



China's Emperor Culture in Subtitle Translation: A Case Study of *The Last Emperor*

YANG Chunhua^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages of China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by School of Foreign Languages of China West Normal University and Translation Center of Chinese Literature and Culture "Film Translation and Culture Communication" (12YY02).

Received 15 December 2014; accepted 7 February 2015
 Published online 26 March 2015

Abstract

The Last Emperor directed by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci tells about the life of Puyi, the last Emperor of China, in the Forbidden City. It reveals the supreme power enjoyed by an emperor in China, explores how the health of an emperor is cared for and shows how important is the death of an emperor to his people. By analyzing subtitle translation related to the power, the health and the death of the emperor in the film, the author aims at giving the reader a better understanding of China's emperor culture and draws translator's attention to the faithful and adequate reproduction of the cultural information implied in the source subtitles.

Key words: Puyi; Emperor; Death; Power; Health; Culture information; Subtitle translation

Yang, C. H. (2015). China's Emperor Culture in Subtitle Translation: A Case Study of *The Last Emperor*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 11(3), 73-77. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/6667>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6667>

INTRODUCTION

The Last Emperor is an autobiography film directed by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci and released in 1987 by Columbia Pictures. The film tells about the life of Puyi, the last emperor of China. It starts with Puyi's arrival

at the Fushun Prison as a political prisoner and ends by Puyi's visit to the Forbidden City as an ordinary tourist. As an emperor, Puyi had spent most of his life time in the Forbidden City. The film is the first one that has ever been shot in the Forbidden City with the permission and support of the central government of China. By revealing and reproducing the true life of Puyi from his ascent to the throne to his life as a puppet emperor of Manchukuo, it gives the audience a chance to understand China's emperor culture better. After its release, it is warmly received by the audience both at home and abroad.

In the long reign of China's feudal society, an emperor, as the only ruler of the country, enjoys supreme power over others. The emperor is worshipped as God. For ordinary people, they are taught to follow every order of the emperor without any rebellions being made. Otherwise, it would be considered as disloyal to the country. Therefore, the power of the emperor is not to be questioned, the health of the emperor is of great importance, and the death of the emperor is a disaster for the whole country.

In this paper, the author is going to talk about China's emperor culture from the above-mentioned three aspects. Since the dialogue between people in the film is spoken in English and the subtitle is in Chinese, there is no total correspondence between its English and Chinese versions. Therefore, the translation of the English subtitles into Chinese reveals different understanding of western audience and Chinese viewers toward the same scene in the film. By comparison of the source English subtitle with the target Chinese subtitle, it will give the reader a deeper exploration into China's emperor culture and a better understanding of the cultural difference between western countries and China as well.

1. THE DEATH OF THE EMPEROR

The Last Emperor starts with the scene of Puyi being sent back to China in the winter of 1950. After the arrival of

the train from Soviet Union to the Manchukuo railway station, Puyi made an attempt to commit suicide in the toilet. A serial of knocks on the door brought Puyi back to his memory of a cold winter in 1908. Three-year-old Puyi was escorted to the imperial palace for the preparation of ascending the throne. That night, he came to know the dying Dowager Empress Cixi. Cixi said the following words to little Puyi.

English subtitle: But the emperor is on high riding the dragon now.

Chinese subtitle: 但是皇帝现在在天堂驭龙而去。

English subtitle: He **died** today.

Chinese subtitle: 他今天**驾崩**了。

English subtitle: And now they are all waiting for me to **die**.

Chinese subtitle: 现在他们都在等我**死**。

That is why they are putting my bed in the middle of the room under **the black pearl**.

所以他们把我的床放在房子中间，上面吊了**黑珍珠**。(DVD, 12:22-13:27)

After saying these words and announcing little Puyi to be the new emperor, Cixi breathed her last and a eunuch standing by put a black pearl into her mouth.

In ancient China, “**驾崩**” is a respectable expression used especially to refer to the emperor’s death. “**驾**” refers to the emperor’s ride and gradually developed into an addressing title for the emperor whereas “**崩**” refers to the collapse of a mountain. Therefore, the two words combined to mean the death of an emperor is as important as the collapse of a mountain. Actually, there are different terms for the death of different people in ancient China. In the Book of *Rites*, it says that the death of ordinary people are referred to as “**死**”, the death of soldiers are referred to as “**不祿**”, the death of scholars are referred to as “**卒**”, the death of lords and tyrants are referred to as “**薨**” and the death of an emperor is referred to as “**崩**”. (《礼记·曲礼(下)》：天子死曰崩，诸侯曰薨，大夫曰卒，士曰不祿，庶人曰死。) (Peng, 2011, p.160) In western countries, the expression of death also differs. For the death of a King, it is called “**demise**”; for the death of a powerful and influential people, it is called “**pass away**”; for the death of ordinary people, it is called as “**has gone**” or “**close one’s eyes**”. After the middle ages, under the influence of Christianity thought of every one is born equal, the death of a King and the death of a beggar is regarded in the same way and called as “**die**”. As an old saying goes in European countries, “**Popes, Kings, beggars, and thieves alike must die**”.

Now, let’s have a look of the source subtitles and its translation in this part. In the film, Cixi used “**die**” to refer to the emperor’s death as well as her own death. It’s in accordance with the present addressing habit of the western countries. In the translation of its subtitles, the usage of “**驾崩**” to signify the emperor’s death follows the rite in China, but the usage of “**死**” on the death of Cixi fails to reproduce the hierarchy meaning of the different

addressing titles of death in China. It’s well known that Cixi is respectfully addressed as “**老佛爷**” (Laofoye) during her forty year’s rule of the country from behind the scenes after the death of the former Xianfeng Emperor. In fact, “**老佛爷**” (Laofoye) is another addressing title for the emperors in Qing Dynasty. It has something to do with the addressing title for the ancestors of the Manchu People as “**满柱**”, which is a transliteration of “**曼殊**” (Buddha’s name). Therefore, “**满柱**” means “**佛爷**” (Buddha) and “**吉祥**” (good luck). After the establishment of Qing Dynasty, Manchu People translated “**满柱**” into Chinese as “**佛爷**” and regard it as another addressing title for the emperor. (满族的祖先女真族首领最早特称为(满柱)。(满柱)是佛号(曼殊)的转音,意为(佛爷),(吉祥)。大清建国后,直接将(满柱)汉译为(佛爷),并把它作为皇帝的特称。)(Liu, 2011, p.30) In a sense, Cixi, as the real ruler of the later Qing Dynasty, enjoys the same power and social status as the emperor. Hence, the author suggests the translation be revised as the following:

English subtitle: And now they are all waiting for me to **die**.

Chinese subtitle: 现在他们都在等我**驾崩**呢。

Then, Cixi said the following sentence.

English subtitle: That is why they are putting my bed in the middle of the room under **the black pearl**.

Chinese subtitle: 所以他们把我的床放在房子中间，上面吊了**黑珍珠**。

The black pearl here mentioned actually is a kind of luminous pearl. Legend has it that the luminous pearl can keep the dead body fresh and incorrupt. In the *Record of Sun Dianying Robbing the Dongling Imperial Mausoleum*(《孙殿英东陵盗宝记》), Sun said

in her mouth is a luminous pearl. There are two parts of the pearl and combined it forms aspherical ball sending out green cold light that enable one to see the hair a hundred steps away whereas being separated, it is only transparent and sheds no light at all. It’s said such a treasure can keep the dead body fresh. No wonder Cixi seems to be in her sleep after the cutting open of her coffin. After being exposed to the wind, her face turned black and her clothes rotted into pieces.

(据《孙殿英东陵盗宝记》记载,孙殿英曾说:“她(慈禧)口里含着一颗夜明珠,分开是两块,合拢就是一个圆球,分开透明无光,合拢时透出一道绿色寒光,夜间百步之内可照见头发。听说这宝贝可使尸体不化,难怪慈禧的棺材劈开后,像睡觉一样,只是见了风,脸才发黑,衣服也有些上不得手了。”)(Yu, 1981) Owing to the precious value of luminous pearl, it is compared to be the “**和氏璧**” (Heshibi), a precious jade in history and regarded as a symbol of power and status. The luminous pearl in Cixi’s mouth is a representation of her dignity and plays the role of anti-decaying. In accordance with the function and historical information of luminous pearl, the author suggests the following retranslation,

English subtitle: That is why they are putting my bed in the middle of the room under **the black pearl**.

Chinese subtitle: 所以他们把我的床放在房子中间, 上面吊了夜明珠。

The employ of the word “夜明珠” gives a better reproduction of the source text meaning intended and it conveys the cultural information to the audience as well.

From the above analysis, we came to know that the rites of death differ from country to country. Following the change of time and history, the emperor culture in Qing Dynasty is not easy to understand for the audience. The default of cultural information formed some comprehension obstacles even for the Chinese audience. In the translation of the subtitles, the translators are obliged to make some adjustment and supply the necessary information to satisfy the viewers' desire for cultural understanding.

2. THE POWER OF THE EMPEROR

“皇帝” (Huangdi) is a title used to address the country leader in China. “皇” (huang) means the up world whereas “帝” (di) means the down earth. The two words combined together signify “heaven and earth”. The title, “皇帝” (Huangdi), is employed to tell people that the ruler is the master of everything on earth. Apart from the title, the emperors of China also like to refer to themselves as “天子” (the son of Heaven). In other words, the emperor, as the son of heaven, is ruling the country for the heaven. It reveals Chinese people's belief of the emperor's power being endowed by the Heaven. During the feudal period of Qing Dynasty, the whole country is under the tyranny of emperor's power. In the film, when little Puyi, as an emperor newly put on the throne, was taking a bath with the service from some eunuchs, he popped up the following question:

English subtitle: **Is it true I can do anything I want?**

Chinese subtitle: 真的我想干什么就可以干什么?

A eunuch answered:

English subtitle: Of course, Your Majesty.

Chinese subtitle: 当然, 皇上。

English subtitle: Anything you want.

Chinese subtitle: 干什么都行。

English subtitle: You are the lord of 10,000 years.

Chinese subtitle: 您是万岁爷啊。

Then, little Puyi exclaimed,

English subtitle: I am the son of Heaven! I'm the son of Heaven!

Chinese subtitle: 我是天子! 我是天子! (DVD, 20:07-20:25)

From the above dialogue, we can see that emperors in China can do anything they like with absolute power over everything. As the final decision maker of all the political and state affairs, the emperor owns all the land, resources, treasures and human power. He is free to take the life away from anybody, or separate children from the parents, or make somebody suddenly rich or poor, or upgrade and degrade someone. (涂毒天下之肝脑, 离散天下之子女。

明主之所操者六: 生之, 杀之, 富之, 贫之, 贵之, 贱之, 此六柄者, 主之所操也。) (Chen, 2013, p.112) In order to fully represent little Puyi's recognition of the unbelievable authority of an emperor to do whatever he likes, the author suggests the retranslation of the following sentence:

English subtitle: **Is it true I can do anything I want?**

Chinese subtitle: 我真的可以想干什么就可以干什么吗?

The amplification of “可以” and the rearrangement of the sentence structure by moving the subject “I” (我) forward not only demonstrate Puyi's doubt but also caters to his speaking way as a three-year-old boy.

In Qing Dynasty, there is a strict system of hierarchy that distinguishes people by age and social status. More than often, the emperor will call themselves as the son of Dragon for the sake of being deified, dignified and mysterious. Things that have been used by the emperor in daily life or the clothes have been worn are imprinted with the word “龙” (Long, dragon), such as “龙袍” (Longpao, the robe of dragon), “龙冠” (Longguan, the hat of dragon), “龙座” (Longzuo, the chair of dragon), “龙床” (Longchuang, the bed of dragon), “龙舟” (Longzhou, the boat of dragon), and so on. Pillars, roofs, steams, and the balustrades of the palace where the emperor lives are carved with the pattern of dragon or decorated with the statue of dragon. Even in ancient literary works, the emperor is described to be the one with the appearance of phoenix and dragon. When the emperor is on an outgoing, ordinary people are not allowed to look at the emperor directly in the face. In the film, there is a scene that goes like the following,

Puyi was taking a walk with his brother Pujie, accompanied by two eunuchs leading the way. The two eunuchs swung their hands to drive away the other eunuchs and palace maid walking in the opposite direction and yelling with the sound of silencing people. All at once, the walking eunuchs and palace maid turned back toward the wall with their backs facing the emperor. Then, Pujie, who has never seen such a scene, immediately exclaimed,

English subtitle: They're **turning away**.

Chinese subtitle: 他们把脸扭开了。

Puyi answered:

English subtitle: Of course, ordinary people are not allowed to look at the emperor. I am too **important**.

Chinese subtitle: 当然! 一般人不许直视皇帝! 我太重要了。 (DVD, 25:47-26:14)

The reaction of the eunuchs and the palace maid in front of the emperor was an embodiment of obedience to the emperor's supreme power. After comparison of the source English subtitle with its Chinese version, the author came to notice that the translation of “turning away”, “ordinary people” and “important” fail to reproduce the sacredness of the emperor. Hence, the author suggests the following translation:

English subtitle: They're **turning away**.

Chinese subtitle: 他们转过身去了。

English subtitle: Of course, ordinary people are not allowed to look at the emperor. I am too **important**.

Chinese subtitle: 当然! 平民不许直视皇帝! 我太尊贵了。

In the original translation, “turning away” is misunderstood as “把脸扭开了” (turn one’s face away). In China, only if one feels angry or embarrassed will one turn his face away. Actually, the eunuchs and palace maid’s turning around are out of respect and fear of the emperor. If they are merely turning their faces away, it would be taken as an action of insult and great disrespect. Therefore, it’s better to be translated as “他们转过身去了”. Then, the original translation of “ordinary people” as “一般人” and “important” as “重要” fail to represent the matchless status of the emperor. Here, the author retranslated the two words into “平民” and “尊贵”.

For the purpose of deifying the emperor’s power, the emperor has his own special color, “yellow”. In ancient China, the emperor is always dressed in yellow Dragon Robe whereas the ordinary people are not allowed to dress in any color that can be classified as yellow. Yellow, as a color, is a symbol of power and status, which has always been favored by the emperors in different dynasties of China. It can be dated back to Sui Dynasty. When it comes to the Tang Dynasty, reddish yellow is worshipped as the color of the sun and the symbol of an emperor. When Puyi was practicing ink brush writing with Pujie, he came into a quarrel with Pujie after noticing his brother’s dressing in bright yellow robe. He said the following words to Pujie:

English subtitle: Why are you wearing that? You are not allowed to wear yellow.

Chinese subtitle: 为什么你穿那呀? 你是不能穿黄色的。

English subtitle: But this is ordinary yellow.

Chinese subtitle: 但这是普通黄色。

English subtitle: It is **imperial yellow**.

Chinese subtitle: 那是御黄色。

English subtitle: No, it is not.

Chinese subtitle: 不, 不是。

English subtitle: We say it is. Only the emperor can wear that yellow.

Chinese subtitle: 我们说它是! 只有皇帝可以用御黄色。

English subtitle: Take it off!

Chinese subtitle: 脱了它! (DVD, 30:02-30:25)

When Puyi questioned the yellow dressing of Pujie, Pujie did not take it to be anything improper because at that time the new President of China, Yuan Shikai has already claimed the ending of emperor’s rule. The root of their dispute is whether imperial yellow is ordinary color or not. The source translation of “imperial yellow” into “御黄色” has caused some ambiguous understanding of the true color of yellow. In Qing Dynasty, “明黄色” (bright yellow) is favored by the emperor because it’s the symbol of the earth element. Although the word “御” (yu) refers to the imperial family, the author strongly suggest the retranslation of “imperial yellow” into “明黄色” for better understanding of the audience.

As the highest ruler of China, every order given by the emperor is a rule that should be followed rather than questioned. However, Puyi encountered a retort from his brother when he ordered the taking off of the yellow robe. His brother, Pujie answered back,

English subtitle: No! you are not the emperor anymore.

Chinese subtitle: 不! 并且你也不再是皇帝了! (DVD, 30:23-30:25)

On hearing these words, Puyi ordered a eunuch named 大脚 (Big foot) to drink the ink in front of him for the purpose of proving the existence of his power. Puyi commanded,

English subtitle: Big foot, drinks it.

Chinese subtitle: 大脚, 喝了它!

English subtitle: Go on. Drink the green ink.

Chinese subtitle: 快, 喝了墨水. (DVD, 31:30-31:43)

Although Big foot was well aware of the unbearable feeling after drinking the undrinkable ink, he still bite the bullet for his knowing of the imperative order of the emperor not to be disobeyed. The eunuch’s behavior is a clear representation of blind loyalty in the face of an inviolable emperor. As the old saying goes, “It’s an act of the emperor wanting you to die and you shall die.” (“君要臣死, 臣不得不死。”)

After the analysis of Chinese emperor’s command, outgoing rites and special color, we came to know better of the supreme power enjoyed by the emperors in the feudal period of China. In the translation of the subtitles concerning those parts, a translator is expected to faithfully represent the cultural information implied and accurately send the metaphoric meaning of cultural images to the audience.

3. THE HEALTH OF THE EMPEROR

In ancient China, the color, shape, hardness and the smell of the emperor’s stool is diagnosed for the purpose of checking the emperor’s health condition and making dietary improvement. In the film, a eunuch took the bedpan of little Puyi outside of the chamber after his stool passing. Then, an imperial doctor waiting outside smelled it with his nose and said the following words,

English subtitle: No **bean curd** today.

Chinese subtitle: 今天没有燕窝。

English subtitle: And no **meat**.

Chinese subtitle: 也没有肉. (DVD, 19:37-19:52)

With these words being spoken, the camera switched to the black cusped shaped hard stool in the bedpan. In terms of medicine, the hard and black stool is a symbol of constipation, which is called as “不更衣” (bugengyi) in Chinese herbal medicine. The causes of the disease tend to be improper dietary habit and the over-consumption of food rich in calcium and protein. Therefore, the imperial doctor prescribed the food improvement solution, i.e. no eating of bean curd and meat. The original translation of “bean curd” into “燕窝” (bird’s nest) is totally

opposite to the semantic meaning intended in the source subtitles. Therefore, the author suggests the following retranslation:

English subtitle: No **bean curd** today.

Chinese subtitle: 今天不能吃豆制品。

English subtitle: And no **meat**.

Chinese subtitle: 也不能吃肉制品。

“Bean curd” is a kind of Tofu food which is relatively high in protein and iron. It’s totally different from bird’s nest, which is one of the most expensive animal products in China. As bean curd and meat can be cooked with various food materials and in diversified ways, the amplification of the verb “吃” (eat) and the noun “制品” (product) in the retranslation gives a more accurate reproduction of the implied meaning.

From the above, we can see the close relationship between the daily diet and the emperor’s health. However, there are still several emperors being food poisoned to death in China’s history. For that, the food consumed by the emperor is closely and carefully checked and tested. At the first meeting of Puyi with his new teacher Johnston, we see a group of eunuchs presenting the dishes one after another before a eunuch who is test eating with a pair of silver chopsticks. And then, Puyi said the following word,

English subtitle: The official taster is a brave man.

Chinese subtitle: 尝膳的太监是个勇敢的人。

English subtitle: Many of my ancestors have been poisoned, **you know**.

Chinese subtitle: 先帝有不少是被毒害的。

English subtitle: Does your Majesty have lunch like this every day?

Chinese subtitle: 皇上每天如此进午膳的吗?

English subtitle: Ah, yes. Every day, like theater.

Chinese subtitle: 对, 每天如是, 像做马戏似的。

English subtitle: I do not know why. It has always been like that.

Chinese subtitle: 朕不知何原因, 一向如此。(DVD: 43-46:07)

“尝膳” (changshan) is a food testing way that derived in Qing Dynasty for the aim of preventing food poison. If it’s tested to be poisonous, the emperor saves his life in advance. There is a rule of “eating no more than three spoonfuls of each dish” for the emperor. The rule is set up to avoid the exposure of the emperor’s dieting habit. Since ancient Chinese people tend to poison somebody with arsenic, the emperor’s daily food is contained in silverware. As we all know, the silverware will turn into black once it’s poisoned. That’s because silver will come into a chemical reaction with the sulfide contained in arsenic and generate black sulfide silver. If the food is

held in vessels made from other textures, such as ceramic, a silver card will be attached as the testing tool. It’s quite workable and efficient for the eunuch in the film to test each dish with a pair of silver chopsticks. The omission of translation of “you know” in the original translation failed to reproduce the well-known truth of emperors being poisoned in Qing Dynasty. Hence, the author suggests it to be translated as,

English subtitle: Many of my ancestors have been poisoned, **you know**.

Chinese subtitle: 你知道的, 先帝有不少是被毒害的。

From the above analysis, we come to know the importance of the emperor’s health for his people and subjects. As the old saying goes, “As the emperor is the real dragon and his body is of priceless value, nothing bad shall ever happen to him.” (“皇帝乃真龙天子, 万金之躯, 容不得一点闪失”。) In the translation of subtitles, a translator should supply the implied cultural meaning for a better understanding of the audience.

CONCLUSION

The last emperor is a vivid picture of the emperor’s life in Qing Dynasty. From the power of the emperor, we come to know of the emperor’s supreme sovereignty; from the health of the emperor, we get to know the dignity of the emperor; from the death of the emperor, we are impressed by the importance of the emperor. For the translation of the subtitles in the film, it is more of a cultural reproduction than a mere translation of semantic meaning. Translators shoulder the responsibility of faithfully reproducing the source text message and conveying the cultural information to the audience.

REFERENCES

- Chen, Z. Y. (2013). Investigation of the reasons for the ancient eastern and western democratic political system: Comparison of pre-Qin in China and Athens of ancient Greece. *Journal of CUPL*, (5), 105-118.
- DVD of *The Last Emperor* (1987). Beijing, China: China Film Audio and Video Publishing House.
- Liu, K. (2011). Laofoye is not dowager empress Cixi’s exclusive appellation. *Historical Monthly*, (12), 30.
- Peng, Y. (2011). On the view of life and death between China and Western countries from the perspective of euphemism on death. *Youth Literator*, (18), 160-161.
- Yu, S. P. (1981). Record of Sun Dianying robbing the Dongling imperial mausoleum. *Forbidden City*, (4), 35-37.