

On C-E Subtitle Translation of New Gods: Nezha Reborn under Skopos Theory

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Abstract: Translation plays a vital role in fostering communication and building a bridge for people to get to know a different culture. With the boom of the film industry, films have gradually become a pivotal vehicle in cross-cultural communication. As Chinese films inevitably carry distinctive cultural elements, subtitle quality greatly impacts how well international audiences understand both the narrative and embedded cultural references. This thesis examines the Chinese-to-English subtitles of a Chinese animated film, *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, analyzing translation strategies and methods through the lens of Skopos Theory. The study reveals that the translation adheres to the Skopos rule through the use of free translation; follows the coherence rule by employing the domestication translation strategy; and respects the fidelity rule by applying the foreignization translation strategy. Under this view, it is effortless for the foreign audience to grasp the film's main plot and the high-context Chinese culture. This study can provide guidance for practical subtitle translation and improve effective cross-cultural interaction.

Keywords: Skopos Theory; Subtitle translation; Chinese animation film; Translation strategy

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1. Introduction

In today's rapidly developing society, material comfort has largely been achieved, and media such as television dramas and films have become major sources of entertainment. The President of the CPC has repeatedly emphasized the need to strengthen China's international communication capacity, to tell China's stories well, and to present a true, multi-dimensional, and comprehensive image of the country^[1]. A core requirement for telling China's story effectively is the ability to construct engaging and meaningful narratives.

China, with its profound cultural heritage, has never been short of compelling stories. These rich narrative resources continue to provide strong support for the growth of the Chinese film industry. In recent years, especially between 2020 and 2024, a wave of Chinese films with distinctively Chinese elements rooted in local culture—including the science fiction epic *The Wandering Earth*, the animated feature *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, the

fantasy blockbuster *Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*, and the comedy *Hi, Mom*—have showed up in the international market and received widespread acclaim. This trend illustrates that the film industry is playing an increasingly vital role in sharing Chinese stories with international audiences.

Among these works, many filmmakers, drawing deeply from China's cultural traditions, create works rich in Chinese aesthetics and values. A notable example is *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, an animated feature by Light Chaser Animation Studios. The film draws inspiration from the 1979 classic *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, and is based on the Ming dynasty mythological novel *Investiture of the Gods*. It was featured in the “Work in Progress” section of the 2020 Annecy International Animation Film Festival in France, and also became the first Chinese animated feature acquired by streaming giant Netflix. By reimagining the legendary figure of Nezha in a futuristic setting—where his reincarnation, Li Yunxiang, confronts the East Sea Dragon Clan after 3,000 years—the film achieves a striking blend of tradition and innovation. This setting retains the essence of Chinese mythology while embracing a contemporary aesthetic, resonating strongly with audiences in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore^[2].

As Chinese films continue to reach broader audiences overseas, the importance of subtitle translation becomes increasingly evident. While global recognition of Chinese films is growing, academic attention to subtitle translation—especially from Chinese to English—remains relatively limited. According to data from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), between 2019 and 2024, a total of 47,425 articles on translation studies were published in China, of which only 871 focused specifically on subtitle translation^[3]. Most of this existing research centers on translation techniques and practices, particularly in the context of film title translation. The majority of these studies focus on the Chinese subtitles of foreign films, while relatively few examine English subtitle translation of Chinese films, and even fewer target Chinese animated films. Being a representative work that integrates traditional culture with modern innovation, *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* offers a valuable case study that offers useful insights for the broader study of subtitle translation in the context of Chinese cultural exchanges. By analyzing how this film handles cross-cultural communication through subtitles, researchers can gain a better understanding of the challenges and strategies involved in translating culturally embedded content.

Ultimately, the global spread of Chinese culture is a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural endeavor in which translation plays a central role^[4]. For Chinese culture to step beyond national borders and find resonance in other societies, effective translation is essential. High-quality subtitle translation not only improves the audience's comprehension of the plot and dialogue but also bridges cultural gaps and enhances mutual understanding. In this sense, subtitle translation is not merely a technical task—it is a crucial medium through which China seeks to tell its stories well on the world stage.

2. Skopos Theory and its three rules

Skopos Theory, introduced in the 1970s by German scholar Katharina Reiss, later developed by Hans Vermeer, lies at the center of functionalist approaches to translation. The term “skopos”, derived from Greek, means “purpose.” According to Vermeer, more specifically, it refers to the “purpose of translation”^[5]. The core aim of Skopos Theory, as Venuti summarizes, is to clarify the intention that drives the translation^[6]. Once the intended purpose is identified, translators can then adopt strategies that best serve this goal. However, this does not imply that translators enjoy unrestricted freedom. Their choices must still align with three fundamental principles: the skopos rule, the coherence rule, and the fidelity rule.

The skopos rule should, according to Vermeer, “translate/interpret/speak/write in a way that enables your

text/translation to function in the situation it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want it to function”^[7]. Therefore, translators are bound to have a clear mind of the translation’s skopos. As Vermeer further notes, “what the skopos states is that one must translate, consciously and consistently, in accordance with some principle respecting the target text. The theory does not state what the principle is: this must be decided separately in each specific case”^[7]. In other words, identifying and adhering to the skopos rule is key to ensuring its effectiveness and audience reception.

The second rule, known as the coherence rule or intra-textual coherence, requires that “a translation should be acceptable in a sense that it is coherent with the receivers’ situation”^[7]. This means that translators must account for the linguistic, social, and cultural background of the target audience, which may differ significantly from that of the source text. Only by doing so can they produce a text that is not only readable and accessible, but also functionally appropriate within its new context.

The third crucial rule is the fidelity rule, also known as inter-textual coherence. This rule requires that “the target text should bear some kind of relationship with the corresponding source text”^[7]. In other words, although the focus of functionalist translation is on the target text and its intended effect, there should still be a recognizable connection to the source text.

Although these three rules guide the translation process, they do not carry equal weight. As Nord points out, “if the translation skopos requires a change of function, the standard will no longer be inter-textual coherence with the source text. If the translation skopos demands intratextual incoherence (as in the theatre of the absurd), the standard of intratextual coherence is no longer valid”^[7]. In essence, both the coherence rule and the fidelity rule are subordinate to the skopos rule. The fidelity rule, in turn, ranks below the coherence rule. This hierarchy implies that as long as the translation fulfills its intended skopos, strict loyalty to or equivalence with the source text may not be necessarily required.

This flexible and purpose-oriented approach is particularly relevant to subtitle translation, which differs significantly from literary translation. Film language is inherently auditory, multimodal, instantaneous, accessible, and annotation-free^[8]. As a result, subtitle translation is constrained by factors such as time, space, culture, and discourse. In addition to adhering to the coherence rule and the fidelity rule, subtitle translation must also align with the visual content of the film. Its ultimate aim is to assist viewers in better appreciating foreign films, understanding plot and dialogue, and gaining insight into other cultures.

3. Analysis from the view of Skopos Theory

Subtitle translation inevitably involves the interaction between two languages and their underlying cultures. To ensure that the target audience can comprehend the plot and dialogue while also sparking interest in the source culture, subtitle translators frequently employ a mix of free translation and the translation strategies of domestication and foreignization. These methods aim to produce subtitles that are both faithful to the original and linguistically coherent. As the second animated feature by Light Chaser Animation, *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* relies heavily on subtitle translation to facilitate its global reach. The following section will present how the subtitle translation of this film meets Skopos Theory’s three rules.

3.1. Free translation method to achieve the skopos rule

Translation is a goal-oriented activity. As previously noted, the skopos rule takes precedence over the other two rules, implying that violations of the coherence rule and the fidelity rule are acceptable, provided the translation

fulfills the requirements of the skopos rule. In the context of a film—particularly a commercial one—the primary skopos is to ensure that the audience comprehends and enjoys the storyline, which promises a box-office success. To accomplish this skopos, the translator has employed the translation method of free translation and the translation technique of generalization.

The free translation method translates the meaning of the source text instead of its literal meaning. The following two examples well illustrate this approach.

Example 1:

Source Text: 德老板：这条鱼我看着眼熟。

孙悟空：熟了，其他地方也熟了。尝尝？

Target Text: De: There's something fishy here.

Sun Wukong: It's fishy all over. Try some?

This dialogue employs the free translation method rather than literal translation. A literal version, such as “This fish is familiar to me” and “The whole fish is already done. Try some?” would be disjointed and confusing for the target audience, failing to capture the underlying joke and conversational logic.

In fact, the line involves a pun that is essential to the humor of the scene. The English phrase “fishy” is cleverly chosen here for its polysemy. As the Cambridge English Dictionary explains, “fishy” has two primary meanings: (1) seeming dishonest or false; and (2) smelling or tasting like fish^[9]. This dual meaning aligns well with the original Chinese pun, where “熟” can mean both “familiar” and “cooked.” In the scene, De—who is the East Sea Dragon King—inspects the roasted “fish”, which is actually one of his subordinates. Sun Wukong uses this pun to dodge suspicion. By leveraging “fishy” in its dual senses, the translation maintains the pun and preserves the humor that arises from wordplay. This example demonstrates how a single word can fulfill the translator's skopos—to make the audience understand and enjoy culturally embedded humor.

Example 2:

Source Text: 我跟他都是女娲补天留下的一块石头。

Target Text: We're stones leftover when the First Goddess patched the sky.

The translation employs a free translation method, aligning with the skopos rule by prioritizing the target audience's comprehension over strict fidelity to the source text. The original line, “我跟他都是女娲补天留下的一块石头”, references the Chinese myth of “女娲补天 (literal translation: Nvwa Mends the Heavens)”. While this story is readily well known by Chinese audiences, it may be obscure to Anglophone viewers unfamiliar with traditional Chinese mythology. Given the constraints of subtitle translation—particularly its limitations in space and time—adding explanatory footnotes is not an option. Therefore, the translator opts for “the First Goddess”, a culturally adapted expression that signals divinity while retaining the referential function of the original. The capitalized letters further reinforce that this is a proper noun. This translation ensures the audience can follow the plot and access the cultural context without confusion.

3.2. Domestication translation strategy to achieve the coherence rule

According to the coherence rule, a translation should be acceptable in the sense that it is coherent with the receiver's situation^[7]. Guided by this rule, translators need to account for the difference in linguistic and cultural

background between the source text and the target text. Only by considering it can the target audience accept and understand the translation. As a result, the domestication translation strategy is frequently employed. This approach involves turning an exotic source language into a much more familiar one with the target audience. The following two examples illustrate this strategy in practice.

Example 3:

Source Text: 德老板 : 你没看出来那是哪吒吗?

孙悟空 : 用火的又不只有他。比如, 葫芦老四也用火对不对?

Target Text: De: You couldn't tell it was Nezha?

Sun Wukong: Others use fire too, you know. Take the Fire Imp, right?

This subtitle employs the domestication translation strategy, directly illustrating Skopos Theory's coherence rule. “葫芦娃”, as known as “Calabash Brothers”, is one of the most famous Chinese animations, presenting a story of how seven Calabash Brothers with different magical powers defeated two demons to save their grandfather. The fourth one, as mentioned by Sun Wukong, holds the power to create and control fire. However, this character is likely unknown to English-speaking viewers or those unfamiliar with Chinese animation. To solve this, the translator substitutes the original cultural reference with the Fire Imp from the widely played game Terraria—a well-known fire-themed character—to convey the same conceptual meaning in a more accessible way. The Fire Imp is a character found in Terraria's Underworld, recognizable for its fiery attacks and teleportation abilities^[10]. Since both figures are associated with fire, the substitution maintains thematic equivalence. Using the domestication translation strategy not only enhances comprehension for the target audience but also preserves the humor and relational dynamics of the original dialogue. Consequently, it increases viewer engagement and helps the film's international impact—demonstrating how effective translation can adapt cultural elements without sacrificing coherence or fidelity.

Example 4:

Source Text: 丁三配二四。至尊宝啊笨。

Target Text: Dead Man's Hand. Joker. Dumbo.

This example employs the domestication translation strategy aligned with Skopos Theory's coherence rule, translating obscure Chinese cultural references into expressions that hold meaning in the target culture. In the original, Sun Wukong mentions “Pai Gow”, a traditional Chinese gambling game. The phrase he mentioned, “丁三配二四 (Ding San with Er Si)” represents a powerful hand combination, also known as “至尊宝” (Supreme Gee Joon), suggesting a high chance of winning^[11]. However, this traditional Chinese domino game is unlikely to be recognized by Western audiences. To bridge this cultural gap, the translator thus replaces the reference with two storied poker hands, Dead Man's Hand and Joker.

The Dead Man's Hand refers to a two-pair consisting of two black aces and two black eights. In poker games, a two-pair hand is solid—far from unbeatable, but often strong enough to win several pots, which offers a sense of near victory^[12].

The Joker acts as a wildcard in many poker variants, capable of substituting for any other card, thus increasing the player's flexibility and potential for winning. Together, these terms echo the source text's message: Sun Wukong sees a strong hand with promising winning potential. This creative use of familiar card game terminology allows the subtitles to bridge the cultural gap, improve narrative understanding, and maintain coherence and

relatability for target audiences.

3.3. Foreignization translation strategy to achieve the fidelity rule

The fidelity rule, also referred to as intertextual coherence, emphasizes that a translation should remain as faithful as possible to the source text, striving to preserve its original meaning to the greatest extent. However, fidelity does not imply a rigid word-for-word translation. As long as the translation maintains the intent and content of the source text, it can still be regarded as an attempt to follow the fidelity rule. The foreignization translation strategy, which seeks to retain the original cultural and informational elements of the source text, is often employed to remain loyal to the original text. The following example illustrates a typical application of this approach.

Example 5:

Source Text: 德老板：这些不成敬意。还请公子高抬贵手，不计前嫌。

哥：德老板，您这也太客气。

Target Text: De: Here's a small token of respect. Hope you can kindly accept this and let us move on.

Brother: Boss, this is so...

This subtitle adopts the foreignization translation strategy, effectively conveying the original meaning while preserving cultural nuance. The use of “Boss” to translate “德老板” reflects China's high powerdistance culture, where addressing someone by title signifies respect and acknowledgment of hierarchy—unlike Western norms, which typically soften such distinctions by using “Mr. De.” Individuals from high-power distance cultures accept power as part of society^[13]. Addressing that guy as Boss indicates that the speaker's full respect for him. Moreover, the phrase “您这也太客气” (You are being too polite) is only partially translated (“this is so...”), with an intentional ellipsis. This unfinished sentence reflects high-context communication typical in Chinese culture, where meanings are often implied rather than explicitly stated. As Hall's concept of highcontext cultures goes, a high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message^[13]. The unfinished sentence, combined with the context, already shows that the utterer wants to accept Boss De's money by showing some appreciation for his “good deeds.”

By combining foreignized address with an unfinished utterance, the translation recreates the original's structural and cultural subtleties, and allows meaning to be inferred from the surrounding context—such as the characters' body language or previous interactions—thereby preserving the communicative style of the original dialogue. This translation strategy successfully preserves both coherence and fidelity, allowing non-Chinese audiences to experience the culturally specific mode of discourse.

Nevertheless, subpar subtitle quality can significantly damage audience reception and even obstruct cross-cultural communication. In analyzing this film, the author identifies several examples of flawed subtitle translation, which may confuse the target audience and thus need correcting. One of those is presented below.

Example 6:

Source Text: 三姐，穿得这么漂亮。说不定被董事长一眼看中可就乌鸦变凤凰了。

Target Text: Miss San, you look so pretty. You might catch the boss's eye and go from crow to phoenix.

In this instance, a literal translation method is adopted to achieve the fidelity rule. Literal translation refers to preserving the source language's lexical choices, structures, and stylistic norms, enabling the target audience to experience the text similarly to the source audience. However, the cultural connotations of “crow” and “phoenix” differ markedly between Chinese and Western cultures. In Chinese culture, birds such as crows are considered ordinary and unimpressive. The phoenix, while also a bird, is richly adorned with multicolored feathers and regarded as noble and auspicious. It has long been a symbol of harmony, prosperity, and high status, and is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions. This Chinese phrase, “乌鸦变凤凰 (go from crow to phoenix)”, implies that an ordinary woman might attain wealth or social elevation through a fateful opportunity.

In contrast, the crow in the Western tradition carries mixed symbolism. For example, in the Bible, the crow (or raven) plays contradictory roles: in the *Book of Kings*, it serves as a loyal messenger helping Elijah survive, while in *Genesis*, it is portrayed as an unreliable one, failing to bring news of the flood's end to Noah ^[14]. Moreover, the English term “phoenix” refers to the mythical firebird known for its resurrection and immortality—ideas that are not entirely equivalent to the Chinese concept of “凤凰 (fenghuang)”. Although some overlap between the Chinese “fenghuang” and the Western “phoenix” exists—partly due to cultural blending influenced by works like Guo Moruo's *The Nirvana of the Phoenix*—the two are not functionally equivalent ^[15]. While a literal translation may satisfy the fidelity rule, it may fail to convey the intended meaning to the target audience, who might struggle to understand the metaphor, in that it is clear that there is no inherent or direct link between the crow and the phoenix in Western cultural frameworks.

According to Skopos theory, the Skopos rule is paramount. To ensure the message is accessible and meaningful to the audience, the phrase could instead be rendered as: “...here comes the story of Cinderella.” The tale of Cinderella is a classic and widely recognized Western example of an ordinary girl ascending to nobility, which closely mirrors the Chinese metaphor of a common bird transforming into a phoenix. This use of the domestication translation strategy takes into account cultural differences and background knowledge, significantly improving both the readability and acceptability of the translated text.

4. Conclusion

Chinese films released in international markets often receive less favorable reception compared to their domestic success, highlighting persistent challenges in the global communication of Chinese culture. Two primary obstacles contribute to this disparity: cultural unfamiliarity and linguistic barriers. As a crucial medium for cross-cultural communication, subtitle translation plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges and advancing the broader objective of effectively “telling China's story.”

Skopos Theory offers valuable guidance by focusing on the intended skopos of the translation, thereby enabling translators to make contextually appropriate and audience-oriented decisions. Through subtitles, international audiences can better understand the narrative and engage with Chinese culture, thereby fostering cross-cultural dialogue and amplifying China's cultural voice on the global stage.

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