then forms a secondary translation feature. Finally, the audience is segmented across regions. Audiences in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have significant regional cultural differences, contrasting with the single-region target audience positioning of most other films.

Such comparative research not only helps deepen the un-

derstanding of translation localization, but also provides a micro-perspective for observing the internal diversity within the Chinese-speaking regions. As for the key role of subtitle translation in cultural dissemination, the quality of subtitle translation directly shapes the perception for those who have never heard about *Mulan*.

This paper studies the subtitle texts of *Mulan*, focusing primarily on character dialogue subtitles, including a small number of scene description subtitles and song lyrics subtitles. It does not cover end credits subtitles listing cast and crew.

At the theoretical level, it helps improve the methodological framework for film subtitle translation by integrating Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory and Bassnett's Cultural Translation Theory to build a collaborative model for analyzing language and culture, promoting interdisciplinary integration between translation studies and communication studies. Simultaneously, it provides new case studies for the cross-regional translation of -culture-specific items, enriching theories related to bidirectional cultural translation.

At the practical level, it helps enhance the effectiveness of cultural export by revealing the key role of subtitle translation in resolving Sino-Western cultural conflicts, providing strategic references for the international dissemination of Chinese stories. By comparing official Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, dubbed Chinese subtitles, and unofficial translations, it summarizes practical techniques, offering operable standards for the film subtitle industry and insights for future foreign film subtitle translation.

If the narrative intent of Disney's official English subtitles is to reflect female awakening and empowerment through the story of taking her father's place in the army, is this intent conveyed equivalently through translation strategies in the different Chinese subtitle versions from the Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan? This study is trying to find out which version achieves the best conveyance effect.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Subtitle Translation

Nida proposed that translation should seek equivalent reader response in the target text as in the source text [2]. Functional Equivalence requires equivalence in both informational content and, as much as possible, formal expression, achieving naturalness. Analysis can proceed from semantic, lexical, and syntactic equivalence. Existing research often applies this theory to the semantic level of *Mulan* subtitles, further clarifying the practical im-

plications of functional equivalence. For example, when analyzing the translation, the paper will examine whether the mainland version achieves equivalent communicative effects as the original in terms of functionality, rather than just making literal or culturally adjusted comparisons

Bassnett said that the heart of translation is the cultural transfer and integration; it's a crosscultural communication instead of just a language transfer; the unit of translation is culture, not the separate text process; the translation should work as well as the original in the target culture, translators should solve the cultural differences by the cultural transfers [3].

Translation is a purposeful action, Vermeer suggested that the goal of reaching crosscultural communication purposes can be achieved by a functionally appropriate target text, Nord added that the purpose (skopos) of target text to be achieved by translator determines the translation strategy [4,5]. The target text should follow the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule. There should be a reasonable fidelity to the original. As the theory shows, the folk version pursues more entertainment of information, while the official mainland version focuses more on aligning with mainstream values.

2.2 Cultural Dimension Differences and Subtitle Translation Dilemmas

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory provides a framework for analyzing East-West value conflicts, where differences between Chinese and American cultures are particularly notable in Power Distance and Individualism dimensions [6]. Research indicates clear cultural dimension misplacement in Disney's adaptation of *Mulan*: the traditional Chinese value of filial piety was simplified into equal father-daughter dialogue, and the concept of Qi was mistranslated as male energy, reflecting the overlay of Individualism over Collectivism [7]. Such deep cultural conflicts pose challenges like conceptual gaps in subtitle translation, such as the dissolution of the spiritual core of loyalty, filial piety, righteousness, and moral integrity. Ma Zihan further pointed out that Disney embeds Eastern symbols into a Western narrative framework, making translation a tool for cultural appropriation [8].

2.3 Cultural Adaptation Strategies in Subtitle Translation

Regarding the handling of culture-loaded words in film subtitles, academia proposes three core strategies.

To begin with, it is the functional equivalence strategy, based on systemic functional linguistics, emphasizing the reproduction of interpersonal function through adding modal particles and converting rhetorical questions to ensure complete transmission of character emotions [9]. The

next is communicative translation. Huang & Wu, using *Ne Zha* as an example, proposed three principles: accuracy, conciseness, and instant readability, advocating for replacing cultural images to reduce the target audience's cognitive load [10]. As for -audience-oriented adjustment, research targeting Arabic audiences showed that although audiences rate literal subtitles positively, literalism easily leads to loss of cultural information, requiring translators to adjust methods based on target audience expectations [11].

Furthermore, Zhao Qianni's comparative study revealed that differences in voice (passive to active conversion) and mismatches of cultural images (using Fujian Tulou to refer to Northern Dynasties dwellings) further highlight the language thought divide, necessitating targeted adaptation strategies [12].

2.4 Audience Reception and Cultural Discount Phenomenon

Research based on Hall's theory revealed that there are clear variations in audience decoding for both animated and live-action *Mulan*[13]: because good characters like Mushu facilitated successful cultural communication, animated *Mulan* manifested marked decoding from audiences, whereas *Mulan* evoked oppositional cultural communication from both Chinese and American audiences due to poor transferences such as original chi setting diminishing empathy and abusing cultural symbols.

3. Construction of Parallel Corpora

They are formulated in accordance with the norms of professional translation, strictly in accordance with the standards of the film industry, the main task of which is the complete reflection of all information, the transmission of feelings, emotions, cultural nuances of the source language: by comparing several subtitles, it is quite possible to identify that the official simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese subtitles are already quite formal and rigorous, they not only adhere to the modern norms of the use of Chinese language, grammar and vocabulary, but also scrupulously adhere to the transmission of the nuances of the source culture, avoiding vague formulations and excessive "adaptation" that can lead to a deviation in meaning.

In contrast, the grassroots subtitles selected in this study are mainly independently produced and uploaded by film and television enthusiasts or non-professional subtitle groups, and their production process is not restricted by strict industrial standards. This makes grassroots subtitles significantly more flexible and popular in style: they abandon the overly formal wording, and instead adopt a

language style that is close to daily communication, especially grassroots Simplified Chinese subtitles, which often use colloquial expressions familiar to the public and even appropriately integrate popular Internet terms, with the primary consideration being the audience's intuitive understanding and emotional acceptance. The differences between the two types of subtitles are more prominent in the cultural translation layer. Official subtitles generally tend to adopt foreignization strategies, and their core purpose is to introduce and promote the source culture while translating, helping the audience understand the unique cultural background of the original work. Official subtitles have extremely strict control over the number of words per line, because they need to match the audio duration and screen display space, and maintain a relatively stable average word count to ensure that the audience can read the subtitles smoothly within the effective display time. In contrast, grassroots subtitles often prioritize the completeness of information expression over word count control, which leads to longer word counts in some cases and thus extended subtitle display time.

Official subtitles use the official language as part of maintaining the seriousness of the system, aiming to convey the legitimate culture of the official authorities, while the popularization of folk subtitles is a market-oriented strategy that prioritizes meeting the entertainment needs of the audience. So, the difference in language style reflects their different purposes.

4. Analysis

4.1 Translation Differences of Qi

Qi is a unique concept in Chinese philosophy. Its translation is more than just a language choice; it reflects a cultural stance.

Mainland China and Taiwan use the traditional term *yuanqi* and *zhenqi* respectively. Hong Kong uses the original Chinese character *qi* to keep the flavour of the original. Folk translations explain its meaning in a simple way.

As a term only existing in Chinese culture, both mainland version and Taiwan version use the traditional terms. They choose the words existing in Chinese and have rich cultural connotation. It is an internal-cultural perspective. It assumes that readers know or should know the term. It tries to keep and transmit the cultural orthodoxy. But the drawbacks are equally obvious: it may cause cultural discounts, as audiences who are not familiar with Chinese philosophy may feel confused, thereby affecting their understanding of the core narrative of her inner strength.

This is in stark contrast to the folk version's approach of ensuring accessible understanding for the audience. The

translator assumes an ideal cultural recipient and is committed to spreading this unique Eastern philosophical concept to the audience, regardless of their country of origin. Hong Kong version keeps the flavour of the original by using the original character. It uses local and external expressions. Folk version uses explanatory translations. It focuses on easy to understand and does not create cultural barriers. Folk version explains simply in folk translation that it is vital energy. They want to make the concept cultural unique disappear and become a universal and easy philosophical or sci-fi concept. It is an external-cultural perspective.

4.2 Negative Language

The official simplified Chinese subtitles from the mainland minimize the expression of negative meanings.

The mainland version translates *stink* as the smell of sweat. It not only reflects the problem, but also shows the source of the smell and avoids using impolite words. It shows that the mainland context is rather polite in terms of interpersonal communication. The Taiwan version uses "you smell terrible", which carries a slightly colloquial sense of familiarity while criticizing. The Hong Kong version uses "you are too smelly", which is concise and direct. The folk version uses "you smell bad", which fully retains the straightforward style of the English original without softening the tone. It shows that the folk version's translation is closer to the literal meaning rather than adapting to the local culture.

Moreover, the mainland version shifts the focus of criticism from the person to the thing, which is sweat. Expressions like "did you act foolishly" or "can't keep calm" also greatly reduce aggressiveness. This is in line with the social norms of the mainland culture, which emphasize politeness, avoids direct conflict, and maintains collective harmony. According to Hofstede, collectivist culture emphasizes group harmony and stable interpersonal relationships, and strives to avoid direct conflicts. The softening treatment of the mainland version can be further extended to the traditional control of negative expression by official media, and translation itself has become a means of ideological filtering. This can be linked to face saving in Chinese interpersonal communication - maintaining group harmony through indirect criticism, which conforms to the principle of conflict avoidance in collectivist culture. Similarly, this process also has its own drawback, which leads to a reduced effect on the narration of women growing up in harsh environments.

5. Conclusion

From the above case studies, it can be seen that the trans-

lator's choice of translation strategies is closely related to their cultural stance and ideology, which deeply affects the quality of the translation and the information conveyed to the audience.

In the mainland version, the emphasis on ethical vocabulary and the softening of specific pragmatic expressions show that the translators focused on cultural adaptation and ideological transformation. They strived to translate actively align with the mainstream values of the Chinese mainland, ensuring that although the original subtitles of *Mulan* were written by non-Chinese, they were as consistent as possible with the acceptance and recognition of local audiences.

Non-mainland versions relatively ignore cultural adaptation. For specific culture-loaded words, they tend to use more general words for simple explanations, stripping away the specific cultural background. They interpret these words as more universal, simple concepts, emphasizing loyalty to the original text and accuracy of information transmission at the cost of eliminating cultural uniqueness.

There is a huge gap between the film producer's cultural adaptation strategy and the cultural expectations of the target audience, especially Chinese audiences. However, this gap has been alleviated through the efforts of official translators, who act as cultural mediators.

The translation disputes of *Mulan* prove the common difficulties and special challenges of cultural communication in the era of globalization. If the international communication of Chinese cultural elements only stays at the superficial transplantation of symbols, without accurate interpretation and respect for their spiritual connotations, it will be difficult to achieve effective value transmission and emotional resonance.

In this regard, the role of translators should actively change from invisible text converters to interpreters and dialogue constructors with cultural awareness and subjectivity. Moreover, future cross-cultural communication should be established on the basis of thorough understanding and recognition of each other, finding the same point in the different and meaning-making communication. This will enable Chinese people's stories transcend the cultural boundary, participate in the cross-cultural and people-to-people exchange more, and develop from one-way cultural transmission to two-way cultural communication. The results of this study can provide some reference and may inspire a little different groups. For professionals in subtitle film industry, when translating subtitles, in addition to translate word by word, they should deeply understand the film's theme and all the details used for that theme. For film distributors, a true and deep understanding

of the target area is needed; one should not subjectively assume, and it is also necessary to recruit highly qualified translators to improve the subtitle translation. For future practitioners of cross-cultural communication, comparing the differences of culture in different regions through this film and study and experience for themselves telling story. For those who are interested in sociolinguistics, through this study, one can directly observe the impact of society and culture on language and understand more similar issues.

References

- [1] Liuling Long, Yu Li. On the translation of film and TV drama from Bassnett's cultural translation theory[J]. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*, 2022, 4(3): 131-135..
- [2] Nida E A. *Language and culture: Contexts in translating*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.
- [3] Bassnett S. *Translation studies*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004.
- [4] Vermeer H J. Starting to unmask what translation is about[J]. *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies*, 1998, 10(1): 41-68.
- [5] Nord C. Quo vadis, functional translation?[J]. *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies*, 2012, 24(1): 26-42.
- [6] Hofstede G. Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context[J]. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2011, 2(1).
- [7] Zou Xiaolin. A cross-cultural study of Disney's live-action film *Mulan*[J]. *Home of Drama*, 2023, (28): 147-149.
- [8] Ma Zihan. A study on the construction of the Chinese image in Hollywood films—Taking Disney's film *Mulan* as an example[J]. *Cultural Innovation Comparative Research*, 2022, 6(18): 13-16.
- [9] Jian Han, Yanzhu Yin. Applying interpersonal function theory in film subtitle translation[J]. *Open Access Library Journal*, 2025, 12: e13108.
- [10] Xiaohu Huang, Jiawen Wu. On film subtitle translation from the perspective of communicative translation[J]. *EAS Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 2023, 5(3).
- [11] Alsager S N, Almohizea M I. An analysis of subtitle translation of *Mulan*: Skopos theory-inspired perspective[J]. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 2023, 7(3): 50-68.
- [12] Zhao Qianni. Viewing Sino-Western linguistic and cultural differences through the subtitle translation of the film *Mulan*[J]. *Modern and Ancient Cultural Creation*, 2024, (5): 102-104.
- [13] Guan Shuaishuai. A study on the communication of the image of *Mulan* in Disney's film from the perspective of encoding/decoding[D]. Anhui: Anhui University of Finance and Economics, 2023.