

## Translation Ethics in the Subtitle Translation of *Chang'an*

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### Abstract

This paper takes the English subtitles of the movie *Chang'an* released in the summer of 2023 as an example. Based on Chesterman's translation ethics model, it investigates which translation ethics the translator followed when translating this text and how they were reflected. It also explores the translation methods used to implement these ethical considerations. With a focus on ethics of representation and communication as the main theoretical foundations, the paper analyzes how the subtitle translation of *Chang'an* embodies these two types of translation ethics. The analysis reveals that the translator employed methods such as literal translation, free translation, as well as domestication and foreignization strategies to fulfill these translation responsibilities. Additionally, the paper offers several suggestions for improvement and recommendations regarding the subtitle translation of this film.

**Key words:** *Chang'an*; Translation ethics; Ethics of representation; Ethics of communication

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Chang'an* is a 3D animated historical film produced by Chase Dream Animation, with a screenplay by Red Mud Stove, and directed by Xie Junwei and Zou Jing.

It was released in China on July 8, 2023. Set against the backdrop of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, the film narrates the chaos in Chang'an due to war after the An Lushan Rebellion, with Gao Shi reminiscing about his past with Li Bai amidst the turmoil. The film invited Linda Jaivin, an Australian best-selling author and critic, to translate the dialogue. With over forty years of experience in Chinese and English cultural fields, Jaivin has completed English subtitle translations for Chinese films such as *Farewell My Concubine*, *Mei Lanfang*, *Hero*, *Eastern Evils*, and *City of Sadness*. Translation is an ethical activity, and its intercultural nature determines that it is a form of cross-cultural communication (Luo, 2009).

Subtitle translation is a unique type of language conversion: a condensed written translation of the original spoken dialogue (Li, 2001, pp.38-40). High-quality subtitle translation helps foreign audiences better understand the film's plot, feel the ideas and emotions conveyed by the movie, and thus gain insight into China's cultural values (Li & Ma, 2021, pp.20-25). Over the past two decades, the main categories of local subtitle translation research include studies on subtitle translation strategies, subjects, quality, ethics, pedagogical applications, interdisciplinary research, comprehensive reviews, and the entire film translation process (Chen, 2021, pp.73-76; Wang & Dai, 2003; Lu & Zhu, 2023; He, Wu, & Guo, 2023).

The concept of "translation ethics" was proposed by Berman and popularized through Venuti's English translation. Subsequently, representative figures such as Chesterman, Pym, and Robinson expanded the exploration of translation ethics from their respective perspectives (Hu & Peng, 2023). Research on translation ethics in China is essentially divided into two categories: one is pure theoretical research, which involves studying and evaluating the ethical theories proposed by a specific theorist (Liu, 2005; Liu, 2014); the other involves studying and reviewing translation ethics theory as a

whole system (Hu & Peng, 2023; Wu, 2021; Zhou, 2022). The second category combines translation ethics theory with a specific text or film for analysis (Wu, 2012; Wen, 2013). These studies aim to serve local translation ethics research by better understanding Western translation ethics thought.

This paper draws on Andrew Chesterman's translation ethics model to analyze the English subtitles of *Chang'an* (taken from Tencent Video's *Chang'an*), examining the translation methods and strategies used by the translator to embody these translation ethics. It also proposes several suggestions for improvement and recommendations for the subtitle translation of this film.

## 2. CHESTERMAN'S TRANSLATION ETHICS MODEL

Andrew Chesterman bases his translation ethics model on "clarity", "truth", "trust", and "understanding", and proposes two corresponding translation norms: (1) Expectancy Norms, which suggest that translators should make the translation meet the readers' expectations; (2) Professional Norms, which encompass three specific norms: a. The Relation Norm, indicating that translators should establish and maintain an appropriate relationship between the source text and the translation; b. The Communication Norm, which states that translators should optimize communication effectiveness by considering the needs of all parties based on the actual situation; c. The Accountability Norm, which implies that translators should be responsible to all participants in the translation activity (original authors, organizers, and potential readers) (Chesterman, 1993).

In his later research, Chesterman revised his earlier classification of translation norms and proposed four translation ethics models: (1) Ethics of Representation, which states that translation should directly represent the source text or the author's intent without any addition, reduction, or alteration; (2) Ethics of Service, which suggests that translation should meet the client's requirements while also being responsible to the original author and readers, emphasizing the importance of completing tasks on time; (3) Ethics of Communication, which indicates that translation should serve as a cross-cultural exchange; (4) Norm-based Ethics, which suggests that translators should act according to pre-established norms, especially those expected by the target culture. For Chesterman, each of these four ethics models has its own set of problems. Therefore, he introduced a fifth ethics model, the Ethics of Commitment, which suggests that as a translation professional, one should commit to striving for better performance in translation. The Ethics of Commitment allows translators to choose from the four different ethics models mentioned earlier based on the actual situation, without being confined to the

classification of these ethics models. He also proposed a translation professional ethics oath, the Hieronymic Oath, modeled after the Hippocratic Oath for doctors, which has become a milestone in the maturation of Chesterman's five translation ethics models (Chesterman, 2001). Chesterman's proposed ethics models are closer to translation practice and have strong regulatory and operability (Li, 2023, pp.24-32). Chesterman's research on translation ethics is relatively objective, encompassing both descriptive and systematic approaches. His five major ethics models have profound significance for both translation research and practice (Chen, 2010, pp.85-88).

In this paper, the author focuses more on the representational and communicative ethics reflected in the translation. Due to objective limitations, such as the inability to contact the translator and the film production company, the paper does not address the ethics of service, norm-based ethics, or the ethics of commitment.

## 3. THE EMBODIMENT OF TRANSLATION ETHICS IN THE SUBTITLE TRANSLATION OF *CHANG'AN*

*Chang'an*, a popular film during the summer of 2023, features over 1,500 lines of both Chinese and English subtitles, making its subtitle translation a subject of considerable research value. Scholars have interpreted this film from various perspectives. Some have discussed the art form of animated films (Huang, 2023, pp.26-29), while others have analyzed the characters in *Chang'an* from a triple ethical dimension of "individual-society-nation" (Zhang, 2023). There are also studies that combine this film with others to investigate the representation of the prosperous Tang Dynasty in recent Chinese film and television works (Li, 2023). These studies illustrate the popularity of the film. Particularly during the 2024 Spring Festival Gala, the Xi'an branch venue used the image of Li Bai from the film to recreate some scenes from it, slowly unfolding a beautiful scroll of *Chang'an* from ancient times to the present in front of the audience, achieving a link between the past and the present and reaching an unprecedented level of emotional resonance.

This paper utilizes Chesterman's five translation ethics models, focusing on representational ethics and communicative ethics, to interpret and analyze the subtitle translation of the film, exploring the path and direction of subtitle translation practice and research for domestic animated films.

### 3.1 The Ethics of Representation Reflected in Movie Subtitle Translation

Chesterman believes that translation should directly represent the source text or the author's intent without any addition, reduction, or alteration. He considers the translation to be a symbol of the original text. Subtitle

translation requires that the source text and its translation appear on the same timeline, one corresponding to the other, a specificity that makes the embodiment of representational ethics particularly evident.

In the over 1,500 lines of subtitle translation for *Chang'an*, many sentences reflect representational ethics, whether they are narrations, dialogues, or monologues.

Example (1): Original Text: 大唐广德元年，十二月，四川松州，云山城

Translation: Late winter, the first year of Emperor Daizong's reign. FORT YUNSHAN, SICHUAN.

(2): Original Text: 剑南西川节度使高适

Translation: GAO SHI, SOUTHWEST SICHUAN GOVERNOR

(3): Original Text: Bookboy: 朝廷又杀了一批大臣重将

Gao Shi: 圣上杀伐果断，一继位就诛杀了李辅国与元丞相。

Bookboy: 朝廷的军书如雪片般传来，都是催促中丞引军出关，西击吐蕃，围魏救赵，逼迫长安城外得吐蕃大军回师，解长安之围。

Gao Shi: 可我反而舍去了云山城，退守泸水关。

Bookboy: 虽然严武马上要来接任，可是，毕竟中丞您还在这剑南西川节度使任上。

Gao Shi: 当然，朝廷责罚下来，罪名在我。带那名吐蕃俘虏来问话。

Translation: Bookboy: More ministers and generals have been executed.

Gao Shi: His Majesty is resolute. As soon as he took the throne, he executed Li Fuguo and Chancellor Yuan.

Bookboy: The court has sent a flurry of orders urging Your Excellency to lead your army to attack the Tubo troops in the west, forcing their main army to turn back and lift the siege of Chang'an.

Gao Shi: Instead, I abandoned Yunshan and retreated to Lushui Pass.

Bookboy: General Yan Wu will soon take over, but, you, sir, are still in charge of the Southwest Sichuan Command.

Gao Shi: Of course, when the court assigns blame, I'll be the guilty one. Bring the Tubo prisoner for interrogation.

These three examples are taken from a short segment at the beginning of the film. Examples (1) and (2) appear on the side of the screen in vertical text, while example (3) corresponds one-to-one with the Chinese at the bottom of the screen according to the timeline design. In example (1), FORT YUNSHAN, SICHUAN is a translation of a place name that excellently reproduces the original text "Sichuan Songzhou, Yunshan City", and its order also conforms to the linguistic rules of each language, from small to large and from large to small. In example (2), the translation uses only one word, "governor", to express the meaning of the Chinese "节度使", which is undoubtedly the correct and most effective expression within the limited

time that film subtitles can present. Example (3) is a series of dialogues between the bookboy and Gao Shi. The first sentence of the bookboy's speech is in the active voice, while the translation adopts the passive voice, which can better present the meaning intended by the original text. Apart from this, the order of the text and translation in this dialogue is almost identical and corresponds one-to-one. Analyzing the original and translated texts of these three examples, it can be seen that the translator mainly uses literal translation, and the embodiment of representational ethics is also very evident. For example, "军书如雪片般传来" is translated as "has sent a flurry of orders". The word "flurry" has the meanings of "a series of things appearing at the same time" and "little snowflakes". This word can not only vividly express the urgent mood of the court that is intended to be conveyed in Chinese but also echoes the meaning of "雪片" in the original Chinese text, which is also easy for English-speaking audience to understand.

*Chang'an* is a film that recalls Gao Shi's past with Li Bai from his perspective, so there are many monologues and narrations by Gao Shi in the film, and the translations of these monologues and narrations also well reflect ethics of representation.

Example (4) Original Text: 我的父亲对我期望极高，盼我有朝一日像我祖父那样直破漠北，封狼居胥。但读书识字对我却是极困难的一件事。我一读书，书上的文字就像水中蝌蚪一般，游来游去，乱作一团。

Translation: My father had great expectations of me. He hoped that one day, I'd be like my grandfather flying the banner beyond the Great Desert. But learning to read was really difficult for me. When I looked at a book, the characters swam on the page like tadpoles, racing around, just a big mess.

Example (5) Original Text: 三年守孝后，我决定离家去长安。虽然读书不成，但我还有武艺在身。那时正当我大唐开元盛世，我要直驱长安，叩天子门，成不世功业，复我高家的赫赫威名。

Translation: After three years of mourning, I left home for the capital, Chang'an. I didn't read well but I had martial skills. It was Kaiyuan, the Tang's Golden Age. I would go straight to Chang'an, serve the Emperor, make my name and restore the glory of my family.

Example (6) Original Text: 那日一别之后，转眼又是数年。我决定去投军。我是个笨拙的人，没有李白的洒脱，更不像李白王维他们才气纵横。我高家本就是军人出身，出生入死，博得一名，是我们高家的命数。

Translation: After parting that day, more years fled past. I decided to join the army. I'm awkward in company. I didn't have Li Bai's ease or his and Wang Wei's immense talent. We Gaos have always been military men. It's in braving danger we make our name. That's the Gao family's destiny.

These three monologues respectively reflect Gao Shi' difficulties in reading as a child, his ambitions after his father's death, and his resolution to fight against the odds after years of biding his time in his hometown. In example (4), the translation "great expectations" represent the original text "期望极高", and the translation "the characters swam on the page like tadpoles, racing around, just a big mess" directly represents "游来游去", "蝌蚪" and "乱作一团" in the original text. In example (5), the translations "I left home for the capital, Chang'an" and "go straight to Chang'an" respectively represent the original text "我决定离家去长安" and "直驱长安". In example (6), the translations "join the army" and "military men" respectively represent "投军" and "军人出身" in the original text.

In summary, the narrations, dialogues, and monologues of the film *Chang'an* all clearly reflect the representational ethics model of translation. When embodying the representational ethics model, the translator mainly uses literal translation methods, occasionally changing the sentence structure according to the expression habits of the target language.

### 3.2 The Ethics of Communication Reflected in Movie Subtitle Translation

Translation is not only the conversion of two languages but also a collision of two cultures. Under the guidance of the ethics of communication, the translator/translation should not only represent the content and intent of the original text but also consider whether the translation can reflect the dialogue between the two languages and cultures, thereby completing the task of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural information transmission.

Although most narrations can adopt literal translation methods to represent the content of the original text, some information containing specific cultural meanings, due to the short presentation time in subtitles, forces the translator to adopt free translation methods to achieve the purpose of communication between cultures. For example, in Example (1), the translation "Late winter, the first year of Emperor Daizong's reign" cannot directly represent the literal information of "大唐广德元年, 十二月" (the first year of Guangde in the Tang Dynasty, December). The translator translated "十二月" as "late winter" instead of directly translating it to "December". This is because in ancient China, people used the lunar calendar, not the Gregorian calendar used today. "December" in the English-speaking world refers to the twelfth month of the Gregorian calendar, which differs from the information expressed in the film's "十二月". Therefore, translating it as "late winter" better conveys the meaning of "深冬" in the film. Similarly, the translation of "大唐广德元年" also takes into account that the target culture may not understand the era name "广德", so it is more appropriate to translate it as the title of the emperor at that time.

Similarly, in monologues, there is information

containing specific cultural meanings that, due to the special nature of subtitle translation, must be paraphrased or omitted. For example, in Example (4), the original text "封狼居胥" is completely omitted in the translation and not translated. "封" in ancient China specifically referred to the act of offering sacrifices to heaven. "狼居胥" is a place name, referring to the Wolf Tooth Pass. The idiom "封狼居胥" originally referred to the story of the Western Han general Huo Qubing, who went on a distant expedition to the north, ascended the Wolf Tooth Pass to offer sacrifices to heaven, and declared success. Broadly speaking, "封狼居胥" is one of the highest honors for ancient Chinese military generals<sup>1</sup>. This idiom would pose no difficulty in a paper text translation, but because it is a movie subtitle and the original text only has the length of four characters, the translation cannot meet this requirement. Therefore, it can be omitted without affecting communication.

There are also many examples in dialogue translation that reflect ethics of communication.

#### Example (7)

Original Text: Gatekeeper: 贩夫走卒这样的贱类下民也敢来行卷?

Li Bai: 有眼无珠, 有眼无珠! 有眼无珠! 高兄, 走。不与这有眼无珠的庸人一般见识。

Translation: Gatekeeper: The descendant of a peddler, and you are to "Pass the Scroll"?

Li Bai: He has eyes but cannot see! Blind! Brother Gao, let's go. To argue with such an ignoramus is beneath us.

Example (7) describes the scene that when Li Bai, full of confidence that his eloquent writing will impress the prefect and open doors for him to realize his dreams through presenting scrolls, is thwarted by the gatekeeper's remark "The descendant of a peddler". In his anger, he says "有眼无珠" four times to describe the gatekeeper or the prefect's behavior. Instead of a literal translation of "His eyes have no eyeballs" based on the ethics of representation, the translator used three different expressions. "Blind" is actually a repetition of the previous phrase "He has eyes but cannot see." As the two phrases are very close together in time, the translator effectively conveyed Li Bai's anger at the time. The last use of "有眼无珠" is translated as "ignoramus", expressing Li Bai's resignation after calming down, recognizing the other party's rejection as a foolish act, but having to accept the reality.

Example (8) Original Text: Li Gui Nian: 李龟年: 岐王今晚一下子给我塞了两个新人。

Translation: Prince Qi pushed two new acts on me tonight.

<sup>1</sup> 封狼居胥 <https://baike.so.com/doc/239793-32362414.html>

Example (8) is a complaint from Li Gui Nian to Gao Shi. At that time, Gao Shi could not find a suitable way to join the army to realize his ambitions. Coincidentally, Prince Qi appreciated his talents and had him perform the Gao family's spear technique at a banquet in his home, hoping to win the favor of Princess Yu Zhen, who was then favored by the emperor, and thus persuade her to recommend Gao Shi to the emperor and join the army. Therefore, Gao Shi's performance was added temporarily. Although Li Gui Nian's original words were "newcomers", the actual meaning was "two performance acts". The translation of "newcomers" as "new acts" is very vivid and successfully completes the task of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural information transmission.

Through the above analysis, we can see that when embodying the ethics of communication, the translator often uses free translation methods, focusing on the use of domestication translation strategies.

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#### 4. SEVERAL SUGGESTIONS

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While watching *Chang'an* and its subtitle translation, the author has some personal doubts about several translations, believing they do not well reflect ethics of communication, nor achieve cross-cultural communication or the transmission of cross-cultural information. These are discussed below.

##### 4.1 The Translation of the Film Title

Generally, a film's title carries the main ideas and core content, and the translation of a film title especially needs to serve the function of transmitting cross-cultural information. A successful title translation can increase foreign audiences' interest and attention to the film (He, Wu, & Guo, 2023). For example, the classic English film *Ghost* has a Chinese translation titled 《人鬼情未了》 (Unfinished Love Between Man and Ghost), which allows Chinese audiences to grasp the core content of the film at first glance. If it were directly translated as "鬼", large audience might be deterred and refuse to go to the cinema to watch the film. *Chang'an*, although told from Gao Shi's perspective as he recalls his past with Li Bai, also presents the prosperous scene of the Tang Dynasty to the audience, explaining why talented individuals like Li Bai, Wang Wei, and Gao Shi flocked to the city Chang'an at that time. In the minds of these talented individuals, Chang'an was not only the capital of the time but also a place to realize their dreams. Therefore, the English version of the film title is simply *Chang'an*, which, while consistent with representational ethics, directly transliterates the Chinese title without changing it. However, this may not immediately convey the core content and emotions of the film to English-speaking audiences. The author suggests that adding a subtitle after "Chang'an", such as "a dream land", might better help English-speaking audiences immediately understand the significant meaning

of Chang'an in this film, aiding in the cross-cultural expression of the film's theme and better fulfilling the role of translation in cross-cultural communication as required by the ethics of communication.

##### 4.2 The Translation of “在下”

When Gao Shi and Li Bai first met, despite a misunderstanding, the confusion was eventually cleared up, and the two got acquainted. At that time, both introduced themselves with a respectful bow, saying “在下, Li Bai” and “在下, Gao Shi.” In Chinese, “在下” is actually a humble term referring to oneself. “在下, Li Bai” and “在下, Gao Shi.” essentially mean “My name is Li Bai” and “My name is Gao Shi.” However, in the film's subtitle translation, “在下” is translated as “at your service.” While “at your service” can indeed be used before one's name, the phrase implies a readiness to assist at any time, usually translated as “乐意效劳” and carries a connotation of subordination to a superior. When Li Bai and Gao Shi first met, they were not familiar with each other, and there was no hierarchical relationship between them. They introduced themselves to each other simply because they admired each other and wanted to make each other acquaintance. Therefore, the author believes it would be more appropriate to translate “在下” as “I am” or “My name is”.

##### 4.3 The Translation of “扶灵”

“扶灵” is a custom in traditional Chinese Han funerals. According to traditional Han funeral customs, the deceased is bathed, dressed, and placed in a coffin. After a series of rituals, the coffin is transported to a blessed land and buried, along with the coffin, and a mound is built over it – this is burial. During the transportation of the deceased's coffin, close relatives (usually eight people) carry the coffin forward, symbolizing escorting the deceased on their final journey, known as “扶灵”<sup>2</sup>.

In the movie, Gao Shi talks about his father's death, and how he took his father's body from Guangdong back to Guangling. In the translation of this line, “扶灵” is translated as “take the ashes.” As previously mentioned, the traditional Chinese funeral practice is burial, so the deceased's body is placed in the coffin for burial. The English word “ashes” means “cremated remains”, which does not correspond to the actual situation. The author believes it would be more appropriate to translate this as “body”.

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#### 5. CONCLUSION

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This paper discusses the rationality of the English subtitles of *Chang'an* using Chesterman's ethics of representation and communication among his five translation ethics models. Through analysis, it is found

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<sup>2</sup> 扶灵<https://baike.so.com/doc/6809486-7026440.html>

that the subtitles translated by Linda Jaivin fully embody the representational and communicative ethics models, effectively promoting cross-cultural communication and the transmission of cross-cultural information. The translator employs both literal and free translation methods, as well as corresponding foreignization and domestication strategies, to achieve these two translation ethics models. In handling translation details, techniques such as changing voice and sentence structure are utilized. At the same time, the analysis of the film's subtitle translation also identifies several points that the author thinks inappropriate. These points all involve the specific cultural meanings of the original text. Therefore, when translating texts with significant cultural differences, the translator should fully understand the various cultures involved in the original text in advance to avoid misunderstandings or omissions.

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