

Subtitle Translation in External Publicity Documentaries under the Guidance of the "Three Closeness Principles": A Case Study of Seasons of China

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Abstract

Under the broader context of enhancing China's cultural soft power and telling its stories well, external publicity translation has gained significant importance, with documentary subtitling emerging as a vital medium for cross-cultural communication. This study, guided by Huang Youyi's "Three Closeness Principles"--which emphasize aligning translation with China's reality, foreign audiences' information needs, and their cognitive habits--explores the application of domestication and foreignization strategies in the subtitle translation of the documentary Seasons of China. The research demonstrates that a balanced and flexible integration of both strategies, under the "Three Closeness Principles" framework, enables the effective transmission of Chinese cultural content while maintaining its authenticity. This approach not only bridges communication gaps but also supports the overarching goal of fostering meaningful cross-cultural understanding through external publicity.

Keywords

The "Three Closeness Principles"; External Publicity Translation; Subtitle Translation; Seasons of China; Domestication and Foreignization.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to effectively communicate a nation's cultural identity and developmental narrative has become a cornerstone of international dialogue. For China, this has underscored the critical importance of external publicity translation, a discipline dedicated to conveying the nation's voice to a global audience. Publicity documentaries have emerged as a particularly potent medium within this realm, serving as a dynamic bridge for cultural exchange and mutual understanding. The pivotal role of subtitle translation in these documentaries cannot be overstated, as it directly governs the accessibility, reception, and ultimate impact of the content for international viewers. It is within this significant context that the "Three Closeness Principles", a guiding framework proposed by Huang Youyi, offer a strategic approach. These principles, which advocate for translations that are close to China's reality, aligned with foreign audiences' information needs and resonated with their cognitive habits, provide a vital methodology for navigating the complexities of cross-cultural communication.

Guided by this theoretical framework, this study conducts a focused analysis of the subtitle translation of the documentary Seasons of China. The documentary itself, which explores the profound cultural heritage of China's 24 solar terms, presents a rich corpus of culturally specific concepts that pose distinct challenges for translation. Language proficiency is the most fundamental skill for translators. Therefore, the author repeatedly emphasizes the importance of solid linguistic foundations, arguing that translators must possess keen "linguistic awareness." [4] This research examines the dynamic application of two fundamental

translation strategies--domestication and foreignization--in subtitles. Domestication is employed to adapt culturally specific expressions into accessible and familiar language for target viewers, thereby facilitating comprehension and engagement. In contrast, foreignization preserves the original cultural and linguistic features, allowing international audiences to encounter authentic Chinese concepts in a recognizable yet novel form. It examines how these strategies are strategically deployed, not in opposition, but in a complementary manner to achieve the objectives of the "Three Closeness Principles." Through this analysis, the study aims to elucidate the practical mechanisms by which translators can balance the preservation of authentic Chinese cultural identity with the imperative of ensuring clarity and engagement for a global viewership. Effective foreign-language translation does not involve mechanically converting Chinese text word-for-word into another language. Instead, it requires adapting the original Chinese content to align with the target international audience's thinking patterns [1]. The ultimate goal is to demonstrate how such a principled and nuanced approach to translation can significantly enhance the efficacy of external publicity, thereby contributing to the larger mission of fostering a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of China on the world stage.

2. Research Background

The accelerated integration of China into the global framework has generated unprecedented international interest in understanding Chinese culture and development narratives. This evolving dynamic has positioned external publicity translation as a crucial mechanism for facilitating meaningful cross-cultural dialogue and dismantling perceptual barriers. Within this context, audiovisual media--particularly cultural documentaries--has demonstrated exceptional capacity for conveying complex cultural concepts through immersive storytelling. The documentary *Seasons of China*, produced by China Xinhua News Network Corporation (CNC), exemplifies this trend, weaving together China's intangible cultural heritage of the 24 solar terms with contemporary ecological and social practices. Its multilingual subtitle translation, therefore, serves as a critical interface between Chinese cultural specificity and global audience comprehension, making it an invaluable subject for investigating the practical implementation of translation theory in cross-cultural communication.

The theoretical underpinnings of this research draw significantly from Huang Youyi's "Three Closeness Principles," which have fundamentally reshaped the methodology of external publicity translation in China. These principles emphasize the strategic alignment of translated content with China's social reality, international audience expectations, and culturally specific cognitive patterns. While previous scholarship has explored these principles in various contexts, like the anthropology of *A Bite of China*, the application to environmental and temporal culture as manifested in solar term documentaries remains underexamined. This research consequently addresses a critical gap by analyzing how the complementary application of domestication and foreignization strategies in *Seasons of China* operationalizes these theoretical principles. Through this focused examination, the study aims to contribute to the evolving discourse on effective cultural transmission while providing actionable insights for enhancing the precision and impact of China's global communication strategies.

3. Theoretical Elucidation

Huang Youyi proposed the "Three Closeness Principles" Principle in 2004, based on a distinctive feature of translation in external publicity work: it is primarily Chinese-to-foreign-language translation, involving the conversion of vast amounts of China-related information from Chinese into foreign languages. This characteristic dictates that, beyond adhering to the universal translation standards of "accuracy, clarity, and elegance," external publicity

translation must also require translators to be thoroughly familiar with and apply the “Three Closeness Principles”: proximity to China’s actual development, proximity to foreign audiences’ demand for information about China, and proximity to foreign audiences’ thinking patterns, it also requires translators to be thoroughly familiar with and apply the “Three Closeness Principles”: proximity to China’s developmental realities, foreign audiences’ demand for China-related information, and foreign audiences’ cognitive patterns [5]. The principle establishes a fundamental framework for external publicity translation by addressing the critical need for cultural fidelity and effective communication. These principles consist of three interconnected dimensions: being close to China’s developmental reality, which requires translations to accurately reflect the nation’s authentic socio-cultural context and contemporary progress; being close to foreign audiences’ needs for Chinese information, emphasizing the importance of addressing the specific interests and knowledge gaps of international viewers; and being close to the thinking habits of the target audience, advocating for the use of linguistic patterns and expressive conventions that align with their cognitive expectations. Together, these principles form a comprehensive methodology that navigates the delicate balance between preserving cultural essence and ensuring cross-cultural intelligibility, providing both theoretical guidance and practical standards for transmitting Chinese cultural content to global audiences.

In the subtitle translation of the documentary *Seasons of China*, the “Three Closeness Principles” are systematically implemented to mediate between Chinese cultural specificity and international viewer reception. The principle of closeness to China’s reality guides the treatment of culturally unique concepts, ensuring their inherent cultural identity and philosophical depth remain intact during translation. Simultaneously, the principle of closeness to audience needs informs strategic decisions regarding which cultural elements require elaboration or reframing to maintain viewer engagement and comprehension. Furthermore, the principle of closeness to audience thinking habits shapes the linguistic style and rhetorical choices, favoring expressions that resonate with international documentary viewership while avoiding culturally opaque references. This integrated application enables the translation to function as a cultural bridge, preserving the documentary’s authentic Chinese narrative while making it accessible and meaningful to viewers across cultural boundaries.

4. Application in Domestication

Huang Youyi noted that cultural differences between China and the West result in distinct variations in thinking habits and modes of expression. Many idiomatic phrases in Chinese, when translated literally into English, not only fail to convey the original meaning faithfully but may also cause unnecessary misunderstandings. Therefore, domestication is essential [1]. The formation of the Chinese language and the culture behind it spans 4,000 years. In contrast, English has not been in existence for nearly as long, which inevitably leads to significant differences between the two cultures and languages. Furthermore, differing social systems naturally give rise to distinct discourses [7]. Domestication is one of the most widely used translation strategies in *Seasons of China*. Especially in publicity materials, some obscure Chinese words are translated in line with the principle of making the audience understand, thereby building a bridge of communication. Domestication is usually applied to the translation of traditional idioms, characteristic words, and four-character idioms with Chinese characteristics. Through Domestication, it can bring the translation closer to the masses, thereby realizing the purpose of enabling the masses to understand.

Example 1: 惊蛰节气是客家人一年一度回家祭祖的日子。

The Insects Awakening solar term is when the Hakka people go home and pay respects to their ancestors. (*Seasons of China: the Insects Awakening Solar Term*)

This example demonstrates a straightforward application of the Domestication strategy in translating the Chinese cultural concepts into English. Instead of using a direct, word-for-word translation that would result in awkward and incomprehensible phrases like “Jingzhe Jieqi” or “worship ancestors,” the translator adapts the message to align with the linguistic and cognitive patterns of the target audience. “惊蛰” is rendered as “The Insects Awakening solar term,” which logically explains the natural phenomenon the term denotes. Similarly, the culturally specific term “祭祖”, which involves complex rituals, is translated into the more generalized and universally understandable concept of “pay respects to their ancestors.” This approach prioritizes fluency and immediate comprehension for the English-speaking viewer, effectively bridging the cultural gap by bringing the source text closer to the reader.

Its domesticated approach directly embodies Huang Youyi’s “Three Closeness Principles”. First, it achieves closeness to the thinking habits of foreign audiences. The translation avoids culturally opaque references and uses clear, descriptive English that resonates with how an international audience processes information. Terms like “Insects Awakening” and “pay respects” are intuitive and require no additional explanation. Second, it supports closeness to the needs of foreign audiences for Chinese information. While simplifying the terms, the translation still accurately conveys the core ideas: that there is a solar term marking the time when insects awaken, and that it coincides with a period when a specific ethnic group (the Hakka people) returns home to honor their forebears. It fulfills the audience’s need to understand the custom without being overwhelmed by untranslatable cultural details. Ultimately, by ensuring the translation is both comprehensible and engaging, it serves the principle of closeness to the reality of China’s development. It presents Chinese traditional culture--the 24 Solar Terms and the practice of ancestor reverence--as a living, accessible tradition rather than an esoteric artifact. This effective communication is essential for building a truthful and relatable narrative about modern China, thereby supporting the country's goal of fostering cross-cultural understanding.

5. Application in Foreignization

Translators, especially those working in foreign publicity, often need to strike a balance between remaining faithful to the original text and catering to the needs of the target audience [3]. Foreignization, as a translation strategy, serves as a vital approach to preserving the cultural authenticity and linguistic uniqueness of source texts while facilitating cross-cultural comprehension. In the context of China’s external publicity, this strategy proves particularly valuable when dealing with conceptually rich terminologies and culturally embedded expressions that constitute the core of Chinese cultural identity. The strategic implementation of foreignization allows translators to maintain crucial cultural markers and conceptual frameworks that might otherwise be lost in translation, thereby enabling international audiences to access more authentic representations of Chinese cultural discourse. This approach aligns seamlessly with Huang Youyi’s “Three Closeness Principles,” especially the principle of being close to China’s developmental reality, as it ensures that the distinctive characteristics of Chinese cultural expressions remain intact in their cross-linguistic transmission. By consciously retaining certain culturally specific elements in the translation, foreignization not only respects the source culture’s integrity but also enriches the target audience’s cultural literacy, fostering a more nuanced and genuine understanding of China’s cultural landscape.

Example 2: 四季分明，森林茂盛，被人们誉为天府之国。

Its four distinct seasons and its luxuriant forests have earned it the name “Land of Abundance.”
(Seasons of China: Rain Water)

The translation “the Land of Abundance” for the Chinese cultural epithet “Tiān fù zhī guó” demonstrates a strategic use of foreignization that simultaneously embodies Huang Youyi’s “Three Closeness Principles.” By preserving the core metaphor and formal designation of the original term rather than simplifying it into a generic description, the translation remains authentically close to China’s developmental reality, accurately reflecting how this historical concept is embedded within the nation’s cultural identity. This approach directly serves the needs of foreign audiences by providing them with genuine access to a quintessential Chinese cultural concept, satisfying their informational curiosity about how the Chinese people poetically characterize their homeland. Furthermore, the translated phrase maintains proximity to the thinking habits of the target audience; though distinctively foreign in origin, “the Land of Abundance” is constructed with immediately comprehensible English words, forming a universal metaphor for prosperity that is intuitively understood without requiring prior cultural knowledge. Thus, through its deliberate retention of cultural specificity coupled with linguistic clarity, this foreignizing translation achieves an effective balance, honoring the original term’s unique character while ensuring its meaningful reception across cultural boundaries.

Translators must demonstrate the ability to effectively convey China’s stories, thoroughly understand relevant policies, and articulate them in their most proficient and natural language to apply translation strategies [6] flexibly. As bridge builders in cultural exchange, the broader and smoother the bridges constructed by translators, the more unimpeded the flow of mutual understanding becomes. [2]

6. Conclusion

External publicity translation serves as a crucial conduit for conveying China’s voice to the global audience, with documentary subtitling emerging as a significant medium for cross-cultural communication. Against this backdrop, the “Three Closeness Principles” proposed by Huang Youyi have provided a robust theoretical framework for external publicity translation, emphasizing the need to account for cultural differences to bridge communicative gaps. These principles advocate that translations should align with China’s actual conditions, meet the informational needs of international audiences, and resonate with their cognitive patterns. Within this framework, both domestication and foreignization strategies are flexibly employed in the translation of publicity materials. Domestication prioritizes the acceptability and comprehensibility of the target language, adapting culturally specific expressions into familiar and accessible forms for foreign viewers, thereby facilitating smoother cross-cultural understanding. In contrast, foreignization preserves the cultural uniqueness and linguistic authenticity of the source text, allowing international audiences to encounter and appreciate the original Chinese expressions in a recognizable yet novel form. Rather than being mutually exclusive, these two strategies complement each other under the guidance of the “Three Closeness Principles.”

When engaging in cultural transmission, translators, positioned at the intersection of two mindsets and languages, should demonstrate heightened insight into achieving effective communication. By strategically balancing cultural fidelity and reader receptivity, translators can effectively convey the essence of Chinese culture while ensuring that the message is both accurately transmitted and meaningfully received, thereby enhancing the overall impact of China’s external communication efforts.

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