

# Translation of Chinese Documentary Subtitles under the Perspective of Communication Science

## -- A Case Study of the Firsts in Life

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### Abstract

As international cultural exchanges become more and more frequent and China's international status continues to improve, higher demands are placed on the external publicity of Chinese culture. As a cultural activity, movies and television have a unique role in contributing to this requirement, so its translation and subtitle translation are getting more and more attention from researchers. In recent years, the production level of Chinese documentaries has been improving, and a large number of excellent local documentaries have emerged, which have received unanimous acclaim at home and abroad. The translation of documentaries has also entered the vision of researchers. The translation of documentaries' subtitles can help the international dissemination of Chinese documentaries and enhance the international image of China. In this paper, based on the research on the Firsts in Life, from the perspective of communication science, the author tries to analyze the translation of the English subtitles of documentary title. At the same time, from the perspectives of information, noise, and audience, analyzing the enhancement and weakening of the communication effect.

### Keywords

Subtitle Translation; Communication Science; Documentary; Internationalization; The Firsts in Life.

### 1. Introduction

Since the new era, the construction of Chinese culture "going global" has received more and more attention, the country attaches great importance to building cultural confidence, and the image of China has become more and more important for international communication in the new context. So, how can the international community understand China today, and in what ways can cultural barriers be removed? Chen Shaomin (2014) suggests that "Chinese ideas, values, and culture can be seen in documentaries made in China, which form a text for mutual exchange. In order to make this text more authentic and give documentaries more process and documentary nature, China is increasingly focusing on the quality and foreign communication of documentaries." At the same time, cultural communication is one of the most critical ways in international communication, which is the process of making people's behavior patterns and spiritual pursuits in interaction and communication, so it needs the receiver and the transmitter to have the same understanding in order to accept and recognize each other. In order to achieve international dissemination of documentaries, it is also necessary to disseminate and convey through the media, which inevitably involves the act of translation in the process.

## 2. Research Background

### 2.1. Times Background

In the past, movies and TV dramas occupied the domestic market, and people paid little attention to documentaries, with a small dissemination range and audience. However, in recent years, more and more excellent domestic documentary works have emerged, which are popular among people, such as "A bite of China," "Life Matters," and "This Is Life" and so on, which are loved by Chinese people and have also gained close attention from the international community. The rapid development of the production level of documentaries has made documentaries go from unnoticed to much attention and has also gradually broken the hegemony of overseas documentaries represented by BBC documentaries within the documentary market.

### 2.2. Research Status

Since the 1990s, translation researchers have been aware of the evolving film and television translation and subtitle translation. The CNKI search on the topic of "documentary translation" showed 287 relevant papers as of 2021. Since 2012, the number of papers published on this topic has been steadily increasing, and the research results are abundant, showing a wave-like rise. The improvement of national soft power and the implementation of the strategy of "going global" of Chinese culture has to a certain extent promoted the research in this field.

- Research on documentary translation mainly focuses on subtitle translation, translation strategies, ecological translation science, and teleological perspective, among which subtitle translation occupies the core position of research. However, less attention has been paid to Chinese foreign and small language translations. Moreover, the research on non-dramatic film and television works is relatively weak. Documentary translation involves many disciplinary fields such as translation, communication, journalism, and film and television, so promoting comprehensive interdisciplinary research in this field can significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of foreign communication.
- In terms of research institutions and scholars' publications, based on earlier studies, many domestic researchers have begun to borrow translation theories to analyze the cases of film and television translation. They have achieved specific results, and higher education institutions are the main research force. Soochow University and Guangxi University are representative institutions, but there is a lack of connection. Qian Shaochang (2000), Ma Zhengqi (2003), and Li Yunxing (2001) have contributed more to the research, but cooperation among scholars is lacking, and the aggregation of research groups is low.

## 3. Theoretical Framework: Translation from a Communication Perspective

The rapid development of communication science has attracted the attention of many translation researchers. According to German scholar Wolfram Wilss (1982), "the science of translation has been formed so slowly because people do not know what specific research model to follow or in what order to study it." He defines translation as a unique way of transmitting information between languages related to linguistic behavior and choices. By this definition, translation is no longer just a linguistic equivalent of rewriting but also includes other factors in information transmission. Given the cross-cultural character and function of translation, a new idea has emerged, namely, to integrate translation studies into communication studies. The researcher sees translation as a particular way of information transmission, which can be analyzed comprehensively by using the results of communication science to expand the horizon of translation studies. The translation is also a part of communication, including "encoding" and "decoding." Lv Jun (1998) suggests that "translation

takes place across cultures, and the symbols chosen by the manipulator are no longer the original symbol system, but a cultural transposition of codes is produced."

#### 4. Research Questions

This paper attempts to study the translation of documentary title subtitles from the perspective of communication science, viewing translation as a special kind of information transmission process, in which there are five main aspects: the transmitter (documentary production team and translator), the message (source language), the channel (mass communication), the receiver (domestic and foreign audience), and the transmission effect. This paper mainly focuses on the translator, information, receiver, and dissemination effect and tries to explore the following questions: How can the subtitle translation of documentary film reduce the noise in information transmission and ensure the accurate transmission of information? What should translators pay attention to in the process of translation, considering the particular characteristics of the recipients of information?

#### 5. The Firsts in Life Introduction

The documentary "*the Firsts in Life*" is a 12-episode series of humanities documentaries produced by CCTV and co-produced by Shanghai Radio and Television Documentary Center. Since its launch, it has attracted significant attention on major online platforms, with more than 1.03 billion reads on the Weibo platform, and is one of the highest-rated domestic documentaries on Douban since the beginning of 2020. The director admits that the documentary's theme was to create a documentary that would be a good choice for the audience. The director admits that the documentary's theme is "to record the bright moments of every ordinary Chinese person." The film adopts the way of squatting and filming, focusing on 12 sections of life, such as birth, schooling, work, and farewell, to show the vivid picture of Chinese people's life. The People's Daily commented, "it captures 12 significant points in life and focuses on topics of high interest, forming a series of symbolic "first times" into a series of life silhouettes and conveying a heart-warming story to the audience."

#### 6. Research Results

The title subtitles of the 12 episodes of the documentary and their translations are shown in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Subtitles Translation

Title subtitles	Translation
出生	the World at First Sight
上学	Joys and Tears of the Childhood
长大	Love, Sorrow and Dream in Poems
当兵	Parachuting Day
上班	Towards the Other Shore
结婚	YES, I DO
进城	a Migrant Dream
买房	Owing a Home
相守	The Kitchen of Love
退休	Never Too Old
养老	Hey Twilight
告别	Please Remember Me

The author focuses on three aspects: translator, information and noise, and audience to analyze the subtitle translation and summarize the communication effect brought by the translation.

### 6.1. As Gatekeeper

Huang Dan considers, "By gatekeeper, I mean an individual or group that has the power to decide whether to let something in or out." In the field of communication, the media can be seen as the typical gatekeeper who controls, screens, and produces the information delivered to the public and determines the content received by the audience. In documentary translation, the translator also plays the same role as a gatekeeper in communication. Usually, the translator conveys the message of the original documentary in its entirety, but considering that subtitle translation, especially title translation, has its notable limitations, the translator also modifies some information to achieve a better communication effect. In *the Firsts in Life*, not word by word, but according to each episode's specific content and ideology, the translators try to get rid of the constraints of the word and convey the unique cultural core of China to the audience to the greatest extent. For example, In the eighth episode, the camera is directed at a real estate agent to record and observe the experience of young people buying a house in a big city and to record their efforts in building a tiny home. Therefore, the title "买房" is not directly translated as "buy a house," but rather as "Owing a Home," which means "Having a real home," which accurately expresses the unique "house buying culture" in China. In China, owning one's own house is a lingering sentiment for most Chinese people, especially young people, who spend their lives running around for a "house". In Chinese culture, owning one's own house is the only way to have a home and a foundation to be established, which is a cultural concept rarely heard in the West. Therefore, such a translation achieves an accurate message in the communication process.

### 6.2. Noise Treatment

Xu Jing suggests that "in social communication, noise may point to three meanings: physical noise, that is, the actual noise in the context of the occasion in which communication occurs; semantic noise, that is, communication obstruction caused by the meaning of words; and differential noise, that is, noise due to different factors such as social status, gender, occupation, politics, and motivation among communication participants communication failures caused by differences in social status, gender, occupation, politics, and motivation among communication participants." In cross-cultural documentary communication, the noise faced by the participants is mainly the latter two. The producers of documentaries and the viewers in the source culture have different cultural background knowledge and may have different knowledge structures than those in the translated culture. The integration of source-language documentaries into the translated culture requires the removal of noise in the form of transformed information. For example, In the sixth episode, the camera focuses on the marriage registry in Pudong New Area, Shanghai, and shows the understanding of love in the minds of Chinese people by recording the concept of marriage among young people today. In the translation, the translator cleverly chose the classic sentence of a Western wedding, "Yes, I do," which means "Yes, I am willing to marry or wed this person beside me." There is no such link in Chinese weddings, and the translation uses "Yes, I do" instead of "marriage" to indicate marriage. The translation eliminates the noise in cross-cultural communication and reflects the cross-cultural function of translation.

### 6.3. Audience Awareness

In communication, especially when disseminating information across cultures, it is essential to have an influential audience awareness, that is, to put the characteristics and feelings of the audience first. Relevant reports show that 76% of documentary audiences are from first-tier cities, 55% have a monthly salary between 7,000 and 20,000, 82% are 18 to 35 years old, and

74% have received a bachelor's degree or higher education, which means that documentary viewers are mainly the new middle class in first-tier cities. Thus, the documentary audience generally has the characteristics of high education, high class, and high income, with specific appreciation ability. These characteristics of documentary audiences also reflect the two-way nature of modern communication. Rather than just waiting for the communicator, documentary audiences have a strong sense of participation. Their feedback is vital in documentary communication and should not be ignored. For example, the second episode shows children's growth. The translation "Joys and Tears of the Childhood" directly expands the title's meaning to the concept of "Childhood." After watching the film, the audience can understand the idea the director wants to convey: school is undoubtedly an essential part of childhood, interspersed with countless joys and sorrows, but the child's childhood itself is the most important, which corresponds to 'Joys and Tears' in the translation, with endless meanings. In the final episode, the production team filmed at the China Will Bank in Beijing, recording the stories of people coming to make a will for the first time. Although the title is "告别," the subtitle is "Please Remember Me" rather than "Farewell," which contrasts the English and Chinese languages through reverse translation and shows the literary and aesthetic quality of the translation. Both domestic and foreign audiences can feel the cultural meaning of the translation.

## 7. Conclusion

The study found that the translator is also the gatekeeper of the information in cross-cultural documentary communication, deciding which information can pass through the channel. At the same time, the international dissemination of documentaries faces noise, and translators need to maximize the reduction of linguistic and cultural noise by adding and adaptation. The translators need to minimize the language and cultural noise to facilitate the correct access of the information recipients. Third, documentary audiences have strong aesthetic expectations and a sense of participation, which requires translators to pay attention to the beauty and tension of language when translating documentary subtitles. Under the perspective of communication, the translator is not a passive worker but an active creator. The translation is also the process of secondary creation, and the translator must have cross-cultural solid awareness and appreciation to help the international dissemination of excellent documentaries and promote Chinese culture "going global."

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