

A Study on Subtitle Translation Strategies in the Film Chang'an's Lychee Based on the Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract:

With Chinese films increasingly entering the global market, subtitle translation has become an important bridge for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication. It plays a vital role in helping overseas audiences understand the content and emotions of the films. Based on Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, this paper explores the subtitle translation strategies adopted in the film Chang'an's Lychee, focusing on the practice of formal, semantic, and cultural equivalence. Through an analysis of representative subtitle examples, it finds that the translator, while preserving the original information, employs flexible translation strategies to ensure both semantic accuracy and natural expression in the target language, effectively conveying the cultural connotations. The study demonstrates that Functional Equivalence Theory provides theoretical guidance for subtitle translation, emphasizing that the translated text should consider the target audience's cultural background and linguistic habits while ensuring accurate information transfer, thereby realizing effective cross-cultural communication. This study offers theoretical and practical insights for optimizing subtitle translation strategies and improving the international dissemination of Chinese films.

Keywords: *Chang'an's Lychee, Functional Equivalence Theory, Subtitle Translation, Cross-cultural Communication*

1. Introduction

Chang'an's Lychee is a historical drama-comedy set in the Tang Dynasty's Tianbao era, directed and starred in by Da Peng, and adapted from Ma Boyong's novel of the same name. The film draws inspi-

ration from the famous verse by late Tang poet Du Mu: "A galloping horse in red dust brings a smile from the consort, unaware that the lychees have arrived." It imagines a "mission impossible" undertaken by a minor official, Li Shande, who must deliver fresh lychees from Lingnan to Chang'an within a

limited time. The story not only embodies rich historical and cultural significance but also reflects modern workplace and social realities through the extraordinary experiences of an ordinary man, evoking strong audience resonance.

As Chinese films increasingly “go global,” subtitle translation has become an essential bridge in intercultural communication. High-quality subtitles help foreign audiences overcome language barriers and gain a viewing experience comparable to that of native audiences [1]. Studying the subtitle translation of a culturally rich film like *Chang'an's Lychee* therefore holds both academic and practical value.

On one hand, such research helps summarize the experiences and shortcomings of Chinese subtitle translation for international audiences and explores more effective ways to spread Chinese culture. On the other, Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory, as an important paradigm in translation studies, offers guiding principles for subtitle translation practice. This paper, under the framework of Nida's theory, analyzes the translation strategies in *Chang'an's Lychee* subtitles, assessing the degree of formal, semantic, and cultural equivalence achieved, and discussing the significance of subtitle translation in cross-cultural communication.

2. Nida's functional equivalence theory

The American translation theorist Eugene Nida proposed the Functional Equivalence Theory, which emphasizes that translation should reproduce the message and effect of the source text as fully as possible. Nida defines translation as “reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.” This definition highlights that translators must not only convey the semantic content but also achieve naturalness and stylistic appropriateness.

The core idea of Functional Equivalence is that the translation should achieve the same or similar effect and function as the original, enabling the target audience to have a response equivalent to that of the source audience [2]. In other words, successful translation depends not only on accuracy of meaning but also on whether the target audience reacts to the translation as the original audience did. Nida stressed that translators should pay close attention to the target audience's cultural background and linguistic habits, adopting flexible methods to achieve “equivalent effect” [3]. This often requires balancing form and content—when the literal form of the source text hinders understanding or sounds unnatural in the target language, the translator should prioritize semantic and functional

equivalence over formal imitation.

Nida also pointed out that translation is a cross-cultural communicative act: translators must be “bicultural” as well as bilingual. When handling cultural elements, they should make function-oriented adjustments to prevent misunderstanding. This insight is particularly significant for film subtitle translation.

Given the brevity and immediacy of subtitles, translators must focus on audience reception, ensuring clarity, naturalness, and effectiveness. In summary, Functional Equivalence Theory guides subtitle translators to prioritize naturalness and completeness of meaning from the target audience's perspective, realizing effective cross-linguistic communication [4].

Several studies have extended the application of this theory—for example, Lu Jie (2009) [5], Tang Zhiwei (2014) [6], Zhao Dudu (2016) [7], Li Yufeng (2016) [8], and Yang Chengling (2021) [9]—though most focus on Chinese teaching materials rather than audiovisual translation.

3. Subtitle translation in *Chang'an's Lychee* from the perspective of functional equivalence theory

3.1 Formal equivalence

Formal equivalence focuses on maintaining the structure and content of the source text. Since subtitles are brief and constrained by time and space, translators may condense or adapt content but should still preserve the original syntax as much as possible to maintain clarity.

Example 1:

一骑红尘妃子笑 无人知是荔枝来

Translation: “One rider gallops in red dust as the Consort smiles. No one knows it is the lychees that have arrived.”

This classical line by Du Mu depicts the emperor's extravagant efforts to deliver lychees for Yang Guifei's amusement. The translation retains the poetic parallelism of the original, achieving formal equivalence. However, due to the difficulty of conveying imagery like “red dust” and “the consort's smile,” the English version captures the literal meaning but not the deeper allegorical tone and cultural resonance.

Example 2:

原文：科举制使得普通百姓有机会进入仕途

译文：The imperial examination system gave commoners the chance to enter the bureaucracy.

Here, “科举制” is rendered as “imperial examination system,” a culturally accessible equivalent for Western audiences, effectively explaining its social function.

3.2 Semantic equivalence

Subtitle translation must prioritize naturalness and brevity while preserving the core meaning. When structural differences between languages arise, translators should adapt expressions to ensure semantic equivalence.

Example 3:

随便找个人坑 → *take the fall*

The idiomatic English phrase “take the fall” accurately conveys the meaning of finding a scapegoat, achieving idiomatic fluency and functional equivalence.

Example 4:

一把就还清了贷款 → *in one go*

The concise English idiom “in one go” captures the sense of “all at once,” making the subtitle natural and succinct.

3.3 Cultural equivalence

Cultural differences often lead to loss of cultural nuance in translation. Subtitles, being brief and without annotations, must use adaptive strategies to preserve meaning.

Example 1:

李善德的官职“监事” → *Li Shande, the “Supervisor”*

Though “Supervisor” conveys the general role, the deeper Tang bureaucratic connotation is lost. Supplementary context could improve comprehension.

Example 2:

臣等叩见陛下 → *We, your subjects, pay our respects to Your Majesty.*

The phrase “pay our respects” effectively conveys the ceremonial tone while maintaining linguistic naturalness.

Example 3:

把荔枝浸在冷水里，保持新鲜 → *Immerse the lychees in cold water to keep them fresh.*

This translation accurately expresses the Tang-era preservation method, allowing audiences to grasp the historical detail.

Example 4:

均田制与驿站体系 → *The Equal-field System and the postal relay system*

Though accurate, further explanation would help foreign viewers understand these key Tang institutions.

Example 5:

大唐盛世，士族官员品位高，职务繁多 → *The Tang Dynasty, where the aristocratic officials held high ranks and had many positions.*

The term “士族” is rendered as “aristocratic officials,” partially conveying its meaning but losing the depth of Tang social hierarchy.

Example 6:

见礼！陟罚臧，未敢怠慢 → *Greetings! The law is strict, and we do not dare to neglect it.*

While this translation captures the sense of respect and caution, it weakens the ceremonial nuance of “见礼。” A better version might use “Pay respect!” for stronger cultural equivalence.

Example 7:

荔枝不仅是宫廷的贡品，还是百姓心中的美食 → *Lychees were not only a tribute to the court, but also a delicacy in the hearts of the people.*

Although accurate, the translation could be enhanced as: “Lychees were cherished as both a royal delicacy and a beloved treat among the people of the Tang Dynasty.”

4. Conclusion

As Chinese films increasingly reach international audiences, subtitle translation plays a crucial role in cross-cultural communication. Translators should follow the principles of Functional Equivalence, improving both linguistic competence and cultural sensitivity. Only by ensuring accuracy, fluency, and cultural resonance can subtitles truly act as a bridge between cultures.

As Nida’s theory suggests, when the target audience experiences the same emotions and meanings as the source audience, the highest goal of translation is achieved. Subtitle translators, bearing the mission of cultural exchange, must continuously refine their methods to enhance the global reach of Chinese stories such as *Chang’an’s Lychee*.

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