

Original Research Article

A study on the translation strategies of English subtitles in Chinese cultural documentaries and their impact on global audience perception

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the English subtitle translation strategies employed in Chinese cultural documentaries, delving into the characteristics and applications of various translation approaches, and analyzing their multifaceted impact on global audience perception. Through theoretical analysis and practical case studies, it aims to provide more targeted and effective guidance for subtitle translation in Chinese cultural documentaries, thereby facilitating the better dissemination of Chinese culture worldwide.

Keywords: Chinese cultural documentaries; English subtitle translation; translation strategies; global audience perception

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization, cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent. Chinese cultural documentaries, as important carriers for disseminating Chinese culture, hold significant importance in enhancing the international influence of Chinese culture through their overseas dissemination. English subtitles, serving as a key element in aiding global audiences to comprehend documentary content, directly influence audience acceptance and the accurate conveyance of cultural information. Therefore, studying English subtitle translation strategies in Chinese cultural documentaries and their impact on global audience perception possesses substantial theoretical and practical value.

2. Characteristics and challenges of English subtitle translation in Chinese cultural documentaries

2.1. Translation of culturally specific terms

Chinese cultural documentaries contain a plethora of culturally specific terms, such as traditional festivals, customs, and historical allusions, which often lack direct equivalents in English, posing challenges for translation. For instance, "Spring Festival" conveys the temporal concept of the festival but falls short of fully capturing its rich cultural connotations of reunion and ancestor worship in Chinese culture.

2.2. Linguistic expression differences

Chinese and English exhibit significant differences in grammatical structure and expressive habits. Chinese emphasizes parataxis, with relatively flexible sentence structures, while English emphasizes hypotaxis, featuring rigorous sentence structures. Subtitle translation necessitates adjusting linguistic expressions to conform to English expressive norms. For example, long Chinese sentences may need to be split into multiple short English sentences to ensure clarity and comprehensibility.

2.3. Temporal and spatial constraints

Subtitle translation is subject to strict temporal and spatial limitations. Audiences must quickly read and comprehend subtitle content within a limited timeframe, necessitating concise and clear translations. Simultaneously, the display space for subtitles is limited, precluding excessive text. This requires translators to condense translations while ensuring information completeness.

3. English subtitle translation strategies in Chinese cultural documentaries

3.1. Combination of literal and free translation

For certain terms with cultural characteristics, if there is a corresponding English expression, literal translation can be adopted. For example, "Tai Chi" is directly translated. However, if the terms involve rich cultural connotations, literal translation may not accurately convey their meanings, and in such cases, free translation should be used. For instance, "dragon" symbolizes auspiciousness and authority in China's culture, but in Western culture, it is often associated with "evil" (dragon). This requires free translation supplemented by explanations to convey its deeper meaning.

3.2. Amplification and omission

Amplification involves adding necessary words or sentences during translation to enhance completeness and clarity. For example, when translating culturally specific historical allusions, background information can be added to aid global audience comprehension. Omission, on the other hand, entails deleting redundant or unnecessary words to streamline translations. For instance, certain modifying words in Chinese may not require direct translation in English.

3.3. Cultural compensation strategies

Given cultural disparities between China and the West, global audiences may encounter cultural barriers when comprehending Chinese cultural documentaries. To bridge these gaps, cultural compensation strategies can be employed, such as adding annotations, explanations, or images in subtitles to facilitate better understanding of cultural connotations.

3.4. Dynamic equivalence strategies

Dynamic equivalence emphasizes achieving similar effects in target language readers as those experienced by source language readers. In subtitle translation, readability and acceptability are crucial, enabling global audiences to easily comprehend documentary content. For example, adopting colloquial expressions can make translations more relatable to audiences' daily lives.

4. Impact of translation strategies on global audience perception

4.1. Cultural understanding

Appropriate translation strategies facilitate global audiences' better comprehension of cultural connotations in Chinese cultural documentaries. Through a combination of literal and free translation, cultural compensation, and other strategies, audiences can gain a more accurate understanding of Chinese traditional culture, values, and social phenomena. For instance, accurate translation and explanation of culturally specific terms enable audiences to delve deeper into Chinese culture.

4.2. Emotional resonance

Dynamic equivalence strategies and colloquial expressions enhance emotional resonance between global audiences and documentaries. When translations convey the original text's emotions in a natural and fluent manner, audiences are more likely to resonate, thereby increasing their appreciation and acceptance of the documentaries. For example, poignant stories translated vividly can touch audiences' hearts.

4.3. Dissemination effectiveness

Effective translation strategies contribute to enhancing the dissemination effectiveness of Chinese cultural documentaries on a global scale. Accurate and clear translations attract more global audiences to watch and engage with the documentaries, thereby expanding the influence of Chinese culture. Simultaneously, appropriate translation strategies reduce cultural misunderstandings and conflicts, fostering intercultural exchange and integration.

5. Case study

Taking a Chinese cultural documentary on traditional Chinese handicrafts as an example, this paper analyzes

the application of English subtitle translation strategies and their impact on global audience perception. In the documentary, literal translation is employed for professional terms like "embroidery" and "ceramics" to quickly convey the names of the handicrafts. For culturally nuanced expressions like "ingenuity and unique craftsmanship", free translation is adopted, accompanied by annotations to clarify meanings, aiding global audiences in understanding the charm and cultural value of traditional Chinese handicrafts and enhancing their recognition and dissemination of the documentaries.

6. Conclusion

The selection and application of English subtitle translation strategies in Chinese cultural documentaries significantly influence global audience perception. Translators should flexibly employ a combination of literal and free translation, amplification and omission, cultural compensation, and dynamic equivalence strategies based on documentary content, cultural characteristics, and audience needs to enhance subtitle translation quality. Appropriate translation strategies aid global audiences in better understanding Chinese culture, fostering emotional resonance, and improving the dissemination effectiveness of Chinese cultural documentaries worldwide, thereby promoting the international dissemination of Chinese culture. Future research can further explore translation strategies for different types of Chinese cultural documentaries and leverage new technologies to enhance the efficiency and accuracy of subtitle translation.

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