Chinese-to-English Metaphor Translation in Ecological Discourse from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract

Metaphors in Chinese ecological discourses convey the ecological concept, culture, and philosophy with Chinese characteristics. This study attempts to explore metaphor English translation strategy and method in terms of the subtitles of an ecological documentary *Song of Life* (shēng mìng zhī gē) under the guidance of the Relevance Theory. It is found that 1) both direct and indirect translation strategies were adopted along with four different metaphor translation methods: metaphor vehicle retention ranking first (most frequently used), followed by metaphor vehicle omission, conversion, and addition in a descending order; 2) These four translation methods in their own context ensure that an optimal relevance between the Chinese metaphor and its English translation is achieved in the ostensive-inferential process to help the audience understand the Chinese ecological ideas. Finally, two suggestions of metaphor English translation are put forward for translators who involve themselves in Chinese ecological discourse translations.

Keywords: Relevance Theory, optimal relevance, *Song of Life*, metaphor translation

1. Introduction

With the continuous progress of China's ecological civilization construction, Chinese ecological discourse works are bountiful in multi-modal forms. *Song of Life* (生命之歌/ shēng mìng zhī gē) is a large-scale ecological documentary jointly produced by China Central Television and Yunnan Province to welcome the 15th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity on November 30, 2021. Showing China's unique ecological wisdom, the documentary intends to send a message that while China is promoting modernization in the new era, it also pays attention to the construction of ecological civilization. It is worth noting that, as an international documentary film for overseas, its subtitles are full of metaphorical arts. (Note 1)

Subtitle translation is a way of pragmatic communication and cultural transmission; and the English translation of the Chinese subtitles aims to transmit Chinese culture abroad through pragmatic communication. This documentary produced by China CCTV is a crystal of Chinese wisdom, showcasing rich and flexible translation strategies and methods of ecological discourse with Chinese characteristics, which demonstrates the continuous progress in the translation and dissemination of Chinese ecological discourse. By selecting the subtitles of *Our Homeland* (我们的家园/ wǒ mēn dē jiā yuán) in *Song of Life* as the research corpus, this paper intends to analyze the strategies and methods of the English translation of subtitle metaphors from the perspective of pragmatic relevance theory.

2. Theoretical Bases

2.1 Relevance Theory and Translation

The most important theoretical research of studying translation from the perspective of pragmatics is relevance theory (Xu & Liu, 2021). Relevance theory was first proposed by Sperber &Wilson (1995) in *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, first developed from the Relevance Principle in the Grice's Cooperative Principle, which treats the communicative behavior of language as an "ostensive-inferential" process. This process includes two aspects (speaker and hearer)of communication, involving information processing by the speaker and the hearer. The speaker provides the hearer with certain information through ostensive communication behavior. From the perspective of speaker, communication is an unmistakable signaling process; from the perspective of the hearer, it is an inferential process; that is, the hearer infers the speaker's communicative intention through the information explicitly provided by him (Huang & Sun, 2011).

The earliest application of relevance theory to translation studies was Wilson's student Gutt. He emphasized that the most important principle to grasp in the communicative behavior of translation is to find the Optimal Relevance (Gutt, 2004). Relevant Translation Theory regards translation as a cognitive reasoning act and a communicative behavior involving brain mechanisms. This communicative act consists of two explicit-reasoning processes: (1) The author of the original text

expresses their communicative intention to the translator, and the translator, as a reader, cognitively obtains the best connection based on the information, logic and encyclopedic knowledge in their own mind; (2) The translator, as a communicator, conveys the author's explicit and communicative intention to the reader of the translation, while the reader of the translation has to reason according to the information, logic and encyclopedic knowledge in the brain provided by the translation, in order to obtain the best association with minimal reasoning effort (Bo & Sun, 2007). As for the second ostensive-inferential process, the translator plays the role of expressing rather than inferring, that is, in order to reduce the target reader's reasoning effort and match his expectations, the translator should make the original translation clear enough (Huang & Sun, 2011). Gutt (2004) also pointed out that the extent of the association is affected by the cognitive reasoning effort and the contextual effect. Under the same conditions, a stronger association comes up with better contextual effect and less reasoning effort, and vice versa (Xu & Liu, 2021). In other words, relevance is proportional to the contextual effect and inversely proportional to the cognitive reasoning effort expended. Therefore, what the translator needs to do is to "seek the best correlation from the communicative behaviors expressed by the original communicator, and then pass this correlation to the receptor; that is to say, the translator transmits his own understanding to the receptor" (Zhao, 1999).

2.2 Metaphor and Translation

Metaphor was first regarded as a rhetorical device; then the publication of the book *Metaphors We Live By* by Lakoff & Johnson in 1980s changed that. Metaphor study was then ushered into a newly cognitive field. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) believe that metaphor is a way of cognition and conceptualization, a dual-domain mapping from the source domain to the target domain, and metaphors are everywhere in people's life. Metaphors not only reflect but also construct reality. Furthermore, they influence and construct our perception and understanding of things, and prompt us to act (Chen, 2014).

Metaphor translation has always been the focus of academic circles. Gutt (2004) mentioned two main strategies in *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context*, direct translation strategy and indirect translation strategy. Direct translation depends on the similarity between two languages, keeping both the content and the style of the two languages similar as much as possible; indirect translation is more suitable for a situation that there are a large number of gaps between the source language and the target language. Therefore, in the case of retaining the basic literal meaning of the source language, the translator translates appropriately with expressions in the source language. Metaphor translation is a crucial part of translation, which tests the translator's skill of finding the optimal relevance with the author's ostensive behavior of the source language, and of employing various translation strategies to convey the relevance to the audience. In this process, the translator becomes the subject of ostensive behavior, and the audience the subject of reasoning.

The method of metaphor translation has always been under the spotlight of plenty of scholars around the world. For example, Newmark (2001) proposed several methods for metaphor translation such as recurrence of metaphorical images, replacement of metaphorical images, conversion of metaphors into similes, omission of metaphors and etc. Huang & Sun (2011) summed up five metaphor translation methods from the perspective of relevance theory: 1) metaphor -> simile with metaphor ground (Wang, 2007); 2) metaphor -> metaphor; 3) metaphor -> metaphor ground; 4) translation with footnotes; 5) non-metaphorical -> metaphorical. Lu & Chen (2020) explored the translation strategies and methods of Chinese political discourse metaphors from *Keywords to Understanding China* (China International Publishing Group & China Academy of Translation, 2016), and summarized four English translation methods of metaphors: metaphor retention, replacement, omission, and addition in translation. The methods of metaphor translation that used by the scholars mentioned above have been list in Table 1, from which it can be sorted out that four kinds of methods of metaphor translation are image (metaphor vehicle) retention, conversion, omission, and addition. (Note 2)

Table 1 Methods of metaphor translation used by different researchers

Lu & Chen (2020)	Huang & Sun (2011)	Newmark (2001)
metaphor retention	metaphor -> simile with metaphor ground; metaphor -> metaphor (with shared metaphorical culture); translation with footnotes	conversion of metaphors into similes; recurrence of metaphorical images
metaphor conversion	metaphor -> metaphor (without shared metaphorical culture)	replacement of metaphorical images;
metaphor omission	metaphor -> metaphor ground	omission of metaphors
metaphor addition	non-metaphorical -> metaphorical	

Metaphor retention of Lu & Chen is a method that the metaphor vehicle of the source text is saved in translation to help readers' direct understanding of the source text. The three methods that Huang and Sun summarized and two methods that Newmark summed function the same in essence as metaphor retention to keep the metaphor vehicle staying put. Metaphor conversion means replacing the metaphor vehicle in the source text with a familiar one in the target text. It is what Huang and Sun concluded that the metaphor is converted into another metaphor with a different vehicle. Metaphor omission is to discard the metaphor vehicle to explicitly convey the essential meaning of the metaphor expression in case that there is no such metaphor vehicle suitable in the current context. And finally metaphor addition means adding a metaphor vehicle to better explicate the connotation of the original text. Such four kinds of methods of metaphor translation are adopted by the translator to maximize the relevance of the reader to the original text, then to minimize the reader's efforts to associate with the meaning of the original metaphor expression, and finally to help the reader get an utmost accurate understanding of the connotation that the author of the source text wants to express.

Metaphors exist in all discourses; however, few ecological metaphor discourses have been studied till now. Texts or discourses mainly aim for pragmatic communication, which endows ecological metaphor discourse a responsibility of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, this study, taking an ecological discourse (a documentary) – *Song of Life* – as a corpus, attempts to explore what metaphor-translating strategies and methods this documentary deploys and whether those translation methods help build an optimal relevance between the source and target discourses for cultural communication. And finally to better the dissemination of the Chinese culture some suggestions for metaphor English translation are provided for an optimal relevance.

3. Exemplification of English Translation Strategies of Metaphors in *Our Homeland* from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

3.1 Statistics on Metaphor Translation Strategies and Methods

According to Gutt (2004), there are two metaphor translation strategies: direct translation and indirect translation, namely literal translation and free translation. And according to the previous studies, metaphor (vehicle) retention, omission, conversion, and addition are the main four metaphor translation methods to achieve the optimal relevance from the perspective of cognitive metaphor as it is mentioned in section *2.2*. For the brevity of naming, this study refers to the naming that Lu & Chen (2020) give to the four metaphor translation methods. With a series of metaphor identification and annotation, the metaphor translation methods used in *Our Homeland* were identified, and the results are shown in Table 2. After this, a detailed explanation for each category of the four metaphorical translation methods will be exemplified.

Table 2 Statistical table of metaphorical translation strategies and methods in *Our Homeland*

Translation strategy	Translation method	Example	Cases (Percentage %)
Literal translation	Metaphor retention	绿水青山就是*金山银山*(lù shǔi qīng shān jiù shì jīn shān yín shān): Green water and green mountains are *golden and silver mountains*	27(61)
		被喻为植物的*诺亚方舟*(bèi yù wéi zhí wù dē nuò yà fāng zhōu): referred to as *the Noah's Ark* of Plants	
	Metaphor omission	认识它的*庐山*真面目(Rèn shí tā de lú shān zhēn miàn mù): know *who they are*	14(32)
Free translation	Metaphor conversion	春天的雨露*催促*着茶树发出新芽(chūn tiān dē yǔ lù cuī cù zhē chá shù fā chū xīn yá): The dew in spring is *an impetus* for the tea trees sprout.	2(5)
	Metaphor addition	仿佛*永恒一般的循环往复*(fǎng fú yǒng héng yì bān dē xún huán wǎng fù): like *an eternal cycle*	1(2)
Total			44(100)

3.2 Exemplification of English Translation Strategies of Metaphors in the Documentary

The literal translation of metaphor guarantees the content and form of the source language metaphor consistent, though it is not a word-for-word translation. Minor adjustments and revisions can be made to achieve the optimal relevance between the

target audience and the source language author with the minimal effort. The main translation method in metaphor direct translation is metaphor retention. Free translation of metaphor is a translation strategy adopted when the source language is metaphorically expressed in the target language culture while the literal translation cannot help convey the metaphorical meaning of the source language or will increase the reader's reasoning effort. Three methods mainly used of the free translation for metaphor include metaphor omission, metaphor conversion, and metaphor addition.

1.2.1   Metaphor Retention

Metaphor retention is used firstly when the metaphor is shared by both two cultures; that is, tenor and vehicle in a metaphor can be directly mapped from one domain to the other, and secondly when some certain purpose like underlining the culture difference is needed. It can be seen from Table 2 that metaphor retention is the one used most frequently among the four English translation methods for the subtitle metaphor in *Our Homeland*. E.g., (Note 3)

> Translation example 1.
> Source text: 如今百花岭人才真正体会到了绿水青山就是金山银山的深刻含义
> Source text Romanized: rú jīn bǎi huā lǐng rén cái zhēn zhèng tǐ huì dào lē lǜ shǔi qīng shān jiù shì jīn shān yín shān
> Target text: At present, people who live in Baihualing find the true meaning of "the deep meaning of Green water and green mountains are golden and silver mountains".
> Translation example 2.
> Source text: 这里是中国西南野生生物种质资源库，7.9 万份植物种子被封存在这里，被喻为植物的诺亚方舟
> Source text Romanized: zhè lǐ shì zhōng guó xī nán yě shēng shēng wù zhǒng zhì zī yuán kù, 7.9 wàn fèn zhí wù zhǒng zī bèi fēng cún zài zhè lǐ, bèi yù wéi zhí wù dē nuò yà fāng zhōu
> Target text: 79000 plant seeds are sealed here. It is referred to as the Noah's Ark of Plants. (Note 4)

The conceptual metaphor in the first example is GREEN WATER AND GREEN MOUNTAIN IS GOLDEN AND SILVER MOUNTAIN. The tenor in the metaphor is "green water and green mountain", which is likened to the vehicle of "golden and silver mountain". This metaphor, meaning that protecting nature brings people continuous benefits, comes from the important concept first proposed by the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping when he was the secretary of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee during his investigation in Yucun, Anji County, Zhejiang Province. Although this metaphor is an expression with Chinese characteristics, the concept words "landscape, gold and silver" shared by Chinese and Western cultures make their metaphorical meaning easy to understand. Translating the Chinese metaphor vehicle "金山银山(jīn shān yín shān)" as "golden and silver mountains" directly builds a bridge of connotation with an optimal relevance between the target audience and the original author, and also conveys the cultural characteristics of the source language. Moreover, a direct translation of such kind of metaphor conceals an aim of spreading the foreignness of the Chinese culture abroad.

In the second example, the conceptual metaphor is GERMPLASM BANK IS NOAH'S ARK. The metaphor vehicle "Noah's Ark", however, is different from that kind of Example 1, since the vehicle of Noah's Ark originally belongs to Western culture. As a symbol of sanctuary, Noah's Ark derives from *The Bible* which tells that God assigned Noah to build a ship that protects people from flood. In this sentence, the author intends to express that the germplasm bank of wild species in Southern China is a hub with abundant plant seeds, which can prevent the extinction of plant species in the world. Therefore, this bank is similar to the function of Noah's Ark in *The Bible*. Since the vehicle of the metaphor in the source language is "Noah's Ark", culturally consistent with the target language, the audience hardly needs any reasoning to understand the source text. So, it is the best choice to save the metaphor vehicle the Noah's Ark in the target text to achieve the optimal relevance between the target audience's reasoning and the source author's explicit results and to facilitate the readers' highly-efficient understanding of the Chinese metaphor.

1.2.2   Metaphor Omission

Metaphor omission is also frequently adopted in the C-E translation of metaphors in the section. This method is mainly used in the case where the metaphor vehicle of the source language culture misses in the target language one, and at the same time there is no synonymous vehicles to replace the source one. Or it is deployed purposely to disseminate the metaphorical meaning straightforward. E.g.,

> Translation example 3.
> Source text: 让我们看一看，认识它的庐山真面目 (Note 5)
> Source text Romanized: ràng wǒ mēn kàn yī kàn, rèn shí tā de lú shān zhēn miàn mù

Target text: We can have a look at them and know who they are.

This metaphor originates from a Yunnan villager when he was interviewed after seeing that the Asian elephants from afar had eaten his crops. The conceptual metaphor in this example can be inferred as ASIAN ELEPHANT IS MOUNT LU. "The real face of Mount Lu (庐山真面目/lú shān zhēn miàn mù)" is an ancient Chinese verse, from Su Shi's poem "I don't know the real look of Mount Lu because I am over there"(不识庐山真面目,只缘身在此山中/bù shí lú shān zhēn miàn mù, zhǐ yuán shēn zài cǐ shān zhōng), which is featured with the unique Chinese culture. "True look of Mount Lu" means the original appearance of something. Given a lack of the culture of the metaphor vehicle "Lushan" in Western culture, it is difficult to find a suitable metaphorical expression corresponding to Western culture. Besides, this metaphor came from a character's oral language, so for the purpose of brevity, the metaphor is omitted in the target line to achieve an optimal relevance between the target audience and source author through free translation.

1.2.3   Metaphor Conversion

Metaphor conversion refers to the method of conversing a metaphor in the source language into a new metaphor in the target language. This translation method is rarely used in the corpus examined in this study because it has plentiful restrictions when applied. whether the two cultures partially overlap in terms of metaphorical expression is still a question, and even if there is such an overlap, it is not reasonable and appropriate to do metaphor-replacing since the number of metaphors that can be fully consistent across cultures is limited (Huang & Sun, 2011). There are only two sentences in the documentary taking this translation method, and here is one of them.

Translation example 4.
Source text: 春天的雨露催促着茶树发出新芽
Source text Romanized: chūn tiān dē yǔ lù cuī cù zhē chá shù fā chū xīn yá
Target text: The dew in spring is an impetus for the tea trees sprout.

At the first glance, it is hard to find out the metaphor vehicle directly in the source text of this example because the vehicle is replaced by the other expression with the quality of the covert metaphor vehicle. However, after inferring, the vehicle can be identified as "people", and the conceptual metaphor of the original text of this example is DEWS IN SPRING ARE PEOPLE IN HURRY, which means that all lives in nature are full of vitality in spring. Here, the source domain "people" is replaced by the target one "impetus", which preliminarily is a physical term referring to the driving force. Since English culture has the metaphorical expression of "A is an impetus for B", while Chinese culture does not, in order to make the meaning stay put, the metaphor in the source language is converted into another metaphorical expression that is familiar to the people who live in the target language culture, so as to shorten the gap for readers to understand and to achieve the optimal relevance with the source language author and understand the source language metaphorical meaning.

1.2.4   Metaphor Addition

Finally, metaphor translation can also adopt a reverse translation strategy, that is, adding metaphors in the target language which are missing in the source language. This target-text-oriented strategy is an extension of the source text, helping achieve greater relevance and better contextual effects, and considers more about the target language reader (Huang & Sun, 2011). However, this method of the English translation is the least used in this corpus, and there is only one case listed as below:

Translation example 5.
Source text: 山路绵绵不绝，它仿佛永恒一般的循环往复
Source text Romanized: shān lù mián mián bù jué, tā fǎng fú yǒng héng yì bān dē xún huán wǎng fù
Target text: The mountain road is endless, like an eternal cycle.

In this example, the conceptual metaphor THE MOUNTAIN ROAD IS AN ETERNAL CYCLE hides in this source text. In order to pass the non-metaphorical meaning of "reciprocity" to the target language audience, the translator adds a vivid and explicit new metaphorical vehicle "an eternal cycle" in the target language, helping the audience directly get the idea of what the source text means, which is more acceptable for the target language readers. Adding such an explicit metaphor vehicle facilitates the readers to understand the source text quickly and accurately, cutting much effort for the target audience's reasoning.

4. Two Implications for the Translation of Chinese Ecological Discourse

The metaphorical English translation of Our Homeland provides the following two implications for the translation of Chinese ecological discourse:

First of all, the principle of faithfulness needs to be followed in the English translation of Chinese ecological discourse metaphors. It is actually why metaphor omission is applied so frequently that it ranks second among the four translation methods. Yan Fu, a well-known Chinese translation master put forward three standards of translation "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance" (Wu & Jiang, 2021), among which faithfulness as the basic principle requires translation text "faithful" to the connotation and the expression of the source one. Connotation faithfulness means that the English translation of metaphors must, first of all, ensure an unchanged meaning of the metaphor. However, the metaphor itself carries much more meaning than its form presents, so that translation of metaphor drains time and energy. To achieve a better effect of the translation, the form of that metaphor will be omitted usually only to save the basic meaning of the metaphor, especially in such case that there is no such expression of the original metaphor. Besides, subtitles of the documentary fleets so fast that too many metaphor expressions saved will leave the translation space insufficient. And finally the target-text readers need to put into much more efforts for an optimal relevance from the ostensive behavior of the source language author. So, on such normal occasions, omitting the missing metaphorical expression in the target language makes an optimal relevance between the source text and the target text.

Second, foreignness has to be guaranteed in English translation of metaphor when metaphor connotation between the source text and the target one gains optimal relevance. *Song of Life*, produced to transmit Chinese ecological concepts, is an ecological documentary with Chinese ecological philosophy,. In this documentary all language expressions including these metaphors carry a different culture from that of countries abroad, aiming for Chinese culture transmission. Therefore, among these four methods, metaphor retention was deployed most frequently. Bhabha (1994) reckoned that the "foreign" element reveals the interstitial…that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which "newness comes into the world". The "newness" or "Foreignness" of the source language emphasizes its cultural difference from the target one yearning for a cultural realm of the country who speaks that language. To complete the mission of spreading Chinese culture internationally, the translator needs the foreignization strategy as a guide during the translation work. This translation strategy is well-advocated by Venuti (1995), who considers it to be "an ethnodeviant pressure on [target-language cultural] values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad". That is to say, the translated text under the guidance of foreignization is responsible for attracting foreign readers' attention to Chinese culture. With both retentions of internal meaning and external form of the metaphor in this documentary, the audience of the English subtitles can link their inference maximally to what the author of the Chinese ones; meanwhile, typical Chinese ecological concepts underlying in these Chinese metaphor expressions can be understood and transmitted to another culture.

5. Conclusion

The construction of ecological civilization has been highlighted unprecedentedly in state governance and administration since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Li, 2020). Metaphor is not only a cognitive model but also a complex linguistic and cultural phenomenon (Huang & Sun, 2011). Metaphors in Chinese ecological discourse reflect unique Chinese culture and philosophy. China's ecological discourse competitiveness in today's international community needs help foreign translation of discourse. However, metaphorical discourses cannot be simply translated literally to realize sending Chinese culture abroad; on the contrary, specific translation strategies and methods should be seriously considered.

This study examines the metaphor translation strategies and methods of *Our Homeland* in the Chinese ecological documentary *Song of Life* and explores how these different methods of translating Chinese metaphors facilitate an optimal relevance between the target readers and the author of the source subtitles from the perspective of cognitive translation studies. It is found that among the translation methods, metaphor retention is most frequently applied, then metaphor omission, followed by metaphor conversion and addition. This result shows that Chinese ecological discourse mainly deploys the translation strategy of foreignization for cultural output. Superficially, there is some attenuation of the relevance between the source text and the target one because of the cultural gap. But due to the universality of the ecological expressions to some extent and the similarity of the form of the metaphor, the audience of this documentary can obtain an optimal relevance during their own referential processing. Also, despite that translators have achieved the optimal relevance between the target audience and the original author by adopting the different translation methods mentioned above when translating different metaphors, it should be pointed out that these methods cannot be adopted without any conditions. Before choosing translation strategies and methods, translators are suggested to first identify necessary factors such as translation purposes, target audiences, text types, and styles; otherwise, the context and relevant effects of the translation will be damaged.

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Notes

Note 1: The Website link of *Song of Life* is https://tv.cctv.com/2021/10/22/VIDE7K8AGFejxAFwaa6zYF3x211022.shtml.

Note 2: Metaphor ground means the essential same quality between the tenor and the vehicle of a metaphor.

Note 3: The tenor is the thing being described and the vehicle is the figurative language you use to describe it.

Note 4: "It" here refers to "the germplasm bank of wild species in Southern China".

Note 5: "它(tā)" in the source text refers to the Asian elephants seen by the villager.