



Reviewing the Translation of the Chinese Animation Film *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* in North America from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

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Abstract: The Chinese film *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* entered the North American market, with English subtitles and dubbing versions. This paper compares the two, analyzes the differences from the perspective of eco-translatology, and discusses the possibility of enriching the concept of communicative dimension of eco-translatology with Translation Economics and Nida's functional equivalence theory. Through comparison of the two versions, this paper finds that the dubbing version of the film has greater deviation from the Chinese subtitles, and is generally closer to the three dimensions of the target language (English): linguistic, cultural and communicative. In terms of swear word translation in the cultural and communicative dimensions, the subtitle version used literal translation, while the dubbing removed all the swear words. In terms of readability, the dubbed English version is more colloquial and idiomatic, which makes the language easier to understand and suitable for children. The dubbing version fully demonstrates the translator's consideration of the audience demographics; meanwhile, its low-cost dubbing production also reflects the distributor's consideration of market and economic benefits.

Keywords: *Ne Zha*; Cultural symbols; Readability; Viewing experience

1. Eco-translatology Perspective/Theory Discussion

Eco-translatology utilizes Darwin's theory of evolution, and integrates ecology into translation studies. Eco-translatology examines the whole translation ecology. From the perspective of translation ecological environment, it explains the translation process, describes the relationship between the translator as the subject and the translation ecological environment, and discusses the survival and development of translators and translation products. The translation ecological environment in eco-translatology is a world in which the original text, source language and target language are combined, and an interactive whole is composed of interrelated languages, cultures and society, as well

as the original author, translator, client and readers (audience). Translation ecological environment is a collection of factors that restrict translators' optimal adaptations and choices (Hu, 2008).

Translation is an activity that needs to adapt to not only the ecological environment of the source language, but also the ecological environment of the target language, in order to survive and take effect (Hu, 2004). To achieve this goal, translators need to transform in the following three dimensions to make selective adaptation and adaptive choices: linguistic dimension, cultural dimension and communicative dimension (Hu, 2013:114). The success of a translation is determined by the translator's degree of transformation in these three dimensions. The higher the degree of “three-dimensional transformation”, that is, the higher the degree of holistic adaptation and selection, the better the quality of the translation (Hu, 2013:114). Specifically, in the process of translation, translators are expected to respect the language expression habits of the target language, balance the cultural output of the source language and the audience's acceptance of the target language, and strive to make the communicative function of the source language reappear in the target language.

In the transformation of linguistic dimension, the translator should consider the influence of the source language form and style on the target language. If the target language's form is too close to that of the source language, it may affect the understanding of the reader, and the text is not suitable for survival in the target language ecological environment. In the cultural dimension, there are cultural differences between the source language and the target language. When working on the transformation, the translator should consider the audience's acceptance of the target language and deal with it properly to avoid the overload of foreign cultures, which may lead to misunderstanding or incomprehension of the audience. In terms of communicative dimension, attention should be paid to ensuring that the target language achieves the communicative purpose similar to that in the original language. In the case of the translation of commercial films, translators need to produce their translation for the communicative purpose of entertainment.

Translation, like any other actions, always has an aim (Vermeer Hans, 1989:221). *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (hereinafter referred to as *Ne Zha*) is a commercial animation film. Different from art films and documentary films, it aims at maximizing box office revenue and caters to mass entertainment. The overseas market expansion of *Ne Zha* not only creates economic income for the production company and distributors but also plays the role of overseas publicity for China. *Ne Zha* draws on Chinese mythology and was not produced by the mainstream western film industry. According to the statistics of Box Office Mojo, a website tracking box office revenue, the box office in China is \$720 million, while the box office in North America is relatively small, with \$3.7 million (Box Office Mojo, 2020). It is a niche film in North America, and its audience characteristics are different from mainstream audiences.

Subtitle translation and dubbing were produced for the film's distribution abroad. Subtitles and dubbing in movie translation are subject to different media transmission conditions and expected audiences, so there may be differences in the text content of the

two translation versions. Foreign language subtitles mainly transform the auditory content of the source language into the text visual symbols of the target language, while dubbing transforms the auditory content of the source language into the speech auditory symbols of the target language. These two types of signs and symbols need to be synchronized with the image content (such as the beginning and end of the actor's speech and the mouth movements) to achieve the best viewing effect. Subtitles and dubbing have their advantages and disadvantages. Foreign language subtitles convert the speech of the source language into the text of the target language and present it to the audience. When watching it, the audience has a visual burden, which means they have to look at the pictures and read the subtitles. During that process, they often miss the important pictures, especially the facial expressions of the characters. While dubbing does not increase the visual burden of the audience and allow them to concentrate on the picture and plot, it lacks the touch (e.g. intonation) of the original voice. From the perspective of the three-dimensional transformation of eco-translatology, the key duty of subtitle and dubbing translation is to transform the source language of movies into the target language ecology in three dimensions: linguistic dimension, culture dimension and communicative dimension, to conform to the source language ecology as much as possible. In the process of transforming from the Chinese context to English context, due to the influence of different factors such as translator, commercial operation and economic cost, the film content and emotion conveyed by subtitles and dubbing will be different.

Film is not only a cultural carrier, but also a commodity, and film translation can help the commodity create value in overseas markets. The difference between commercial film translation and other translations, such as science and technology translation, lies in its different functions, which have both active cultural transmission and entertainment functions. Two different small translation ecosystems are derived from different audiences. For example, subtitle translation audience of *Ne Zha* is mainly fans who love Chinese culture, while the small ecological participants of English dubbing translation are those who emphasize entertainment. These two small ecological audiences may also overlap. In terms of the communicative dimension, they all aim to achieve communication effect and commercial value, but the translation processes and forms are different. In different translation ecological environments, translators use different degrees of transformation from the source language to target language to adapt to the different translation ecological environments.

2. *The film*

The distribution channels of the movie *Ne Zha* in North America include cinemas, DVD and the streaming media Netflix. The American Netflix version of *Ne Zha* is covered by the TV content rating system, and its TV-14 rating implies the program contains content that parents or adult guardians think is not suitable for children under 14 years old. There are two translation versions of the movie provided by Netflix in America: a subtitle and dubbing version. The film was distributed in North America by the company “Well Go USA”. According to its official website, the company focuses on introducing movies from all over the world to North America and other places for distribution. In an

interview with Xinhua News Agency, Annie Walker, the chairman of the company, stated: “*Ne Zha* is an attractive animation film. We bring the English dub to North America because we hope to share the film with not only overseas Chinese but also audiences from other ethnic groups. It's certainly a chance for a mainstream audience in North America to know more about Chinese film and Chinese culture.” It can be seen from that interview that the purpose of adding dubbing to movies is to cater to the mainstream, not just the minority fans of Asian culture.

This research randomly selected 30 English language films (released between 2000 and 2020) and compared their Chinese subtitles and dubbing versions. It is found that there are few differences between those two versions. The few differences lie in certain words and phrases. The main reason for the differences is that dubbing is expected to match the mouth movement of the characters. The echoes what Xiuyan Jia, a famous film translator in China, said in an interview conducted by Zhang (2020): “In cinema blockbusters, subtitles are expected to be the same as the dialogues, while dubbing texts should match the mouth movements. The textual differences between subtitles and dubbing arise because dubbing is supposed to match the mouth movements of characters.” After examining five other Chinese films released overseas between 2015 and 2020, it is found that there is very little difference between the dubbed and subtitled versions. In comparison, there is a big difference between the subtitled and dubbed version of *Ne Zha*. The following is a detailed analysis of the differences between the subtitled version and the dubbing version of *Ne Zha* in three dimensions: linguistic dimension, culture dimension and communicative dimension. Although this paper lists three dimensions for discussion, sometimes the two versions are converted in two or three dimensions at the same time, so the analysis of these dimensions is not strictly separated during the discussion.

3. Three-dimensional analysis

3.1 The linguistic dimension

By comparison, it is found that the text conciseness of subtitle and dubbing versions is very similar. First of all, the author uses Antconc corpus software and Microsoft Word software to count the number of words and finds that the dubbing version contain slightly more words. The English spelling of the subtitle version is *Ne Zha* with a space in the middle, while the dubbing version uses “*Nezha*”, with no space. To reflect the actual number of words more truly, the researcher changed all the English spellings of “*Ne Zha*” in the two versions into *NeZha* and compared the number of words. After this processing, it is found that the number of types and tokens in the dubbing version is 2.7% more than that in the subtitle version, with the difference being small. According to the calculation made by Microsoft Word, the number of words in the dubbing version is 1.7% more than that in the subtitle version. Antconc treats words with apostrophes such as “*won't*” as two separate words, so the number of figures counted is more than that counted by Word. By comparing the word frequency lists, it is found that the top ten words in the list are almost equivalent in the two versions, which shows that the basic vocabulary usage of the two

versions is similar. When the list was examined further down, it is found that the dubbing version contains 71 “huh?”, but the subtitle version does not have this word. This shows the difference between the subtitles and dubbing, that is, dubbing can express questions or rhetorical questions through voice intonation, to achieve the purpose of conveying information.

Table 1: Comparison between the subtitled version and the dubbing version

	Types (Antconc)	Tokens (Antconc)	Words (MS)	The top ten words on the frequency list
Subtitle	1418	7687	7385	You, the, I, to, 't, a, it, is, of, and,
dubbing	1456	7894	7505	You, I, the, 's, to, it, and, 't, a, that

After carefully comparing the two versions sentence by sentence, great differences were found in the textual content of the two versions. The dubbing version is more colloquial, while the subtitling version is larger and more difficult. The definition of big and difficult words means that these words appear less frequently in English. The following is an example showing the difference of vocabulary use between the subtitle and dubbing versions.

Example 1

Chinese: Shīfu pài wǒ hé shīdì qián qù shōufú (02:03:62)

Subtitles: My master sent me and a fellow discipline to subordinate it.

Dubbing: so my master, the supreme Lord of heaven, sent my brother and I to put a stop to the chaos.

In the above example, for the translation of the original Chinese word “shōufú”, the subtitle version uses the formal word subdue, while the dubbing version uses “put a stop”, an informal colloquial phrase. Also, the dubbing version adds explanatory information “the supreme lord of heaven”, to the translation of “Master”, so that the audience can better understand the Master’s status and why the Master can send them to complete tasks. In the cultural dimension, this information is added to the translation to adapt to the cultural environment of the target language.

The author invited a native English speaker (British, adult, male, numbered: NativeE) and a near-native English speaker (Chinese, adult, male, numbered: NearN) to compare the predicate verbs of the corresponding sentences in the two versions one by one, and calculated the number of large words and small words in the two versions. The list is as follows. The Chi-square test of these 87 samples with SPSS shows that the corresponding significance P-value is 0.000 (close to 0)<0.05, which indicates that the frequency of using large and small words in these two versions is different and statistically significant. In the linguistic dimension, the dubbing language is colloquial and easy to understand. From the perspective of communication, dubbing emphasizes communication, namely,

entertainment, focusing on helping the audience understand the dialogues and making them laugh.

Table 2: Use of large vocabulary in two translated versions

Version	Large voc. frequency		Small voc. frequency		Total number
	NativeE	NearN	NativeE	NearN	
Subtitles	81	80	6	7	87
Dubbing	6	7	81	80	87

From the above data analysis, it can be seen that the big-word style in subtitle translation is more in line with the linguistic dimension of the original Chinese, while the dubbed small word style is more suitable for the linguistic dimension of the English target language targeting the children audience. The subtitle translation of *Ne Zha* retains the language style of Chinese as much as possible and adapts to the language style of the target language to a limited extent. This shows that translators made adaptive choices of the language forms in the process of translation. That is to say, in subtitle translation, the language features of Chinese are fully transferred in English subtitles; however, dubbing translation is more suitable for the ecological environment of the target language, and it is more flexible in the linguistic dimension.

3.2 The cultural dimension

The translation of movie dialogues is a communicative action across cultural differences. As a part of the film, film dialogues are also the carrier of culture. Due to cultural differences, if the translation works do not effectively transmit cultural meanings, the works will not adapt to the cultural system of the target language translation ecological environment, which may lead to a communication failure. In the translation of swear words, the subtitle version uses literal translation, while the dubbing version tones down or omits those words. For example, in the Mandarin version of the movie, there are such rude words as “niǎo mìng”, “qù sǐ ba”, “b ài g è p ǐ”, and “gǒupì”, and in the English subtitle version, they were translated as similar swear words: “screw you”, “go to hell with that” and “bull shit”. In the dubbing version, all these rude words are omitted, while the feelings or opinions expressed in the rude words are translated in non-taboo language. For example (see below), “screw you” in the subtitle version is a very impolite phrase in English, which expresses the attitude of “not accepting fate”, while the dubbing version directly expresses this attitude of “not accepting fate” without swearing.

Example 2:

Chinese: Qù nǐ gè niǎo mìng

Subtitle: Screw you!

Dubbing: 'Cause it is not the boss of me.

The core concept discussed in the film is to fight against fate, not fearing other people's judgment. This film is told from the perspective of China and Chinese culture. The film's transmission overseas can help more people understand Chinese people and Chinese culture. Although the animation's visual effect is on a par with that of the West, the film contains cultures unfamiliar to American audiences. If the audience does not know much about Chinese people or mythology, they will not be able to understand cultural-specific jokes and stories. There are many references or lines similar to Stephen Chow's films in the story, such as "bù zhīdào wǒ néng bùnéng káng dé zhù", "fàng kāi nàgè nǚhái" and so on. When dealing with these lines, the dubbing version uses free translation, and the meanings are quite different from the original Chinese text. The following example illustrates how the line "tāmen jūrán néng káng dào xiànzài," similar to that in one of Stephen Chow's movie, was translated.

Example 3:

Chinese: Tāmen jūrán néng káng dào xiànzài. Bù xiǎodé jiā shàng wǒ, dǐng bù dǐng dé zhù.

Subtitles: I can't believe they're still holding on. If I jump in, I wonder if they'll survive.

Dubbing: How dare they not invite me to join in... I love a good party. Stay strong, you two.

In the above example, the subtitle version's meaning is close to that of the original. In comparison, the dubbing version is more idiomatic and colloquial, conforming to English language habits. Its meaning far from the original, but the communicative purpose is similar to that of the Chinese original, namely, entertainment. The dubbed version focuses on helping the audience understand the dialogues and making them laugh. From the linguistic dimension, the language is colloquial and easy to understand.

3.3 Communicative dimension

Besides the transformation of linguistic dimension and cultural dimension, eco-translation also includes the adaptive selection transformation of communicative dimension, that is, adaptive selection and transformation of communicative intention between the source language and target language is needed. In the communicative dimension, the ecological environment of film translation focuses on factors such as the communication effect and commercial value of the source language and the target language. This adaptive choice transformation of communicative dimension requires the translator to "focus the adaptive selection on the communicative level and ensure the communicative intention in the source text is reflected in the target text" in addition to the transformation of linguistic information and the transmission of cultural connotation. (Hu, 2013:237)." The communicative function of language in commercial movies can be understood as the function of arousing people's reaction, that is, entertainment function. If these different translation methods can be tailored to serve different target audiences, and achieve a communication effect similar to that of the original film, the maximum commercial value can be achieved, that is, the maximum communication function.

To analyze the feedback and viewing needs of the audience, the author collected the comments the audience posted on the website of Internet Movie Database (IMDB, 2019). The viewers leaving their comments on IMDB.com include both movie theater viewers and Netflix viewers. In addition, the author interviewed three American Netflix viewers whose native language is English. According to the analysis, it is discovered that the audience of American cinemas is mainly overseas Chinese, as well as a minority of English-speaking audience who cannot speak Chinese. The dubbed version is more suitable for non-Chinese speakers looking for entertainment. The subtitle version is suitable for Chinese culture fans, or Chinese language learners who can listen to the Mandarin audio and read the English subtitles to absorb the contents of the original film as much as possible. For example, a viewer named David M comments:

The story is wonderful and the animation is excellent. If you watch it on Netflix, even people like me who can't speak Mandarin should watch the version with Mandarin audio track and English subtitles. English dubbing [quality] is not worthy of such a good film, and it is far from subtitles.

According to various comments on IMDb, for those who want to learn Chinese culture, they generally expect the subtitle version to convey Chinese culture as completely as possible. However, the English subtitles of *Ne Zha* are fast, and reading those subtitles requires a high level of fast reading. For example, some viewers commented: "The subtitles can pass by VERY fast and/or get lost against the background, so get ready to read fast." Another viewer commented: "The freaking subtitle will blow your brains out, it's like decoding the entire story from start to finish! Feels like your starting to learn English while still in your mom's tummy." It can be seen that subtitles are not easy to read for every audience member. However, dubbing requires lip-synching, which requires more work for dubbing actors and translators. For example, a viewer commented: "I started watching dubbing, but I hated that the audio track didn't match the character's lips, so I immediately switched to the subtitle version." It can be seen that the synchronization of audio track and lips is very important for some viewers to watch the dubbing version. Therefore, high-quality dubbing production is also very important for film communication. Although the dubbing production of the film is flawed in terms of lipsyncing, it was generally praised by the audience. For example, a viewer named westsideschl said: "English voicing, often shaky in Asian films, was quite modern Western & culturally appropriate." One Netflix viewer interviewed by the author said: "Apart from some Chinese names such as Taiyi Zhenren, the dubbed English is very idiomatic. The dubbing can score 9 points out of 10."

In this research, foreignization and literal translation used in the subtitled version, and free translation and communicative translation methods used in the dubbing version, are explained from the perspective of eco-translatology. The translators of the subtitle version chose to work within the constraints of the original text, while the dubbing version overturns its constraints. It can be seen that the translator has made different choices and adopted different translation strategies to adapt to the two small ecological environments.

4. Refining eco-translatology

The purpose of the English translation of *Ne Zha* is to create income, publicize Chinese culture and promote the development of the animation industry. Based on the analysis, the subtitle and dubbing translations of the movie *Ne Zha* have well realized the transformation of linguistic dimension, cultural dimension and communicative dimension, and the translated texts have well adapted to the translation ecological environment. The translation of the film assists in the transmission of the film, thus achieving the functions of entertainment and China's "international communication", and increasing the audience's positive impression of China. Interpreting the differences between English subtitles and dubbing from the perspective of "three-dimensional transformation" in eco-translatology can help us better understand the translation process and results of the film, and provide a great reference for similar cultural communication in the future.

According to the eco-translatology viewpoint, translation success is determined by the translator's degree of transformation in these three dimensions. The higher the degree of "three-dimensional transformation", that is, the higher the degree of "degree of holistic adaptation and selection", the better the quality of the translation (Hu, 2004:214). In the dubbing translation of commercial films, the adaptive choice transformation in the communicative dimension is the key point in three-dimensional transformation. It is especially necessary to ensure that the communicative intention of the original film (that is, entertainment and creating commercial value) is reflected in the translation to create economic benefits. Hu Gengshen believes that translation should not only minimize the ecological damage of the original text but also best maintain the ecology of the translated text (Hu, 2013:240). Due to the film rating system in America, the dubbing of *Ne Zha* eliminates swearing words, adapts the culture in the source language, and makes a large number of dialogues colloquial, which damages the ecology in the original text to a great extent, but the translation achieves a better effect in the target language context. Therefore, to evaluate whether the dubbing translation of *Ne Zha* is the best, we should not only look at whether it keeps the original ecology, but more importantly, whether it adapts to the translation ecology.

As for the communicative function, Hu Gengshen did not define it in detail in his book *Eco-translatology*, while Nida's exposition discussed it more deeply. Hu Gengshen translated his term "jiāoji wéi" as "communicative dimension" in *Glossary, the Main Terms of Eco-translatology* in Appendix 2 of his book. Communication here is the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving people information. And what is communication in commercial movies? What does a film production company want to communicate with the audience? The definition of communication needs to be broadened for the research of film communication. In its broad sense, it is emotional communication through visual and auditory stimulation, arousing audience resonance and entertaining audience. Nida maintains that "translation is a kind of communication" and "the meaning and intention of the original text must be clearly reflected" (Nida, 1969). Nida made a comprehensive analysis of his "functional equivalence" theory from all aspects, and put forward that "translation is communication". Nida included the reader-

response theory, and fully considered the receptive ability of target readers. The author believes that Nida's functional equivalence theory can better explain the communicative dimension transformation of English subtitles and dubbing in *Ne Zha*. Given the commercial nature of the movie *Ne Zha*, using the concept of translation economics for reference will help increase the understanding of the translation of *Ne Zha*.

From the perspective of translation economics, the subtitle and dubbing translation of *Ne Zha* is “both an investment and a commodity (Xu, 2014:35)”. The cost of dubbing was relatively low because no TV or movie celebrities were invited to do the dubbing. The distributor was cautious and did not allow much additional expense, hoping to get a certain amount of profits with limited investment. In terms of the economic benefits of film translation in North America, the subtitle translation product is more suitable for the cultural needs of the niche market (Chinese cultural fans), while the goal of dubbing translation is to meet the needs of the public. *Ne Zha*'s box office in the US exceeded three million dollars, while other Chinese animations brought to America such as *Journey to the West: Return of the Great Sage*, and *White Snake: Origin*, grossed less than one million dollars. So in comparison, *Ne Zha* has made great progress in economic profits. Although the success of a Chinese film in North America is closely related to the quality of the film itself, the role of translation cannot be underestimated. The success of Chinese film culture export largely depends on subtitles and dubbing.

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