

# Subtitling Translation of a Bite of China from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology

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**Abstract:** The documentary, *A Bite of China*, serves as an important vehicle for disseminating Chinese culture to the world. Its subtitle translation plays a crucial role in cross-cultural communication. Based on the eco-translatology proposed by Professor Hu Gensheng, this paper analyzes the adaptation and selection processes in the subtitle translation of *A Bite of China* from three dimensions: linguistic, cultural, and communicative. The study finds that the translators achieve a balance in the translation ecology by adaptively transforming linguistic forms, conveying cultural connotations across cultures, and accurately reproducing communicative intentions. Through case analysis, this paper examines the compensation strategies in subtitle translation and their role in promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture, offering a new theoretical perspective and practical reference for the study of documentary subtitle translation..

**Keywords:** Eco-translatology, *A Bite of China*, subtitling translation; three-dimensional transformation, cultural dissemination

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the deepening of the Belt and Road Initiative and the implementation of China's "going global" strategy for its culture, documentaries, as an effective means of cultural dissemination, have attracted increasing academic attention in terms of translation studies. *A Bite of China*, as a successful food documentary, not only showcases China's rich culinary culture but also conveys the values and lifestyle of the Chinese nation. The eco-translatology theory proposed by Professor Hu Gensheng provides a new perspective for studying such translations. This theory posits that "translation is the translator's adaptive selection activity of transplanting the text to fit the translation ecology"<sup>[1]</sup>. This paper will analyze the cultural omission issues and compensation strategies in the subtitle translation of *A Bite of China* from the perspective of the three-dimensional transformation in eco-translatology, and explore how translators achieve adaptive selection in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions to achieve the goal of disseminating Chinese culture.

## 2. ECO-TRANSLATOLOGY

Eco-translatology is a breakthrough interdisciplinary research achievement in the field of translation studies over the past decade. Its theoretical foundations mainly consist of three aspects: ecological holism, Eastern ecological wisdom, and the adaptation/selection theory. Based on Darwin's theory of evolution, this theory regards the translation process as "an alternating and cyclical process of adaptive selection and selective adaptation"<sup>[2]</sup>.

Under the perspective of eco-translatology, the translation ecology is a multidimensional concept, encompassing "language, communication, culture, and social factors" [3], as well as the interaction between the original author's ideas and the translator's thoughts. The translator plays the role of "an adapter to the ecological environment" throughout the translation activity [4], and needs to make adaptive choices within a specific translation ecological environment. These choices are mainly reflected in the adaptive transformation of three dimensions: linguistic, cultural, and communicative.

Eco-translatology emphasizes the translator-centered approach, considering the translator as the center of the translation activity, with a dual identity: being an "adapter" to the source language ecological environment and a "selector" for the target language ecological environment. "When facing two

different languages and cultures, the translator should not rigidly apply the source language to the target language, but should coordinate the balance between the source language and the target language in terms of grammar, discourse, and language style.”[5]

### 3. THE TRANSLATION ECOLOGY OF THE SUBTITLES IN A BITE OF CHINA

The subtitle translation of documentaries faces a unique translation ecology. Unlike the translation of literary works, documentary subtitles “must not only convey the meaning accurately but also match the visuals with a certain rhythm”<sup>[5]</sup>, while being subject to multiple constraints of time, space, and technology. As a food culture documentary, the translation ecology of *A Bite of China* is even more complex.

#### 3.1. Macro-level Translation Ecology

From a macro perspective, the translation ecology of *A Bite of China* is influenced by national cultural strategies. With the increasing international status of China, more and more Chinese films are reaching a global audience. Documentaries, as an important medium for shaping the national image, must balance cultural authenticity and the effectiveness of dissemination to foreign audiences. *A Bite of China*, with its diverse content, rich language, and wide range of ingredients introduced, excellently showcases the essence of Chinese culture. This mission of cultural dissemination constitutes an important part of the translation ecology of its subtitles.

#### 3.2. Micro-level Translation Ecology

At the micro level, the subtitle translation of *A Bite of China* faces multiple constraints:

**Formal Constraints:** Time and space limitations are significant. Subtitles need to convey information completely within a limited time (usually 2-4 seconds) and space (usually no more than two lines).

**Linguistic Constraints:** There are significant differences between Chinese and English in grammatical structure and expression habits. Chinese emphasizes meaning coherence, while English relies more on form and structure.

**Cultural Constraints:** Many concepts in Chinese food culture lack corresponding expressions in English, leading to cultural omissions.

Moreover, the subtitles in *A Bite of China* have a distinct characteristic of synchronizing with both the visuals and the narration. The subtitles in the documentary are a complete textual system, often received separately from the spoken language. Translators need to ensure that the subtitles are synchronized with the visuals and the narration while maintaining their coherence. Subtitle translation is a form of diagonal translation, which involves converting spoken language into written language and performing cross-language translation. Faced with such a translation ecology, the translators of *A Bite of China* need to fully exert their subjectivity, make “selective adaptation” and “adaptive selection” based on “adapting” to the ecological environment, and achieve the best dissemination effect through three-dimensional transformation.

### 4. ADAPTIVE TRANSFORMATION IN THE LINGUISTIC DIMENSION

Adaptive transformation in the linguistic dimension refers to “the translator's adaptive transformation of linguistic forms during the translation process. This kind of adaptive transformation in the linguistic dimension is carried out at different levels and in different aspects.”

#### 4.1. Conversion between Parataxis and Hypotaxis

Chinese is a paratactic language, focusing on semantic coherence rather than formal connection, while English is a hypotactic language, relying on conjunctions and grammatical structures to express logical relationships. When dealing with this difference, translators often achieve the conversion by adding conjunctions, adjusting word order, and so on.

**The Original Text:** 这些味道，已经在漫长的时光中和故土、乡亲、念旧、勤俭、坚忍等情感和信念混合在一起，才下舌尖，又上心间，让我们几乎分不清哪一个是滋味，哪一种情怀。

**The Translated Text:** Mixed with emotions and beliefs such as hometown, folks, keeping old friendships in mind, hardworking and thrifty, perseverance, and so on, these flavors have lasted for a long time, not only to the tip of our tongue, but also to our hearts, making it almost impossible to distinguish which is a taste and which is a feeling.

In this example, the translator converts the Chinese paratactic sentence into the English hypotactic structure. By adding conjunctions such as “mixed with”, “not only... but also”, and “making”, the loose Chinese sentences are integrated into a logically coherent compound sentence, which is characteristic of English hypotaxis. At the same time, the phrase “这些味道” is adjusted to the middle of the sentence to avoid the problem of a top-heavy sentence structure in English, demonstrating the translator's adaptive choices in the linguistic dimension.

#### 4.2. Balancing Dynamic and Static Features

Chinese often employs verbs, which gives it a dynamic quality, while English frequently uses nouns and prepositions, resulting in a more static quality. Translators need to be mindful of this difference and achieve a balance between dynamic and static features during the translation process.

The Source Text: 取最新鲜的冬笋切寸段，下重油加各种调味料，即成为江浙一带最常见的家常菜。

The Translated Text: The cubes of fresh winter bamboo shoots, after being cooked in deep fat with various spices, will be a widely popular dish in Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces. The original text employs a series of verbs such as “取”, “切”, “下”, “加”, and “成为”, presenting a dynamic process. In contrast, the translation converts these verbs into “the cubes”, “with various spices”, and “be cooked”, reflecting the characteristic of static expression in English. This conversion not only faithfully conveys the cooking process but also conforms to the expression habits of the English language.

#### 4.3. Application of Omission in Translation

Due to the temporal and spatial constraints of subtitles, translators often employ the method of omission, leaving out repetitive or non-essential elements that do not affect the core information.

The Source Text: 所有由美食纪录片引起的垂涎之心皆可从这里找到最好的出口，一切思乡、怀旧、想象的情绪都能在这里得到最温暖妥帖的安放。

The Translated Text: All the coveted hearts aroused by gourmet documentaries can find the best outlet here, where homesickness, reminiscence, and so on can be placed most warmly and appropriately.

The translator simplified “思乡、怀旧、想象的情绪 (the emotions of homesickness, nostalgia, and imagination)” to “homesickness, reminiscence, and so on”, avoiding redundancy while retaining the core information. This kind of omission not only adapts to the spatial constraints of subtitles but also does not affect the conveyance of meaning, representing a typical manifestation of adaptive transformation in the linguistic dimension.

As can be seen from the above analysis, in the linguistic dimension, the translators of *A Bite of China* have achieved adaptive transformation between Chinese and English by adjusting sentence structures, converting parts of speech, and appropriately omitting elements. This approach not only preserves the information and style of the original text but also conforms to the expressive conventions of English and the technical requirements of subtitling.

### 5. ADAPTIVE TRANSFORMATION IN THE CULTURAL DIMENSION

Adaptive transformation in the cultural dimension requires translators to “pay attention to cultural differences in the source language and avoid misunderstandings of the cultural connotations conveyed by the original text”<sup>[2]</sup>. *A Bite of China* contains a wealth of Chinese cultural concepts related to food, cooking methods, and culinary philosophies, which are unique to Chinese culture. The translation of these culturally specific items is both a key focus and a challenge in subtitle translation.

#### 5.1 Translation Strategies for Cultural Keywords

For cultural keywords, translators adopt different strategies based on specific contexts, mainly including literal translation, transliteration, and free translation.

#### 5.2. Literal Translation

This method is suitable for dish names whose basic meanings can be conveyed through literal translation, typically adopting the structure of “cooking method + ingredient” or “flavor + ingredient”. Examples are as follows:

莲藕排骨汤 is translated as Lotus root and rib soup, and 清炖跳跳鱼 is translated as Stewed mudskipper. Such translations are intuitive and clear, facilitating foreign audiences' understanding of the basic composition of the dishes.

### 5.3. Transliteration

Transliteration is appropriate for proper nouns that are rich in cultural connotations and lack direct equivalents in English. When necessary, annotations can be added to provide further explanation. Look at the examples below:

腊八豆腐 is transliterated as Laba Tofu, and 打糕 is transliterated as Tteok, with an additional explanation of “a kind of rice cake”.

Transliteration effectively preserves the unique cultural characteristics of Chinese terms. By creating a “foreignization” effect, it arouses the curiosity of foreign audiences, making them more interested in exploring the cultural connotations behind these terms.

### 5.4. Free Translation

Free translation is suitable for expressions that are rich in cultural connotations and whose full meanings cannot be conveyed through literal translation. Please refer to the following examples.

狮子头 (Shizitou) is translated as Yangzhou Style Braised Meatball. This translation explains the dish's origin and cooking method, helping foreign audiences understand its essence.

刀板香 (Daba Xiang) is translated as Sliced Salted Pork. This translation clarifies the main ingredient and preparation style, making it easier for foreign viewers to grasp the dish's characteristics.

By using free translation, the translator provides explanatory context that helps foreign audiences understand the substantive features of the dishes, rather than just their names.

### 5.5. Interpretation of Cultural Concepts

Many culinary concepts in A Bite of China are imbued with profound philosophical ideas. Translators need to employ creative transformations to convey these cultural connotations.

The Source Text: 在中文里，“火候”一词的使用并不局限在厨房，更能用来评价处世的修养，以及为人的境界。

The Translated Text: In Chinese, the use of the expression “duration and degree of heating” is not limited to the kitchen, but rather can be used to evaluate the cultivation of life value. The term “火候” (huohou) is a core concept in Chinese culinary philosophy, embodying the wisdom of “moderation” and “appropriateness” in life. Instead of simply translating it as “heat”, the translator expanded it to “duration and degree of heating” and added an explanation that it can be used to “evaluate the cultivation of life”. This translation accurately conveys the cultural connotations of the term. It avoids cultural omission and does not create comprehension barriers.

### 5.6. Compensation for Cultural Default

When there is a vacancy in the target language culture for elements present in the source language culture, the translator needs to adopt compensation strategies.

The Source Text: 今天是请酒神的日子，没有人怠慢。

The Translated Text: This is the day to worship the god of wine; no one dares to slight it.

“请神” (inviting a deity) is a folk sacrificial activity in China. A literal translation as “invite” fails to convey its cultural connotations. The translator's choice of the word “worship” aligns more closely with Western audiences' understanding of religious rituals, achieving an effective transformation at the cultural dimension. This compensation is not a mere cultural substitution but a creative transformation based on an understanding of the source text's cultural implications.

## 6. ADAPTIVE TRANSFORMATION AT THE COMMUNICATIVE DIMENSION

The adaptive transformation at the communicative dimension requires translators to “focus on whether the communicative intentions in the original text are reflected in the translation”<sup>[6]</sup>. For promotional

documentaries like *A Bite of China*, the transformation at the communicative dimension is particularly crucial as it directly affects the effectiveness of cultural dissemination.

### 6.1. Consideration of Audience Acceptance

The ultimate goal of subtitle translation for documentaries is to enable foreign audiences to understand and embrace Chinese culture. Translators need to fully consider the cognitive environment and reception habits of the target audience and make appropriate adjustments to the original text.

The Source Text: 半生闯荡，带来家业丰厚，儿孙满堂，行走一生的脚步，起点，终点，归根到底，都是家所在的地方，这是中国人秉持千年的信仰，朴素，但有力量。

The Translated Text: Half a lifetime of adventure brings wealth to one's family, and a full house of children and grandchildren. The starting point and ending point of a lifetime are where one's family is located. This has been the belief of Chinese people for thousands of years, simple but powerful.

The translator rendered “儿孙满堂” as “a full house of children and grandchildren”, adopting an idiomatic expression in English that conveys family happiness. Additionally, the phrase “朴素，但有力量” was simplified to “simple but powerful”, aligning with the concise and direct style of English expression. These transformations not only preserve the communicative intent of the original text but also take into account the reception habits of the target audience.

### 6.2. Transmission of Emotional Impact

*A Bite of China* not only introduces delicious cuisine but also conveys emotions and values. At the communicative dimension, translators need to ensure that these emotions can transcend cultural barriers.

The Source Text: 在这个时代，每一个人都经历了太多的苦痛和喜悦，中国人总会将苦难藏在心里，而把幸福变成食物，呈现在四季的餐桌之上。

The Translated Text: In this era, everyone has experienced too much pain and joy. Chinese people always hide their bitterness and turn happiness into food on the dinner table.

The translator rendered “苦痛” as “pain” and “苦涩” as “bitterness”, with the former emphasizing physical suffering and the latter highlighting the taste of bitterness. Through this nuanced distinction, “the effect and role of cultural intercommunication are achieved, clearly demonstrating the power of food in the hearts of the Chinese people”<sup>[7]</sup>. This translation accurately conveys the Chinese philosophy of “turning bitterness into sweetness” in life, thereby achieving a strong emotional resonance

## 7. CONCLUSION

Firstly, the “three-dimensional transformation” theory of eco-translatology offers an effective analytical framework for the study of documentary subtitle translation. By examining the adaptation and selection process from the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions, one can comprehensively grasp the complexity of subtitle translation. Research indicates that the translators of *A Bite of China* achieved adaptive transformation between Chinese and English languages at the linguistic dimension through strategies such as the conversion of parataxis and hypotaxis, as well as the balance between dynamic and static expressions. At the cultural dimension, they effectively compensated for cultural defaults by employing strategies like literal translation, transliteration, and free translation to handle culture-loaded words. At the communicative dimension, they ensured the cross-cultural communication effectiveness of the documentary by considering audience acceptance, transmitting emotional impact, and optimizing dissemination effects.

Secondly, the “translator-centeredness” emphasized by eco-translatology is fully manifested in documentary subtitle translation. Facing a unique translation eco-environment, the translators of *A Bite of China* fully exerted their subjectivity and made appropriate adaptive choices under multiple constraints, including formal, linguistic, and cultural constraints. These choices were not arbitrary compromises but rather based on comprehensive consideration and balancing of the translation eco-environment, reflecting the core concept of eco-translatology that “translators engage in selective activities to transplant texts during the translation process”<sup>[8]</sup>.

Finally, the subtitle translation practice of *A Bite of China* offers valuable insights for the “going global” of Chinese culture. Successful cultural communication necessitates finding a balance between fidelity



to the source culture and adaptation to the target culture. Through the “three-dimensional transformation” of eco-translatology, translators have not only preserved the distinctiveness of Chinese culture but also ensured the acceptability of international audiences. This translation practice holds significant reference value for other types of promotional translations.

Of course, this study also has certain limitations. Due to space constraints, it did not cover all seasons of subtitle translation cases in *A Bite of China*. Future research could expand the corpus scope for a more comprehensive analysis. Additionally, eco-translatology itself is still evolving, and its theoretical framework and application methods require further enrichment and refinement.

In summary, studying the subtitle translation of *A Bite of China* from the perspective of eco-translatology not only validates the explanatory power of this theory but also provides theoretical guidance for documentary translation practice. As China’s international communication capabilities continue to enhance, how to effectively tell Chinese stories and disseminate Chinese voices through translation remains a topic worthy of in-depth research. As an emerging interdisciplinary translation theory, eco-translatology will play an increasingly important role in this field.

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