

# The Construction of Chinese Ecological Discourse Power from the Multimodal Translation Perspective: A Case Study of the Documentary *Amazing China*

Jinlin Jiang<sup>1</sup>, Liwei Zou<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of University of South China, Hengyang 421200, China;

<sup>2</sup>School of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou 510000, China.

## Abstract

The global contest for discourse power over environmental and ecological issues has a long history, with nations vying to establish their own paths in the global competition for a voice on ecological civilization. Ecological documentary, by virtue of its authenticity, narrative feature, and communicative superiority, has emerged as effective vehicles for constructing ecological discourse. This paper, focusing on the documentary *Amazing China*, examines China's efforts in building its ecological discourse power through a multimodal translation perspective. It not only dissects the multimodal relationships and translation strategies employed in *Amazing China*, but also analyzes the constructed ecological discourse of China presented in *Amazing China* from three dimensions: the practices of China's ecological civilization construction, the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and the concept of a community of life. This study contributes a fresh perspective to the creation of ecological documentaries and the advancement of multimodal translation theory, while also offering new insights into establishing China's ecological discourse power.

## Keywords

Multimodal translation, ecological discourse power, ecological documentary, *Amazing China*.

## 1. Introduction

The issue of ecological discourse power has become a focal point for the international community in the 21st century. For a long time, China has been under significant international pressure due to the Western media's inaccurate reporting and malicious interpretations of China's ecological environment. In its pursuit of ecological discourse power, China faces numerous obstacles. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, a series of ecological civilization concepts that align with the common interests of all countries have been put forward, including *building a community with a shared future for mankind*, *global partnerships*, and *mutual learning among civilizations*. These ideas have resonated widely in the international community, presenting both opportunities and challenges for China to gain international discourse power on ecological civilization [1]. In the internet era, there is an urgent need to shift from traditional single-path approaches to constructing international discourse power towards diversified ones. Documentaries, by integrating linguistic, auditory, and visual resources, possess unique advantages in narrating ecological stories, shaping national images, and conveying ecological ideologies. They have attracted increasing attention from researchers in recent years [2]. However, existing research primarily focuses on the expressive and communicative power of ecological documentaries in shaping national images [3], overlooking the multimodal aspects. Against this backdrop, this paper takes the ecological documentary *Amazing China* as a case study, examining the construction of China's ecological

discourse power from a multimodal translation theory perspective. The aim is to outline a practical and effective strategy to facilitate China's acquisition of ecological discourse power on the international stage, commensurate with its comprehensive national strength.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Multimodal Translation Theory.

Kress and Van Leeuwen [4] define multimodality as encompassing all channels and media involved in communication processes, extending beyond basic linguistic symbols to include non-linguistic systems such as color, images, music, and saturation. The interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic symbols was initially explored in intersemiotic translation by Roman Jakobson. Although Jakobson's [5] suggestion of translating linguistic signs into non-linguistic ones demonstrated foresight, it did not address how non-linguistic signs within source texts are transformed during translation. Delabastita [6], analyzing meaning conveyance in audiovisual discourse and drawing from classical rhetoric, proposed three types of sign code-switching: *adiecti*, *detracti*, and *substitutio*. It provides theoretical references for transitions between multimodal signs.

Multimodal perspectives in translation studies emerged globally in the 21st century. In 2013, *The Journal of Specialised Translation* dedicated an issue to multimodal translation, and over two decades, research under this perspective has permeated all areas of translation studies [7]. While a unified conclusion on multimodal translation theory has yet to be established in academia, many scholars have made strides. For example, Chinese scholar Zhang Delu [8] outlined a four-level framework for multimodal discourse analysis—cultural, contextual, content, and expression—offering broad guidance for translation practice. Moreover, Jianguo Wu, Diqiao Li, and Hongshan Zhang [2] built upon this, proposing multimodal translation strategies of additional translation, abbreviated translation, and compiled translation. They also summarized three types of intermodal relations based on Pastra's [9] model of cross-media interaction: equivalence, complementarity, and independence, thereby providing theoretical support for this study.

However, current research on multimodal translation in China predominantly focuses on subtitle translation in film and television [10, 11], with the majority of studies confined to the content level [12, 13] and expression level [14, 15], rarely delving into cultural or contextual aspects. With the advent of Xi Jinping's thought on ecological civilization and the proliferation of ecological documentaries, applying multimodal translation theory to analyze the expression of ecological culture in these documentaries not only advances the development of multimodal translation theory but also uncovers new avenues for constructing China's ecological discourse power.

### 2.2. Construction of China's Ecological Discourse Power.

Ecological discourse power refers to a country's ability to influence international environmental governance negotiations, set rules, and interpret them; it is a crucial component of international discourse power, influence, and leadership [16]. Competition over the discourse on ecological issues has long been a global phenomenon. During the process of the global contest for the narrative of ecological civilization, nations are all seeking their own paths to construct such discourse. Currently, China's academic circle has started to pay attention to issues related to the country's ecological discourse power, with numerous scholars analyzing the challenges faced in establishing it, including inadequate dissemination efforts and poor communication outcomes [17], low credibility and weak appeal [18], among others, and offering strategic advice accordingly. Many of these scholars have noticed that leveraging media discourses and civilian discourses in cyberspace to build China's ecological discourse power

not only mirrors and authentically showcases China's achievements in ecological construction, enhancing the *narrativity* of the concept of ecological civilization while reducing its *propagandist* tone [19], but also facilitates the diversification spread of this ideology [20].

Given that ecological documentaries possess characteristics such as authenticity, narrativity, and communicability, numerous scholars have made efforts on associating ecological documentaries with the shaping of national image [21, 22, 23] in recent years. However, research topics often remain limited to the expressive and communicative power of such documentaries [3]. Therefore, this study innovatively adopts the multimodal translation perspective to comprehensively examine the content, expression, and cultural dimensions of the ecological documentary *Amazing China*. By doing so, it can revitalize multimodal translation theory in building a more holistic and multidimensional image of China's ecology, thereby contributing to China's acquisition of ecological discourse power commensurate with its comprehensive national strength on the international stage.

### 3. Multimodal Relationships in Amazing China

Drawing upon Kress and Van Leeuwen's [4] interpretation of multimodality and Forceville's [24] further elaboration and refinement of modalities, the modes involved in the documentary *Amazing China* can broadly be categorized into two main types: visual modality and auditory modality. The visual modality encompasses image symbols, written signs, color symbols, and behavioral actions, while the auditory modality includes spoken language symbols, sounds, and music. These modal symbols interact with one another through the principles of equivalence, complementarity, and independence, collectively constructing the meaning conveyed in the documentary *Amazing China*.

#### 3.1. Equivalence.

The concept of equivalence refers to a situation where information conveyed by different modes is semantically equivalent. All the information points to the same entity, but adds different dimensions to the communicated entity. It serves as additional means to express the same thing [9]. This equivalence relationship involves precise matching or partial matching between modes, and this type of equivalence falls under the category of formal correspondence.



Fig. 1 Taken from the second episode Fig. 2 Taken from the tenth episode

For instance, Figure 1, taken from the second episode of *Amazing China* titled *The Perfect Stopper for Migratory Birds*, features a textual introduction about the Yangtze River while the visual aspect displays the Yangtze River Bridge. These elements form a partial equivalence relationship. The Yangtze River originates from the Tanggula Mountains on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and flows eastward into the East China Sea, stretching approximately 6300 kilometers. Yangtze's vastness and historical depth are challenging to capture entirely in a single shot. The director opted for the representative Yangtze River Bridge as a graphic mode to replenish the expression of Yangtze River. It can not only symbolize the river's unique geographical and historical significance but also highlight its pivotal role in China's cultural and economic development. As the mother river of the Chinese nation, the Yangtze has nurtured generations

for thousands of years. While the linguistic and visual modalities do not directly refer to the same entity, the semantic equivalence is evident to the audience.

Furthermore, equivalence among modes can also be achieved through rhetorical devices like metaphor, metonymy, and personification, leading to rhetorical equivalence.

An example is showed in Figure 2, from the tenth episode *The Black-necked Crane on the Lakeside of the Plateau*. It visually presents Gahai Lake in Gannan, Gansu province. Through verbal and auditory symbols, it introduces the lake as the *Pearl of the Plateau*. Gahai Lake is likened to a pearl not merely because it is the largest freshwater lake on the Gannan Plateau, maintaining its beauty despite its high-altitude location. The color symbols in the visual modality aptly correspond, with Gahai Lake appearing pure like a pearl amidst expanses of green. This metaphor also relates to Gahai Lake's unique ecological function as a vital wetland in eastern Tibet, attracting over 80 species of migratory birds, including swans, cranes, and black storks, which come from Southeast Asia, Nepal, and the Himalayan foothills for breeding during spring and autumn. Gahai Lake fosters invaluable ecological resources for China and the world. Legends surrounding Gahai Lake are also imbued with sanctity, reflecting the reverence of Tibetan herdsman living around the lake for generations. Gahai Lake was designated as a provincial sanctuary for migratory birds in 1982 and later elevated to a national nature reserve by the State Council in 1999, evidencing China's cherishing and conservation efforts.

Thus, the equivalence among modes not only vividly restores and presents the intended semantics but also, through metaphors and other rhetorical devices, conveys the Chinese people's affection and appreciation for their country's magnificent landscapes and ecological riches.

### 3.2. Complementarity.

Complementarity refers to a situation where one mode provides supplementary information to another [2]. The supplementary information often pertains to the action, event itself, or the subject or object of the action, event, or state that was previously expressed by the initial mode.



Fig. 3 Taken from the third episode

For example, Figure 3, taken from the third episode of *Amazing China*, titled *The Sea of Flowers on Swamps*. It depicts the Xinghua stack field in Jiangsu Province. The visual mode shows these unique fields, while the language and audio symbols merely mention *forming fields suitable for cultivation*. The distinct feature of Xinghua stack field is their being surrounded by water on all sides, unconnected to each other, resembling small islands in the sea. The pictorial symbols effectively supplement the term *fields* mentioned in the subtitles, allowing viewers to quickly and accurately associate this with the Xinghua stack field discussed earlier. Moreover, it was the diligent and wise ancestors of Xinghua who transformed unsuitable low-lying wetlands into arable land that now yields grains and vegetables for the locals. Although the verbal symbols only state the fact of *forming*, the depiction of Xinghua farmers navigating between the stack field in the visual symbols well complements the missing subject in the discourse.

Therefore, by leveraging the complementary relationship among different modes in meaning construction, China's ecological environment and biological resources can be presented comprehensively. Meanwhile, when showing China's endeavors and accomplishments in

ecological civilization construction, the supplementation of the subject of events through pictorial symbols enhances the ecological stories' *narrativity* and reducing its *propagandistic* tone. This approach conveys an image of a responsible country committed to ecological development, thereby laying a solid foundation among the masses and providing factual evidence for China to gain ecological discourse power.

### 3.3. Independence.

Independence implies that each mode carries its own information, with symbols capable of standing alone, yet when combined, they yield a richer message. These seemingly independent pieces of information are actually coherent, all aligned with the overarching theme.



Fig. 4 Taken from the twenty-fourth episode

For instance, Figure 4, taken from the twenty-fourth episode of *Amazing China*, titled *A Cow or An Antelope*, intends to inform viewers through linguistic symbols that the sound made by antelopes is similar to that of sheep. However, no equivalent audio information about sheep is presented. Instead, the viewers can only see antelopes through visual symbols. In this case, the language, sound, and image—these three multimodal symbols—operate independently. This independence, though, is relevant to the episode's theme, which highlights the antelope as a rare and precious wildlife living in the remote Qinling Mountains, unseen by many, including local conservationists for over a decade. In the later part of this episode, it mentions that *without using a drone, it's impossible to track them and capture this rare footage*, and emphasizes that *antelopes are sensitive to the approaching drone, necessitating a friendly and safe distance when filming them*. Thus, the absence of corresponding sound symbols can also underscore our respect for and protection of such endangered wildlife as antelopes.

Evidently, the independence among modal symbols plays a unique role in portraying ecological themes, enabling a nuanced representation that respects the integrity and preservation of the subjects depicted.

## 4. Multimodal translation strategies applied in *Amazing China*

Recently, with the need of accelerating the internationalization of Chinese culture and enhancing the country's influence on the global stage, the production of bilingual (Chinese-English) films and television works has increasingly become the norm. Ecological documentaries have also followed this trend. Alongside this emergence, a plethora of studies on subtitled translations for ecological documentaries have arisen, with researchers from various perspectives proposing feasible translation strategies. However, given that ecological documentaries are multimodal discourses, it is often more rational to explore multimodal translation strategies by considering the relationships among modal symbols. Consequently, this section will be grounded in Delabastita's [6] model of intersemiotic translation to analyze the multimodal translation strategies applied in the ecological documentary *Amazing China*.

### 4.1. Additional Translation.

Delabastita [6] posits that additional translation involves introducing new images, sounds, dialogues, or verbal commentary into the original mode. Consequently, the principles of

equivalence and complementarity between multimodal signs are often harnessed in the additional translation within multimodal discourses.



Fig. 5 Taken from the twenty-seven episode

For example, Figure 5 is excerpted from Episode twenty-seven of *Amazing China*, titled *A Home Coming Story of Milu Deer*. The image captures a segment from the story about the conservation efforts between China and United Kingdom for the Milu deer during the 19th to 20th centuries. The translated subtitle reads, *The Milu deer were lost*. This amplifies the location where the deer once lived. The visual symbol conveys precisely the scene from the 19th century when a flood led to the disappearance of the Milu deer in the royal hunting grounds. By introducing a new graphical symbol and leveraging the equivalence among modal signs, the translation process enriches the detail about the deer's disappearance, emphasizing not only that China is the native habitat of this unique species but also subtly hinting at the deer's eventual return and the Chinese government's initiative to establish the royal hunting grounds as a national nature reserve.

#### 4.2. Abbreviated Translation.

Abbreviated translation refers to the removal of irrelevant or redundant information to highlight key points, thereby making the discourse more concise and coherent. To ensure the completeness of discourse meaning and even convey a richer context, abbreviated translation often capitalizes on the complementarity and independence among multimodal signs.



Fig. 6 Taken from the forty-four episode

For instance, Figure 6 is excerpted from Episode forty-four of *Amazing China* titled *A Huge Gathering of Migrant Birds*. The captured segment primarily employs visual symbols and musical symbols. Visual symbols depict scenes of competition for food among various raptors at the Jingxin Wetland, while the accompanying music features the pounding of drums, a tradition in China since ancient times to rally troops and boost morale. The complementarity between visual and musical symbols transforms the harsh law of survival of the fittest in the natural world into an exhilarating, arena-like competition, showcasing the vibrant side of nature. Moreover, as Jingxin Wetland is situated at the tri-border of China, Russia, and North Korea, and close to the Sea of Japan, the migratory birds that stop here are all globally rare species. By portraying the competitive relationship among these birds in a friendly manner, it indirectly conveys China's sentiment of friendship and cooperation towards other nations. When visual and auditory modal symbols are clear and sufficient to convey meaning, they create room for abbreviated translation, thus eliminating the need for subtitles or verbal

commentary. Such translation skill minimizes interference with the overall multimodal effect, enhancing the audience's visual experience.

### 4.3. Compiled Translation.

Compiled translation, as a variant of translation, traditionally refers to a particularly liberal approach. The term inherently implies *alteration*, representing a form of adaptation where the translator, for the sake of the reader or due to certain translation objectives, modifies the content and form of the original text to a certain extent. Thus, compiled translation often leverages the independence of modal symbols to achieve its ends. In *Amazing China*, the directors skillfully employ compiled translation to adeptly handle unavoidable biases and discrepancies.

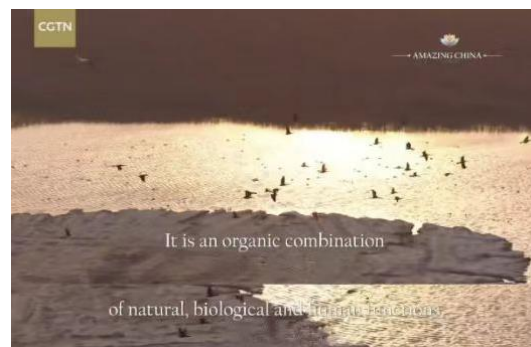


Fig. 7 Taken from the second episode

For instance, Figure 7, taken from Episode two of *Amazing China*, titled *The Perfect Stopper for Migratory Birds*, demonstrates how the independence among different modal symbols leaves room for compiled translation. The original text *It is an organic combination of natural, biological, and human functions* is compiled into the sentence showed in Figure 7, introducing the term *function* as a common predicate for nature, biology, and humans. It anthropomorphize the nature and biology. Moreover, it primarily serves to emphasize that the formation of the Jingxin Wetland and the development of the Yangtze Delta are inseparable from the collective efforts of nature, biology, and humanity. Specifically, dynamic natural forces, such as sediment accumulation and continental shelf subsidence, shape the landscapes and ecological processes of the Yellow Sea and Bohai Bay wetlands, rendering them among the world's most diverse and fertile coastlines. The unique ecological spectacle formed by millions of migratory birds stopping here attracts birdwatchers and photographers worldwide. Most importantly, in the Yangtze Delta region, China's most economically advanced and densely populated area, extensive coastal wetlands have also been conserved amidst the rapid economic development. This responses the controversial issue China has long faced regarding sacrificing nature for economic growth. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the concept of *a community with a shared future for mankind* and *lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets* has been put forth, which emphasizes the need to properly balance economic development with environmental protection. Protecting the lucid waters and lush mountains, harnessing natural advantages to develop specialized industries, focusing on landscapes and ecology, and bolstering the *green economy* are the core value conveyed through the creation of ecological documentaries in China.

In summary, fully utilizing the equivalency, complementarity, and independence among different modal symbols effectively guides the flexible application of multimodal translation strategies such as additional translation, abbreviated translation, and compiled translation. Not only does this make the discourse more concise and coherent, but it also enhances the viewer experience of ecological documentaries, immersing the audience in a vivid atmosphere that appreciates the beauty of China's landscapes, culture, and ecology. Moreover, it acknowledges China's efforts in preserving unique natural landscapes and precious biological resources. The

translation skills like abbreviated translation and compiled translation can also be used to ingeniously respond to controversial criticisms against China. It allows audiences to perceive China's humility in expressing that rare natural resources are a shared global treasure. China's wisdom to promote the balance of the world's ecosystem, shown in the documentary *Amazing China*, further reflect China's concept of harmonious coexistence between human and nature and the principle of global ecological sustainable development.

## 5. Exploring the Ecological Discourse Power Constructed in Amazing China

In the new era, China's ecological civilization discourse is a language symbol rooted in the fundamental objective of promoting ecological civilization construction and the ultimate goal of realizing environmental rights. Scholars Gan Wang and Xianghui Cai [25] have proposed three aspects necessary for constructing ecological discourse power. Thus, this section will analyze the ecological discourse power constructed in the documentary *Amazing China* based on these guidelines.

First, the discourse system of ecological civilization is deeply embedded in the long-term practice of ecological civilization construction [25]. Presenting China's efforts in protecting biodiversity and advancing ecological civilization through ecological documentaries is highly persuasive in building ecological discourse power. *Amazing China* not only showcases China's ecological beauty but also extensively details China's practical actions taken for ecological civilization. Examples like Xinghua stack field (see Figure 3), Jingxin Wetland (see Figure 6), and the Royal Hunting Ground (see Figure 5), turned into nature reserves for their unique roles in protecting rare species, demonstrate China's practical endeavors and build the factual foundations for claiming ecological discourse power.

Second, the harmonious coexistence between human and nature is a fundamental tenet of the discourse system of ecological civilization [25]. This harmony is a critical mission for China's sustainable development and the latest discourse expression for ecological civilization, guiding the direction of discourse power construction. In the documentary *Amazing China*, abundant rhetorical devices such as metaphor, metonymy, and personification are used to vividly convey this central idea, leveraging the equivalence among modal symbols. For example, in episode 6 *The City of Banyan Tree*, the harmonious relationship between Fuzhou residents and banyan trees is well presented and episode 52 titled *The Most Loyal Partner in the Desert* celebrates the friendship between Bactrian camels and humans. What is more, one of the biggest features of *Amazing China* is the view of nature as the mother of creation. For instance, in episode 16, it is mentioned that *But this yellow land was created by particles carried by the wind*. The human's transformation of the Loess Plateau is minimized which can guide the audience to re-examine the relationship between human and nature. The concept of harmonious coexistence between human and nature is the inheritance and development of the traditional Chinese cultural concept of the unity of nature and man.

Lastly, the concept of a community of life is the basic principle of the ecological civilization discourse [25]. Ecological civilization concerns the future of humanity, and protecting the environment and resources is a shared task requiring global collaboration. The story of milu deer (see Figure 5) exemplifies a shared consciousness in preserving biodiversity between China and United Kingdom. In the episode 54 of *Amazing China*, there is a special mention of the origin of the name Guling, a summer resort located in the secret area of Lushan Mountain. More than 100 years ago, a British missionary built a villa area here, so it is named Guling in the sense of English word *cooling*, which expresses the friendship between China and Britain. At the same time, it also expresses China's intention to arouse people around the world to recognize the concept of ecological resource sharing and life community.



In conclusion, the documentary *Amazing China* effectively constructs China's ecological discourse power by demonstrating practical efforts in ecological civilization construction, promoting the harmony between humans and nature, and advocating for a community of shared life, thereby contributing to the global conversation on ecological sustainability.

## 6. Summary

Ecological documentaries, as powerful vehicles for disseminating the values of ecological civilization, should focus on the concepts and practices of ecological civilization. Specifically, in planning such documentaries, the core orientation should be ecological civilization, with the narrative centered on the practices of ecological civilization construction, showcasing successful cases of ecological conservation. Given the interactive relationships among multimodal symbols and their unique role in building ecological discourse power, the production of ecological documentaries should tap into a wealth of multimodal resources to enhance narrative features and attraction. Furthermore, in crafting multilingual versions of these documentaries, the strategic application of multimodal translation techniques can facilitate effective communication, immersing global audiences in experiences that deepen their understanding and engagement with ecological civilization. This, in turn, encourages the international community to be more receptive to China's voice. This study initiates an exploration of China's ecological discourse power construction from a multimodal translation perspective, aspiring to inform the creation of ecological documentaries, advance the development of multimodal translation, and contribute to the establishment of China's ecological discourse power. Nonetheless, the analyzed data, relationships among multimodalities, and applicable translation strategies discussed herein are limited, suggesting potential for future expansion and deeper investigation.

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