Subtitle Translation of Animated Films Through the Lens of Three-Dimensional Transformation in Eco-Translatology: A Case Study of Ne Zha II

Yixin Zhang

School of Foreign Languages, Chengdu University of Technology, Chengdu, China
810992886@qq.com

Abstract: In the current globalized and informatized era, cinematic works have emerged as a significant medium for disseminating Chinese culture. *Ne Zha II*, rooted in traditional Chinese mythology yet innovatively reconstructed with modern linguistic adaptations and humorous elements, has achieved international success as the first Asian film to rank among the global top-five box office earners and the global box office champion for animated films. This study investigates the subtitle translation strategies of this cinematic phenomenon through the theoretical framework of Eco-Translatology. By analyzing linguistic disparities between source and target texts, and applying the principles of 'selective adaptation' and 'adaptive selection', the research proposes multidimensional translation approaches across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. The findings aim to enhance the cross-cultural efficacy of Chinese cinematic texts and empower international audiences' comprehension of Chinese mytho-cultural codes, thereby strengthening the global outreach and cultural influence of China's film industry, advancing the "Going Global" agenda for China's animation industry.

Keywords: Eco-Translatology, Chinese Animated Films, Subtitle Translation, Cross-Cultural Communication, "Going Global" Strategy

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese animated films have achieved remarkable progress in implementing the "Going Global" Strategy. From *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* to *Ne Zha Ⅰ: Birth of the Demon Child* and its sequel *Ne Zha II*, these mythologically rooted yet linguistically modernized productions demonstrate growing cultural influence. As of March 2025, *Ne Zha II* has grossed 15.019 billion RMB (including presales), equivalent to US$2.1 billion, ranking fifth in global box office history—making it the first Asian film and non-Hollywood production to break the Western monopoly on this chart. Nevertheless, compared to Euro-American animations, Chinese animated films face persistent challenges in international reception. The deeper their cultural embeddedness in Chinese mythology (as exemplified by the Ne Zha series), the greater the linguistic and cultural barriers in translation emerge.

Domestic scholarship has witnessed comprehensive development in Eco-Translatology research. A CNKI search using "ecological translation" yields over 5,000 publications, with leading Chinese journals dedicating special columns to this theoretical paradigm. Within this framework, subtitling

studies have gained momentum. Zhu analyzed the live-action film *Mr. Six*, proposing tri-dimensional strategies—linguistic, cultural, and communicative—guided by the principles of "selective adaptation" and "adaptive selection" to bridge source-target ecological disparities[1]. Similarly, Mi examined the animated feature *Chang'an*, advocating multidimensional equilibrium under spatiotemporal constraints of subtitling to preserve source-text vitality in target ecosystems[2]. Both studies emphasize ecological balance in translational environments, yet current research predominantly focuses on live-action films (e.g., *Green Book, Farewell My Concubine*) and Western animations (e.g., *Avatar, Kung Fu Panda*), while systematically neglecting domestically produced Chinese animations.

Contrastingly, Western subtitling research, initiated by Caillé's seminal work on translational constraints, has evolved robust theoretical frameworks through contributions by Ivarsson, Chaume, and Taylor[3]. Notably, Wu applied Eco-Translatology to Disney's *The Lion King*, underscoring ecological equilibrium for optimized cross-cultural efficacy[4]. Prevailing Western studies employ Nida's functional equivalence (e.g., Hu's analysis of *Friends*) or Skopos theory (e.g., Zhao's study of *Avatar*), leaving Eco-Translatological investigations into Chinese animated films conspicuously absent.

This study addresses the theoretical and empirical gap by analyzing *Ne Zha II*'s subtitling through Eco-Translatology's tri-dimensional transformation. It aims to: (1) formulate mythospecific translation strategies balancing linguistic authenticity, cultural transferability, and communicative intentionality; (2) enhance the global dissemination efficacy of Chinese cinematic narratives; (3) provide novel perspectives for transcultural mediation of Sinospheric cultural products. The findings seek to empower international audiences' comprehension of Chinese mytho-cultural codes, thereby advancing the "Going Global" agenda for China's animation industry.

2. Material and method

2.1. Theoretical foundation: Eco-Translatological perspective

Emerging from global ecological intellectual trends and traditional Chinese ecological wisdom, Eco-Translatology constitutes an interdisciplinary paradigm that investigates translation through ecological lenses. Evolved from the Adaptation-Selection Theory of Translation, it systematically interprets translational phenomena via three core mechanisms: (1) Translation Principle: Multi-dimensional selective adaptation and adaptive selection. (2) Operational Methodology: Tri-dimensional transformation across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. (3) Evaluation Criteria: Integration of dimensional conversion efficacy, target-audience reception, and translator competence. The theory posits that optimal translations achieve the highest "degree of holistic adaptation and selection" by dynamically balancing these parameters [5].

2.2. Characteristics of animated film subtitle translation

Subtitle translation refers to the translation activity of converting the original language in film and television works into written form and presenting it to the audience in the form of subtitles. Its purpose is to help the audience understand the content in different languages in film and television works, overcome language barriers, and enable the audience to better appreciate and understand elements such as the plot, dialogue, and cultural background of the film. In films like *Ne Zha II*, subtitle translation presents the following characteristics:

2.2.1. Conciseness

The length of subtitle translation is strictly limited by space and time (typically 2 lines × 35 characters in Chinese; 6-8 words/sec in English). Factors such as the size of the screen and the duration of the characters' dialogue all affect the length of the subtitles. Subtitles that are too long or too short are not conducive to presenting the film content clearly and smoothly. Therefore, subtitle translation should be clear and concise. It is advisable to choose common words, simple words, and short words; and the sentence patterns should be simple and straightforward, avoiding complexity and verbosity [6].

2.2.2. Colloquialism

Catering primarily to juvenile audiences with developing cognitive capacities, animated subtitles demand vernacular accessibility. *Ne Zha II* exemplifies this through its strategic use of Sichuan dialectal features and conversational registers that resonate with youth demographics.

2.2.3. Cultural transmissibility

The film, rooted in Chinese mythological traditions, incorporates culturally specific elements such as the sacred Lotus — a Taoist symbol of spiritual purity. Translating these culture necessitates not merely linguistic fidelity but more critically, the strategic mediation of cross-cultural semiotics.

2.3. Three-dimensional transformation strategies in subtitle translation of Ne Zha

Eco-Translatology posits translation as a dynamic process of adaptive selection and selective adaptation, requiring translators to preserve and transform the source text's linguistic, cultural, and communicative ecosystems while ensuring its viability within the target ecosystem[7].

2.3.1. Adaptive transformation from the linguistic dimension

This dimension involves "the translator's adaptive selection and transformation of linguistic forms across multiple levels"[8], necessitating equilibrium between source and target translational ecosystems to ensure fluency, accuracy, and cultural resonance. The film constructs a Taoist cosmological hierarchy centered on the Chan Sect, depicting celestial battles between immortals and demons. Dialogue blends religious lexicon (e.g., mystic incantations) with situational humor and urgency. Translators prioritized semantic fidelity and readability for such linguistically hybrid content.
　　Example 1:
　　Swift and uplift
　　The source phrase originated from Qin-Han administrative documents, where it concluded official decrees to mandate immediate legal compliance, imbuing the text with authoritative immediacy. The target rendering "swift and uplift" employs consonant rhyme to enhance rhythmic urgency, encapsulating both temporal acceleration ("swift") and metaphysical empowerment ("uplift") through concise lexis. This translation strategically mirrors the dynamism and exigency of Ne Zha's spellcasting to rescue Chentang Pass.

2.3.2. Adaptive transformation from the cultural dimension

This dimension refers to "the translator's prioritization of bicultural connotation transfer and hermeneutic mediation during the translation process"[9]. Translators must recognize that translation transcends mere linguistic transposition, requiring systemic adaptation to the source language's

cultural ecosystem while negotiating intercultural semiotic equivalences. Neglecting such cultural disparities risks misinterpretations among target audiences.

In *Ne Zha II*, Ne Zha's pre-battle doggerel—a rhymed monologue blending childlike candor with unwavering demon-slaying resolve—exemplifies this strategy. The translation employs iambic pentameter and heroic couplets.

Example 2:
I am Nezha, the Third Prince bold!
I slay the demons, I write in thyme untold.
Today I come to rid the evil's breath.
You wicked fiends, prepare for death.

The English rendition of this doggerel employs iambic pentameter and heroic couplets as its translational framework. The iambic pentameter structure manifests in the division of each line into five metrical feet (e.g., I am | Nezha | the Third | Prince | bold), where each foot comprises an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. This poetic form, also termed the heroic couplet, features paired end-rhymes (e.g., bold/untold; breath/death) across consecutive lines. By adopting iambic pentameter, the translation aligns with the rhythmic conventions of English poetic tradition, thereby enhancing target-audience receptivity to the verse's prosodic aesthetics. The strategic orchestration of syllabic stress patterns endows Ne Zha's doggerel with a rhythmically distinctive yet culturally resonant cadence in English. This approach achieves dual fidelity: semantic preservation of the original text's combative resolve and childlike forthrightness, coupled with formal adherence to Anglophone metrical norms. Such calibrated adaptation exemplifies cultural-dimensional transformation, where the sinospheric oral tradition of yaoyun shi (humorous folk verse) converges with Western heroic poetics to amplify the transcultural legibility of Chinese mythological narratives.

2.3.3. Adaptive transformation from communicative dimension

This strategy entails "the translator's strategic mediation of bilingual communicative intentionality during the translation process"[1]. Beyond linguistic and cultural transference, translators must prioritize functional equivalence in pragmatic effects to align with the source text's communicative goals. As Tan asserts, "Any message failing to fulfill communicative functions is rendered futile."[10] Translators must therefore negotiate linguistic-cultural disparities by calibrating outputs to audience demographics, film genres, and character archetypes, thereby optimizing cross-cultural receptivity. In *Ne Zha II*, distinct translational strategies are applied to identical source dialogues across the theatrical release and trailers.

Example 3:
Theatrical Version:
Giving off a righteous vibe
Trailer Version:
He is all about righteousness

In the theatrical version, Ao Bing and Nezha share the same physical form, with Nezha's appearance embodying Ao Bing's demeanor—courteous and righteous. The phrase "giving off" denotes "emitting" or "releasing," while "vibe" refers to "atmosphere" or "aura." This translation not only conveys the intrinsic quality of "righteousness" but also vividly depicts an outwardly radiating aura perceptible to those around the character. It allows the audience to viscerally grasp the righteous atmosphere projected by the character, thereby more effectively communicating the character's traits through dynamic audiovisual interplay. This approach ensures that viewers swiftly comprehend the character's conveyed message during the film, enhancing both accessibility and narrative immersion.

In the trailer, describing Ne Zha as "embodying righteousness" incorporates deliberate humor. Originally destined to incarnate as the Spirit Pearl, Ne Zha becomes the Demon Orb through a cosmic mishap, resulting in a demeanor starkly contrasting with Ao Bing—the true Spirit Pearl reincarnation. Ne Zha's mischievous and irreverent persona creates intentional incongruity when labeled "righteous." Within the time-constrained promotional context requiring emphatic focalization, the direct translation of "righteousness" succinctly captures the core notion(embodied virtue). This lexical minimalism, juxtaposed with Ne Zha's carefree visual portrayal, enables instantaneous audience recognition of the character's ironic duality and the subtitles' humorous undertones. The strategic dissonance between textual solemnity and visual levity effectively sparks audience interest and affinity toward the character within limited exposure durations.

3. Conclusion

As an intuitive and vivid art form, animated films serve as an important means of cross-cultural communication. With the growing influence of domestic Chinese animated films in the international market, high-quality subtitle translation enables these films to break through language barriers and becomes one of the key factors for their successful dissemination overseas. Translators should be aware that subtitle translation is not merely a conversion of languages but also a transmission of cultural information. It is necessary to ensure the visual and auditory experience of the audience while watching the film. At the same time, translators need to consider accurately conveying the meanings of Chinese lines as well as the cultural elements embedded in them, allowing the audience to smoothly understand the language information in the film without affecting the overall viewing experience. This will enhance the dissemination power and influence of Chinese film culture and enable Chinese animated films to better "go global".

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