

On Chinese-English Translation of Documentary Subtitles from the Perspective of Skopos Theory: A Case Study of Aerial China

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Abstract

Documentary subtitles convey geographical and cultural information through language that can also be condensed and expressive. This article examines Chinese-English subtitle translation in *Aerial China* through the Skopos, coherence, and fidelity rules. Three selected bilingual examples are analysed in detail: a river-related idiom, agricultural continuity on the Loess Plateau, and a simile describing the Great Wall. Close reading compares source meaning, information structure, and rhetorical form with the accompanying English renderings and suggested alternatives. In the river example, cultural explanation can clarify figurative meaning while preserving its connection to a local reference. Condensation can consolidate repetition while leaving a distinct proposition implicit or shifting the emphasis from transmission to preservation. Expressive reformulation may retain a source image yet alter the spatial relationship that gives the image its function. These findings support an integrated application of the three rules, in which communicative purpose guides a choice and coherence and fidelity test its consequences. The article identifies specific criteria for assessing explanation, reduction, and reformulation in documentary subtitling. Its conclusions concern the selected textual examples; audiovisual suitability and audience comprehension require further investigation.

Keywords

Skopos Theory; Documentary Subtitling; Chinese-English Translation; Cultural References; *Aerial China*

1. Introduction

Documentary narration connects landscapes with cultural meanings through idioms, descriptions of human activity, and figurative language. Chinese-English subtitle translation must therefore consider not only what a sentence identifies but also the relationships it establishes. A fluent translation may retain a river, a farming

community, or a monument while changing the connection between a place and an expression, people and inherited practices, or a structure and its surroundings.

Audiovisual translation research provides criteria for examining these choices. Díaz Cintas and Remael[1] place subtitling within linguistic, semiotic, and technical conditions, while Pedersen[2] examines extralinguistic cultural references in television subtitles. Studies of Chinese documentaries address related concerns: Jiang[3] discusses compact four-character expressions in Daming Palace; Luo and Wang[4] examine Wild China through Skopos theory; and Sheng[5] studies linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions in *Aerial China* through eco-translatology. These studies establish the relevance of cultural mediation and information organisation to documentary translation.

Identifying addition, omission, or restructuring does not, however, establish why a translation choice is appropriate. A gloss can clarify an idiom while reducing its imagery; compression can remove repetition while leaving a distinct proposition implicit; and an expressive verb can alter a spatial relationship. This article asks how cultural explanation, condensation, and expressive reformulation affect selected examples associated with *Aerial China*, and how the Skopos, coherence, and fidelity rules can be applied together to evaluate those effects.

The study uses qualitative close reading of three bilingual examples: the Jing and Wei rivers and an idiom, agricultural continuity on the Loess Plateau, and a dragon simile describing the Great Wall. Each source sentence and accompanying English rendering is compared with a suggested alternative. The English examples have not been authenticated as official subtitles, and the alternatives are analytical formulations. The study assesses textual choices rather than strategy frequency, a complete subtitle edition, or actual viewing performance.

2. Skopos Theory and Documentary Subtitling

2.1. The three principles of Skopos theory

Skopos theory treats translation as purposeful activity guided by the intended function of the target text[6]. Here, the assumed purpose is to communicate documentary descriptions to English-reading viewers while retaining their cultural and expressive functions. This assumption provides an analytical basis; it does not reconstruct a documented translation commission or imply uniform audience knowledge. The Skopos rule consequently directs attention to the particular communicative task, such as connecting a location with an idiom or relating a monument to its landscape.

The coherence rule concerns interpretability in the receiving situation. At sentence level, identifiable referents, clear clause relationships, and intelligible information progression help readers connect actions with participants. Coherence also depends on context: a fragment may continue an earlier cue, and a pronoun may refer to an already established object. Without adjacent cues, textual analysis can identify such

dependencies but cannot establish whether they cause difficulty in the programme. The fidelity rule concerns source–target relations. The present comparison examines places, participants, activities, temporal and spatial scope, and rhetorical relationships. Fidelity does not require Chinese syntax to be reproduced. It requires attention to whether a formal change also changes meaning. Consolidating repeated references to continuity differs from leaving residence unstated, just as retaining a dragon image differs from preserving the spatial relationship expressed through it. These rules operate together. Purpose identifies the communicative task, coherence examines its presentation in English, and fidelity tests the source features retained. Nord's[7] distinction between textual fidelity and loyalty to translation participants further cautions against treating assumed audience needs as unlimited justification for change. The analysis therefore asks what function the source performs, what the English changes, what interpretive benefit follows, and what becomes less explicit or altered. These questions also relate to Li's[8] discussion of faithfulness, readability, and usability.

2.2. Documentary subtitle requirements and analytical procedure

Subtitles are read under limits of display time and screen space alongside images and sound[1]. Economy is therefore relevant, but reducing repeated wording and removing an independent proposition require different assessments. Cultural mediation also involves separate tasks: retaining a geographical name preserves its referent, whereas explaining an idiom supplies a conventional linguistic meaning. Neither operation automatically accomplishes the other.

For each example, the analysis identifies source propositions and rhetorical form, compares the accompanying English, and evaluates an alternative against the same features. The alternatives isolate particular choices: a gloss rather than an image-based quotation, explicit habitation rather than inference, or integration rather than extension across mountains. Their suitability for production remains dependent on the relevant scene and subtitle cues.

3. Subtitle Translation in Aerial China

3.1. The Skopos rule and idiomatic meaning

Example 1 Rivers and an idiom

Chinese: 泾河与渭河在这里交汇，并且诞生了一个成语“泾渭分明”。

English rendering: The meeting of the Jinghe and the Weihe Rivers has given rise to a Chinese idiom “As distinct as the waters of Jing and Wei.”

Suggested alternative: The Jing and Wei rivers meet here, giving rise to an idiom meaning “clearly distinct.”

The Chinese performs two connected tasks: it identifies where the Jing and Wei rivers meet and associates that meeting with “泾渭分明.” The idiom repeats the river names, linking verbal form to geographical description. “在这里” locates the

event in the immediate setting. The analysis examines this stated association without independently establishing the idiom's historical origin.

The accompanying English preserves the named rivers and identifies the quotation as a Chinese idiom. “As distinct as the waters of Jing and Wei” also retains the river imagery. Yet a reader unfamiliar with the expression must infer why the waters provide a comparison. Their meeting alone does not explain the distinction. This is a potential interpretive demand rather than a demonstrated failure of comprehension; the complete programme may supply relevant visual support.

The alternative supplies the conventional sense through “an idiom meaning ‘clearly distinct’,” while retaining the rivers and their meeting. Naming and explanation thus perform complementary functions. Pedersen's[2] treatment of cultural references informs the retention of geographical identity, but explaining the linguistic expression requires a separate decision. Giving only the gloss would lose the local association; retaining only the names would leave its meaning unstated.

The gloss has a cost: it no longer repeats the waters within the quoted expression. It preserves geographical identity and makes figurative meaning explicit while reducing the idiom's image-based form. This trade-off can serve an immediate purpose of linking a location with an expression's meaning. If the verbal imagery is central, its reduced prominence matters more. Explanation is therefore justified by a specific function rather than by a general preference for explicitness.

The alternative also changes information structure. “The rivers meet here” replaces the nominal subject “the meeting,” restores “在这里,” and moves from participants to event to interpretation. Using “Jing” and “Wei” with a shared “rivers” expresses the generic element once; this is a naming choice within the proposed sentence, not a verified official convention. The version adds no account of water quality or hydrological history. Its benefit concerns explicit meaning and clause organisation, which must be weighed against the reduced imagery.

3.2. The coherence rule and agricultural continuity

Example 2 Agricultural life on the Loess Plateau

Chinese: 在这片广袤的黄土高原上，生活着世代代的农民，他们世代耕耘，传承着古老的农耕文化。

English rendering: On the vast Loess Plateau, generations of farmers have cultivated the land, preserving ancient agricultural traditions.

Suggested alternative: Generations of farmers live on the vast Loess Plateau, cultivating its land and passing down ancient farming traditions.

The Chinese establishes the plateau as a setting, states that farmers live there, describes continuing cultivation, and presents the transmission of agricultural culture. “世代代” and “世代” connect habitation and work across generations. Their meanings overlap, but their repetition also reinforces continuity. Condensing the wording does not make every proposition redundant.

The accompanying English arranges the description around one main action: “generations of farmers have cultivated the land.” The opening locates the activity on the vast plateau, and the final participial phrase connects cultivation with preserved traditions. “Generations” consolidates the repeated temporal wording, retaining continuity with less rhetorical insistence. This is a defensible economy, provided that the reduction in emphasis is distinguished from a loss of information. Habitation presents a separate issue. Cultivation on the plateau is compatible with living there but does not explicitly assert residence. The English leaves “生活着” to inference. If the passage introduces longstanding cultivation, that implication may suffice; if it introduces the inhabitants, explicit residence is more important. Treating the whole reduction as removal of redundancy would conceal this difference.

The alternative makes residence the main assertion and connects cultivation and transmission to the farmers. “Its land” refers back to the plateau without repeating its name. “Passing down” foregrounds transmission across generations, whereas “preserving” emphasises continued existence. Both concerns are relevant to “传承,” but the source’s generational wording makes transmission especially salient. The alternative retains that relation without inventing a particular mechanism of inheritance.

“Farming traditions” and “agricultural traditions” differ mainly in register; neither exhausts every dimension of “农耕文化.” Expanding the subtitle into beliefs, social organisation, or historical techniques would exceed the sentence’s evidence. The present “live” also foregrounds current habitation, while “have cultivated” connects earlier work with the present. Neighbouring narration would help determine which emphasis is preferable. The fuller alternative is justified when residence and transmission need direct expression, rather than by an assumption that additional words guarantee fidelity or readability.

3.3. The fidelity rule and a landscape simile

Example 3 The Great Wall and a dragon

Chinese: 长城，如同巨龙融入山脉之间。

English rendering: The Great Wall of China, stretching like a mighty dragon across the mountain ranges.

Suggested alternative: Like a giant dragon, the Great Wall blends into the mountain ranges.

The Chinese compares the Great Wall to a giant dragon and relates it to the mountains through “融入.” The simile therefore includes a landmark, an image, scale, and a spatial relationship. Fidelity must address their connection, rather than merely check whether “dragon” appears in English.

The accompanying rendering retains the landmark and an explicit comparison through “like.” Adding “of China” identifies the monument more fully but does not

explain the simile. “Mighty” also shifts emphasis: “巨” primarily marks size, whereas the English adjective foregrounds strength or power. The change is expressive, but it is not an explanation of dragon symbolism.

The principal difference lies in “stretching ... across.” This foregrounds extension through the landscape, while “融入” foregrounds integration into it. Both can form plausible descriptions, yet their spatial perspectives are different. Without the corresponding shot, the analysis can establish a textual shift rather than a factual error about the monument's position.

The alternative uses “blends into” to restore integration and “giant” to represent scale more directly. Moving the simile before the main clause changes syntax while keeping the landmark, image, and descriptive relationship. “Mountain ranges” retains the terrain; “之间” is not expressed separately, but the verb and complement place the Wall within the mountainous setting. This demonstrates why formal resemblance and fidelity are distinct criteria.

The accompanying English is also a fragment without a finite predicate. Adjacent cues might complete its construction, so the isolated quotation does not prove a defect in the subtitle sequence. The alternative forms a complete sentence whose coherence benefit depends on whether the cue must stand independently. Adding a separate account of dragon symbolism would not resolve the spatial shift and is unsupported by the quoted source. The relevant task is to preserve how the image relates the monument to the landscape.

4. Conclusion

The three examples show that translation strategies affect different components of documentary meaning. Cultural explanation must coordinate geographical identity with idiomatic sense; condensation must distinguish overlapping wording from an independent proposition; and expressive reformulation must preserve the relationship between an image and its descriptive verb. The Skopos, coherence, and fidelity rules support these assessments together by connecting communicative purpose with intelligible English and identifiable source relationships.

These findings concern three selected textual examples. Their status as official subtitles has not been authenticated, and the study cannot evaluate cue division, display conditions, or visual support without subtitle tracks, timecodes, and audiovisual observation. Ahonen's[9] study of subtitling without audiovisual context underscores this limitation. Further research should verify the examples against a specified edition and examine the corresponding scenes. Audience research is also needed before the proposed distinctions can be claimed to improve comprehension or interpretation.

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