
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Relevance-Theoretic Approach to the Subtitle Translation of *Farewell My Concubine*

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the subtitle translation of the film *Farewell My Concubine* from a relevance-theoretic perspective. The Chinese film *Farewell My Concubine* has been well-received in China as well as in other parts of the world and marked a milestone in Chinese film history. Its subtitle is rich in Chinese culture-loaded words, which may pose difficulties for both the translator to translate and for the oversea audience to understand. To explore the reasons for the warm reception of the subtitle translation of *Farewell My Concubine* among international audiences, this paper takes a relevance-theoretic approach to analyze the translation of culture-loaded expressions in the film, including mainly three types: Beijing Opera jargon, the Beijing dialect, and Chinese idioms. Through a detailed case study, this paper finds that the translator flexibly uses different translation strategies, such as domestication and foreignization, for different texts and contexts to cater to the audience's cognitive environment. Meanwhile, the translator also takes into account the features of subtitles, which are often limited by time and space, and accordingly makes reasonable omissions of the translated texts. From the perspective of relevance theory, the translator realizes optimal relevance and delivers the subtitle information accurately to the target audience. This paper also proves that relevance theory, as a cognitive pragmatic approach to communication, is a useful tool for translation studies.

KEYWORDS

Relevance Theory; Translation; Film Subtitle; Contextual Effect

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1. Introduction

With the deepening of globalization, cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries are becoming increasingly frequent. The Chinese film industry, as a window into the national culture for the world, plays an important role not only in strengthening the Chinese soft power but also in establishing the status of world power (Vlassis, 2015). In the process of promoting Chinese films to the outside world, subtitle translation is a decisive factor that determines whether the foreign audience would fully perceive and understand the film. However, for a long time, film subtitle translation hasn't received adequate attention like translation of literary works such as novels, poetry, and prose (Karamitroglou, 2000).

The Chinese film *Farewell My Concubine* is one of Chen Kaige's best works, which has been well-received all over the world. It is adapted from a novel written by Lilian Lee. The film spans fifty-three years, depicting the lives of two Beijing Opera artists and a woman against the historical upheaval. Beijing dialect is used throughout the script, and the lines are strongly characterized by the old Beijing culture. The dialogue in the film *Farewell My Concubine* is rich in Chinese cultural words, such as Beijing Opera jargon, the Beijing dialect, and Chinese idioms, which are the highlight of the film but meanwhile constitute difficulties in subtitle translation. To closely examine how the translator deals with these expressions will be of great help for exploring the Chinese-English subtitle translation.

According to Hatim and Mason (1990), translation involves a process, a decision-making procedure, and an act of communication between language users. Therefore, relevance theory, as a cognitive pragmatic approach to communication, would be a distinctive perspective to translation studies. After relevance theory was put forward in 1986 by Sperber and Wilson, scholars started to apply it to translation studies because it can explain how successful communication takes place (Kovačič, 1994; Hjort-Pedersen, 1996; Gutt, 2000; Zhonggang, 2006; Díaz-Pérez, 2014). According to relevance theory, communication is ostensive and inferential (Sperber & Wilson, 1996). Similarly, the traditional way of studying translation is to consider the relation between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) to be based on equivalence (Bogucki, 2020). Therefore, by examining how the translator used “different strategies to try to recreate the cognitive effects intended by the source communicator with the lowest possible processing effort on the part of the target addressee” (Díaz-Pérez, 2014, p. 108), we will be in a better position to understand what makes a good translation. Based on these assumptions, the current study hopes to approach the subtitle translation of the film *Farewell My Concubine* with the help of relevance theory and tries to find the answers to the following questions:

1. What translation strategies are applied when the translator deals with Beijing Opera jargon, the Beijing dialect, and Chinese idioms?
2. How does the subtitle translation of *Farewell My Concubine* cater to the audience’s cognitive habits in terms of form?
3. What effects does the subtitle translation of *Farewell My Concubine* have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

2. Background

2.1 Film Subtitle Translation

Film subtitles are regarded as “a distinctive instantiation of cinematic discourse” (Guillot, 2020, p. 317), and require distinctive ways of translation compared with traditional translation like literature translation. Some medium-related factors, including space, time limitation, and readability, pose additional challenges and sources of pragmatic idiosyncrasy for this special form of translation, making it specific as an expressive mode (Guillot, 2020).

The early studies on film subtitle translation mainly focused on descriptive research of subtitle translation. In 1991, Luyken wrote the book *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television-Dubbing and Subtitling for the European Audience*. This was the first time that a systematical investigation was carried out on the number of translated European films and audience preferences. Afterward, Cintas (2004) pointed out that studies on film subtitle translation were restricted to the language level only and that other social or cultural factors that were affecting translation had been ignored. Overall, the number of foreign studies on film subtitle translation is still limited. Karamitroglou (2000) noted that film and television translation had been inferior to literary translation.

To date, studies on subtitle translation can be largely divided into two types. First, an overwhelming majority of studies focused on translation strategies of certain words in subtitles, like cultural-specific items (CSI) or cultural-specific words (Shiryaeva & Badea, 2014; Horbacauskiene et al., 2016; Abdelaal, 2019), metaphors (Al-Adwan & Al-Jabri, 2023), swear words and taboo expressions (Abdelaal & Sarhani, 2021), Arabic profanities (Thawabteh et al., 2022). Obviously, the translation strategies of CSI have received the most attention in this field, probably because CSI translation “is always problematic due to cultural interrelation” (Horbacauskiene et al., 2016, p. 223) and is cultural-specific, and therefore requires our extensive investigation. Second, there have also been studies that explored subtitle translation across multiple languages (Guillot, 2020; Castelló-Mayo et al., 2021). Such a cross-linguistic perspective might also increase our understanding of subtitle translation as an intercultural mediation (Guillot, 2020).

As a world-famous film, *Farewell My Concubine* is worth studying in terms of its subtitle translation. Some Chinese scholars have carried out their research in this field. Zhang (2013, 2014) analyzed the subtitle translation of *Farewell My Concubine* based on contextual conformity theory and offered his opinion on the treatment of cultural imagery and subtitle mistranslation. He argued that translators should make good use of their knowledge of both cultures to reconcile the differences in cognitive environment between the Chinese and foreign audiences, so as to work out a translation that meets the cultural background of foreign audiences.

2.2 Relevance Theory

Relevance theory was developed by American scholars Sperber and Wilson (1986) to explain the relationship between language and communication. According to relevance theory, linguistic communication is a cognitive activity in which the speaker indicates his or her intentions to the listener through words, and the listener infers the speaker’s true intentions in relation to the context,

thus achieving successful communication (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). The central concept of relevance theory is that “human communication crucially creates an expectation of optimal relevance, that is, an expectation on the part of the hearer that his attempt at interpretation will yield adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost” (Gutt, 2000, p. 31-32). Over decades, this relevance-theoretic framework has been applied to various communication studies including translation (Gutt, 2000), discourse particles (Blakemore, 2004; Iten, 2005), literary language (Clark, 1996; Pilkington, 2000; Sperber & Wilson, 2008), non-verbal communication (Wharton, 2009), metaphor (Moreno, 2007; Sperber & Wilson, 2008; Carston 2010).

Ostensive-inferential communication is one of the most central theories of relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). This model describes two aspects of communication: the speaker and the listener. From the speaker’s point of view, communication is an explicit and ostensive process, i.e., an unmistakable indication. In communication, the speaker expresses his or her intentions in clear and unambiguous terms. From the listener’s point of view, communication is a process of inference, which means that the listener infers the speaker’s implicit intention from the information that the speaker provides. From this perspective, translation studies can be carried out in the relevance-theoretical framework because it also involves two processes: first, the translator figures out the information in ST and clearly convey the information in another language; second, the readers or audience infer the meaning from the information provided.

In the case of verbal communication, the speaker, through the act of speaking, indicates that the information he provides is somehow related to the listener, i.e., the discursive information interacts with the listener’s existing assumptions about the world. We can use the term “relevance” to describe this process. Relevance refers to a relation between an assumption and a context, and it is a matter of degree (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). The strength of relevance depends on the relationship between two factors: the contextual effect and the processing effort. When people infer from a conversation, they must find the best relevance between the utterance and the context, so as to deduce the contextual implication through inference and finally achieve successful communication. If the contextual effect is strong and the effort used to infer is low, then the relevance is strong; if the contextual effect is weak and the effort used to infer is high, then the relevance is weak. This relationship between contextual effect and processing effort can be shown in Figure 1:

$$\text{Relevance} = \frac{\text{Contextual Effect}}{\text{Processing Effort}}$$

Figure 1 Relationship Among Relevance, Contextual Effect, and Processing Effort

Although strong relevance facilitates communication, it does not mean that we need to realize maximum relevance (i.e., to seek minimum processing effort and maximum contextual effect) in communication. What we wish to achieve is optimal relevance, that is, sufficient contextual effect with minimum processing effort (Gutt, 2000). A discourse is optimally relevant if it can produce sufficient contextual effects with minimal processing effort. In this way, all the interpretations of discourses must conform to this principle: “Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 158).

3. Methods

The Chinese subtitles of *Farewell My Concubine* were translated by Linda Jaivin, an Australian audiovisual translator. Her English subtitles contributed to the Golden Palm Award for this film at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival (Wang, 2019), and therefore deserve our close investigation.

In the transcript of *Farewell My Concubine*, we can see loads of expressions with Chinese characteristics, like the Beijing Opera jargon, the Beijing dialect, and Chinese idioms. These expressions add to the Chinese features of the film and meanwhile pose a challenge for foreign audiences to fully understand the plot of the film. To better examine the strategies applied in the subtitle translation, the following section will focus on the translation of Beijing Opera jargon, the Beijing dialect, and Chinese idioms in this film.

A collection of Beijing Opera jargon was made according to the context. When the opera performers are talking before or after the performance, they often use Beijing Opera jargon, which is unique to the Chinese and unintelligible to foreigners. These opera-related expressions were collected as a small corpus of Beijing Opera jargon.

Corpora of Beijing dialect and Chinese idioms were selected based on dictionaries. Dialect words and idioms were first picked out from the subtitle according to the author's subjective judgment. Then, the corpora for this study were sorted out according to Beijing Dialect Dictionary (Gao & Fu, 2013), Chinese Proverb Dictionary (Wen, 2015), and Chinese Idiom Dictionary (Wang, 2007).

After all the corpora had been collected, typical examples were selected and discussed according to the three research questions:

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

Q2: How does the translation meet the audience's cognitive habits in terms of its form?

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

It is worth noting that not all three questions will be discussed in each example and only the typical ones will be involved.

4. A Case Study

4.1 Beijing Opera Jargon

Beijing Opera is a unique Chinese art form and a showcase for Chinese culture and history. Therefore, foreign audiences often have difficulty understanding the jargon of Beijing Opera because there are no equivalent expressions in English in most cases. However, the translation of Beijing Opera jargon in the subtitle of *Farewell My Concubine* is understandable for the target audience and therefore deserves an investigation into the strategies applied in the process of translation.

Example 1

ST 我要是成了角儿.....

TT If I *make it big*...

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

"角儿" is a term commonly used in traditional Chinese opera. It is an honorific title for famous figures in the field of opera, or the actors whose skills are outstanding in the class. In the film, a young actor is saying that if he becomes a famous actor one day, he will eat candied crab apples every day for every meal.

To convey the child's manner of speech, the translator applies the strategy of domestication and chooses the rather simple expression "make it big" to add to the casualness. In the film, this line is said by a young and naughty actor who looks edacious and ambitious. Besides, in Chinese, "角儿" is ended with a rhotic sound, which makes it casual and colloquial. Therefore, if the translator puts it into its literal meaning as "a famous actor", it may sound too formal and is not in keeping with the child's character.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

By using domestication, the translator creates a new context for the target audience, which is a little boy dreaming big and imagining the future, and what he says is consistent with this cognitive environment.

In the new context, information like "a famous opera actor" is left out. This treatment avoids superfluous contextual effects because such information is not consistent with the tone. This ensures the sufficient contextual effect of the translation. By reading the simple expression "make it big", the processing effort of the target audience is lowered, so that the audience can easily grasp the character's tone and personality without feeling abrupt.

Example 2

ST 文武昆乱不挡，六场通透

TT You are an expert in all the varieties and facets of opera

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

The source text consists of much opera jargon, which poses great difficulty in understanding for foreign audiences. "文" refers to "civil" plays, which are characterized by singing; "武" refers to "martial" plays, which feature acrobatics and stunts; "昆" refers to Kun Opera, an ancient Chinese opera; "乱" refers to Beijing Opera or other traditional Chinese operas. "六场", literally meaning "six instruments", refers to all the instruments used in the opera performance. All these words are commonly used in opera arts, but

they are unfamiliar to foreigners. Therefore, it's not wise to translate every word in detail, which will increase the processing burden on the part of the target audience and produce the extra contextual effect.

When dealing with this line, the translator abandons literal translation and adopts free translation. Instead of explaining what each Chinese character represents, the translator summarizes all the qualities mentioned in the Chinese subtitle into "expert". In this scene, Xiaolou intends to flatter Master Yuan by boasting about his knowledge and taste of opera, even though he doesn't agree with Master Yuan in his heart. He then says so to emphasize that Master Yuan is an expert at opera. This is probably what the translator wishes to convey to the target audience.

Q2: How does the translation meet the audience's cognitive habits in terms of its form?

To adapt to the audience's cognitive habits, the translation deletes the unnecessary information in the translation and reduces the number of words in the sentence. Of course, the literal translation is not totally unacceptable, but it will be too tedious as subtitle translation. There are only ten characters in the Chinese subtitle, which means that this line flashes up and disappears on the screen in a short time period. Therefore, the audience has very limited time to process the English subtitle.

As illustrated in Q1, much information is not necessary for understanding. The translator may therefore decide to leave out the detailed meaning of each Chinese character, so that the audience can better understand the subtitle in limited time and space.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

Firstly, the translation conveys the necessary information to the audience. By summarizing the meaning and reducing the number of words, the translation can convey the intention of the character in the film without producing extra contextual effects because the audience does not have to understand what these words literally mean. The translation can produce the same effect as the source text: to tell the audience that Master Yuan knows a lot about the opera. In this way, the translation realizes sufficient yet not superfluous contextual effects.

Secondly, the processing effort of the audience is minimized. Compared with the literal translation of the original subtitle, this one is shorter and easier to process. Besides, the vocabulary is close to the daily expressions of foreigners, so they may not find difficulty in comprehending complex cultural words. The optimal relevance is then achieved and the audience will feel at ease when reading this line.

Example 3

ST 急急风催半天了

TT *The orchestra's been warming up for ages*

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

"急急风" is a classical opera term, referring to a technique of percussion in Beijing Opera. This technique is characterized by the fast tempo and is mostly used to accompany tense and rapid movements. In this scene, the band and the audience are urging the two actors to the stage, and the dense drumming heightens the anxiety. Before the two actors show up on the stage, the band needs to warm up the audience and urge Dieyi and Xiaolou to perform.

Here the translator does not expand on what "急急风" is but applies domestication and translates it into "the orchestra", which is commonly used in Western theatres.

Q2: How does the translation meet the audience's cognitive habits in terms of its form?

The translator simplifies the translation by avoiding explaining what "急急风" is, so as to reduce the number of words. If the translation directly points out that it is the fast-tempo percussion urging the actors to the stage, the translation will be longer and require more time to process, which is not suitable for subtitle translation. Besides, since the film is an audio-visual art, the audience can hear the drumbeat in the soundtrack. When watching this scene, they can understand what is urging the two actors without reading the literal meaning of "急急风". For these reasons, this translation is well adapted to the audience's cognitive habits.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

Firstly, the translation provides a sufficient while not superfluous contextual effect. It is well enough for the audience to understand that everyone in the film is looking forward to watching the two actors' performance and the bandsmen are urging the two actors with booming drums. Since the audience can hear the tense drumbeat in the soundtrack, this translation has already provided adequate information for comprehension.

Secondly, the processing effort required is lowered. The word "orchestra" is easily understandable for foreign audiences, because it is commonly seen in Western countries that the performance is accompanied by an orchestra. In this way, a new cognitive environment is created for the audience, which is a setting of watching a performance, and the processing effort of the target audience is minimized to a great extent. Thus, optimal relevance is achieved, and that is why these translation skills have made the translation acceptable for the target audience.

4.2 Beijing Dialect

The film is set in Beijing from 1924 to 1977, and most characters in the film speak the Beijing dialect. Beijing dialect is characterized by its simple expression and rich meaning, which means that a word or phrase may have different meanings in different situations, and it is highly context-dependent. Besides, due to the rich rhotic sounds in the Beijing dialect and the disappearance of certain sounds in real conversations, the Beijing dialect is relatively livelier and more humorous compared with Mandarin.

Example 1 Translation of "捧场" in different contexts

"捧场" literally means going to the theatre to support or appreciate the performance of the opera performers, which is commonly used in Beijing dialect. In this film, "捧场" appears five times in total, each in different contexts and with different implications. The translator also translates them in different ways.

ST 各位爷, 多捧场了啊!

TT Ladies and gentlemen, *enjoy the show!*

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

In this scene, a troop of opera actors is performing on the street, and their master is welcoming the passengers to watch their performance and to leave a tip. Therefore, the translator tries to convey the master's intention of attracting the audience. She avoids word-for-word translations like "please come to support and appreciate our performance", but deals with it by describing the emotional state of the audience as "enjoy the show", which is more appropriate and natural as an opening of a show. Domestication is used here to facilitate the audience's understanding of the subtitle.

Q2: How does the translation meet the audience's cognitive habits in terms of its form?

"捧场" literally means to support and appreciate the performance. This Chinese phrase, consisting of only two characters, is short and requires little time to process for the Chinese audience. As for the translation, the translator abandons the literal translation and chooses three simple words, each of which is composed of two syllables at most. In this way, the audience can understand the subtitle in less time than they need when reading the literal translation.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

Firstly, the translation provides sufficient contextual effect. The translator creates a new context for the target audience, which is a street performance. Therefore, this piece of translation can fully convey the master's intention, which is to welcome the passengers, and sufficient contextual effect is therefore achieved.

Secondly, the translation consists of fewer syllables and is more colloquial compared with the literal translation, thus minimizing the processing effort that the audience needs to understand the subtitle. In this way, optimal relevance is achieved and the audience shall understand the subtitle better.

ST 袁四爷专门来给您捧场

TT Master Yuan has come especially to *see you perform* tonight.

ST 袁四爷今儿来捧场了

TT Master Yuan has come to *see us* tonight.

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

The two translations share something in common, hence they are discussed together in this section. The translator doesn't translate this word in the same way as the last example, but puts it into "see you perform" and "see us". Domestication is used here to enhance the audience's understanding. Besides, the translator chooses words that consist of no more than two syllables, which takes little time for the audience to process.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

Firstly, the translation conveys all the information that the audience needs to understand the subtitle. The verb "see" in the two translations has fully expressed the meaning of the Chinese subtitle. In the film, Dieyi has become a famous opera performer and is adored by the public. Before a show, Na Kun flatters Dieyi by saying that Master Yuan, a member of the nobility, comes specially to watch Dieyi's performance. In the next scene, Dieyi tells Xiaolou with joy that Master Yuan has come to watch their performance. Here, the new cognitive environment created for the audience is that a rising star in the field of opera is appreciated by a big shot. Therefore, what the audience needs to understand in these two scenes is Master Yuan's attendance at Dieyi's performance. Different from the last example, in which "捧场" only means to enjoy the show, this one lays more stress on Master Yuan's appreciation of Dieyi. The verb "see" well indicates the intention of Master Yuan.

Secondly, the small number of syllables of the words used as well as the simple vocabulary requires little time and effort for the target audience. In this way, the processing effort required is lowered to a great extent and the audience can effortlessly perceive the identities of Dieyi and Master Yuan as well as the relationship between them. Combined with the sufficient contextual effect mentioned above, optimal relevance is achieved and successful communication is realized.

ST 没他四爷的捧场咱在北平也照唱照红

TT Even without his *patronage*, we'd still be the talk of the town here in Beijing.

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

Here, the translator applies domestication when dealing with "捧场". She chooses the word "patronage" to indicate Master Yuan's support for the actors, which is appropriate for Master Yuan's identity. Master Yuan is a noble and an expert in opera, which means that he can provide rich support, both financially and socially, for the two actors.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

The translation provides sufficient contextual effect for the audience. In this scene, Xiaolou shows his confidence in themselves and his scorn for Master Yuan's attendance at their performance. From his words, we can clearly see that he is not so attached to his role compared with Dieyi and doesn't care about Master Yuan's appreciation. In *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, "patronage" refers to "the support, especially financial, that is given to a person or an organization by a patron" (Lea & Bradbery, 2019). Therefore, "patronage" reveals the rich financial and social support that Master Yuan, a patron, can provide for the two actors. Thus, this word is suitable for a celebrity like Master Yuan. In this way, the contextual effect is amplified so that the audience better grasp the identity of Master Yuan.

ST 四爷，您捧场！

TT You're very *kind*.

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

"捧场" in this sentence is used in a way different from the previous examples, and the translator deals with it in a different way as "you're very kind". Here, domestication is applied to enhance the audience's understanding of the subtitle.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

The translation realizes sufficient contextual effect. The expression "you're very kind" seems to have nothing to do with the literal meaning of "捧场", but achieves a similar contextual effect as the original sentence does. In the film, Xiaolou sees Master Yuan and greets him with these words. Therefore, it is part of the phatic communion. When seeing "you're very kind", the target audience may think of a man paying respect and gratitude to someone, which realizes a similar function to that of the source text. Since this utterance takes place in phatic communion, the new cognition created by the translator is the situation where two people meet

and one expresses gratitude to another for his coming. This new context helps the audience better understand the relationship between Xiaolou and Master Yuan.

Example 2

ST 全北京的大街小巷都支楞着耳朵

TT All of Beijing is *waiting with bated breath*

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

In the film, lots of people come to visit Dieyi, who has just recovered from an addiction to opium. Dieyi has left the stage for a long time because of his sickness, and Na Kun flatters Dieyi by saying that everyone in Beijing is waiting for his singing and performance.

“支楞” in Beijing dialect means to raise something, and “支楞着耳朵” in Chinese means to prick up your ears and listen carefully. In this scene, Na Kun intends to describe the public’s high expectations of Dieyi’s performance.

Here, the translator adopts the strategy of domestication and chooses an existing phrase in English carrying a similar meaning to the original text, which is “waiting with bated breath”.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

The application of domestication realizes both sufficient contextual effect and low processing effort.

On the one hand, the translation conveys all the necessary information to the audience. In *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, “with bated breath” means “feeling very anxious or excited” (Lea & Bradbery, 2019), and this is in line with the emotions of the audience who are looking forward to watching Dieyi’s performance. Therefore, though we cannot find perfect word-for-word translations of the source text, this English phrase can still inform the audience of what they need to understand.

On the other hand, the translation is an authentic English expression and is easily understandable by the audience. Therefore, it takes foreign audiences little time to process the subtitle. That is probably why the translation is acceptable to the audiences.

4.3 Chinese Idioms

An idiom is a unique and fixed expression formed in the use of a language. In a broad sense, Chinese idioms include four-character idioms, proverbs, two-part allegorical sayings, allusions, etc, among which four-character idioms account for the most part (Zhou, 2004). In the subtitle of *Farewell My Concubine*, 37 idioms are detected, most of which are four-character idioms and proverbs. In the following section, some idiom translations will be discussed within the framework of relevance theory.

Example 1

ST 凤凰当然栖高枝啦

TT *The phoenix roosts on the highest branches, of course!*

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

The translator adopts foreignization and uses word-for-word translation when dealing with this proverb and translates it into “the phoenix roosts on the highest branches”.

In this scene, Xiaolou asks a prostitute where Juxian is, and she answers by saying so, indicating that Juxian has leaned on a moneybag. Meanwhile, she also looks up at the room on the second floor, suggesting that Juxian is now upstairs. In Chinese, the animal “凤凰”, “phoenix” in English, is an important image. It is originally a metaphor for the emperor and afterward becomes an auspicious sign. Therefore, the phoenix can be seen as a metaphor for the grandee. A phoenix roosting on the highest branches can be compared to a celebrity up on the social ladder. Therefore, two pieces of information are worth processing in this sentence. The first layer is that Juxian is now upstairs. The second layer is that Juxian, a high-class celebrity in the brothel, has leaned on a moneybag.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

The translation provides sufficient contextual effect for the audience. In Western countries, the phoenix is also a sacred bird, representing rebirth and resurrection. Therefore, this image can also evoke the foreign audience's association with sacredness because the cognitive environment of the translation functions in a similar way as the original one does. Besides, this translation reserves the metaphor "high branches", so that the first and the second layer of the information can both be conveyed to the foreign audience. Therefore, the sufficient contextual effect is achieved in a way that is easily acceptable for the audience, thus optimal relevance is achieved and successful communication is realized.

Example 2

ST 嫌我偷工减料啊？那成，今儿晚上就是定亲礼

TT You don't think I plan to *cut corners*, do you? The formal engagement ceremony will be tonight.

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

The translator adopts the strategy of domestication and translates it into "cut corners". This is a commonly used English phrase, which means "to do something in the easiest, cheapest or quickest way, often by ignoring rules or leaving something out".

In this scene, Juxian asks Xiaolou to hold the engagement ceremony first, so that she can enter his home as a proper bride. Then, Xiaolou jokes that Juxian thinks he hopes to slack off and skip the ceremony. In Chinese, "偷工减料" means that a worker does not use all the materials, so that something is jerry-built. Here, this idiom doesn't refer to anything jerry-built. It is a metaphor for Xiaolou's skipping the engagement ceremony.

Q2: How does the translation meet the audience's cognitive habits in terms of its form?

For this translation, the translator chooses two short words that consist of no more than two syllables, which ensures that the audience can read this line on the screen in a short time. Since the subtitle accompanies the voice of the characters, the audience must process each subtitle in a very short period of time. Therefore, the subtitle translation should be succinct enough to satisfy the audience. This translation satisfies the audience's cognitive needs in this regard.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

Firstly, the sufficient contextual effect is realized. This English phrase is appropriate for this context because it both conveys the meaning and adds to the humor of the dialogue. The audience shall fully comprehend the intention of the character. Secondly, the audience's processing effort is lowered. A small number of syllables of this authentic expression makes it easily understandable for the audience. Thus, optimal relevance is achieved. That is why this translation is acceptable for the target audience.

Example 3

ST 果然世上的事 是踏破铁鞋无觅处啊！

TT *One searches far and wide for something, only to stumble upon it by chance.*

Q1: What translation strategies are applied?

In this scene, Master Yuan gives Dieyi a precious sword, which once belongs to the eunuch Zhang and can be said of Dieyi's old acquaintance. Hence, Master Yuan says that though the sword is hard to find, Dieyi still gets it by chance. What is worth noticing is that "踏破铁鞋无觅处" in the subtitle is only the first half of a well-known Chinese idiom. Master Yuan doesn't complete the idiom because it is so familiar to Chinese people that everyone can easily retrieve the second half of the idiom and understand what he means. However, when translating the subtitle into English, the complete meaning needs to be conveyed so that the foreign audience can understand it.

The translator demonstrates two skills when dealing with this sentence. The first one is addition. Since there is no similar expression in English, the foreign audience cannot infer the complete meaning of the idiom by reading its first half only. Therefore, the translator completes the idiom by adding the second half of it. Such addition is necessary even though it adds to the processing effort of the audience. The second skill is free translation. There are too many images in the original text, like "踏 (tread)", "铁鞋 (iron shoes)", and "功夫 (effort)" in the second half of the idiom. If translated word by word, these images will pose difficulties for the foreign audience to understand. Therefore, the translator chooses free translation and paraphrases the sentence, so as to lower their processing effort.

Q3: What effects does the translation have on the target audience from the perspective of relevance theory?

This translation ensures the sufficient contextual effect of the subtitle. By clarifying the second half of the Chinese idiom, which is the key to the understanding of it, the translator conveys the complete meaning of the line, so that the foreign audience can understand the intention of Master Yuan. This may lead to an increase in the audience's processing effort, but the translator skillfully balances it. She omits the translation of the Chinese subtitle before this idiom: "果然世上的事", literally meaning "things in the world". Such omission does not interfere with the audience's understanding and meanwhile lowers their processing effort. Therefore, this translation can be regarded as acceptable and effective.

5 Conclusion

This paper conducts an analysis of the subtitle translation of the film *Farewell My Concubine* within the framework of relevance theory. After the analysis of examples selected from the subtitle including Beijing Opera jargon, the Beijing dialect, and Chinese idioms, conclusions are made about the translation skills adopted by the translator, how the translation meets the audience's cognitive habits, and the effects it has on the audience.

Firstly, the translator adopts different translation skills according to the different features of the original texts. Beijing Opera jargon often involves proper nouns, which means that no equivalent words can be found in English in most cases. Therefore, the translator usually creates a new context for the audience and then finds appropriate words or expressions in the new context. Hence, domestication by virtue of free translation is used most often when the translator is dealing with Beijing Opera jargon. Beijing dialect features its rich meaning carried by only a few words, and the meaning is highly context-dependent. Therefore, the translator relies on the original context to first determine the meaning, and then use domestication to find equivalent English expressions. The translation of Chinese idioms is more flexible. Sometimes, there are equivalent English expressions, and the translator often adopts domestication to facilitate the target audience's understanding. In other cases where no equivalent expressions are available, the translator often uses foreignization like direct translation or addition to realize successful communication.

Secondly, the translator makes adjustments to the translation to adapt to the audience's cognitive habits. Different from literature translation, subtitle translation only flashes on the screen and the audience has to read it in a limited time. The translation of the subtitle of *Farewell My Concubine* satisfies the audience's cognitive needs. The equivalent English expressions chosen by the translator are mostly short and easy to understand, which lowers the processing effort of the audience and promotes their understanding of the plot or proper nouns that are alien to them.

Thirdly, the translation fully conveys the meaning of the original subtitle in an acceptable way. The translator often creates a new context for the audience, which contributes to sufficient contextual effect. Meanwhile, the simple and short expressions in the translation require a low level of processing effort. In this process, optimal relevance is achieved, which means that the audience can easily understand the meaning of the original subtitle and the intention of the characters in the film.

Despite the findings, this study still has its limitations. Firstly, this paper discusses only three types of words in the subtitle translation of *Farewell My Concubine*. Therefore, other factors that contribute to the success of the subtitle translation may be neglected and the result is not representative enough for other similar researches. Secondly, the analysis is difficult to be quantified. This is partly due to the weakness of relevance theory since the degree of relevance itself cannot be measured in a specific way. Within the framework of relevance theory, the analysis of the translation is carried out through a description of the effects, and the degree of contextual effect and processing effort can only be measured by subjective judgment. Therefore, this theoretical framework cannot yield specific statistics to support the conclusion.

In view of the limitations listed above, more comprehensive researches on the subtitle translation of *Farewell My Concubine* still need to be carried out to find out more reasons behind its success. Based on the analysis of the translation of some typical Chinese expressions, this paper hopes that it can humbly put forward some new viewpoints on film subtitle translation and the promotion of Chinese films.

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Appendix Corpus of the Subtitle of *Farewell My Concubine*

Beijing Opera Jargon

| No. | Source Text | Target Text |
|-----|--------------|---|
| 1 | (成了)角儿 | make it big |
| 2 | 刀坯子 | a taste of the sword |
| 3 | 思凡 | Dreaming of the World Outside the Nunnery |
| 4 | 唱武生(倒不错) | make a good actor |
| 5 | 马后 | There'll be a slight delay. |
| 6 | 急急风 | the orchestra |
| 7 | 梨园 | theatre arts |
| 8 | 文武昆乱不挡, 六场通透 | You are an expert in all the varieties and facets of opera. |
| 9 | (帮我)勾勾脸 | Give me a hand with my makeup. |
| 10 | 唱, 念, 做, 打 | Songs, recital, movement and acrobatics |

Beijing Dialect

| No. | Source Text | Target Text | |
|-----|----------------|---|------------|
| 1 | 我们哥俩 | we | |
| 2 | 可不 | Isn't it? | |
| 3 | 各位爷 捧场 | ladies and gentlemen | |
| 4 | | these gentlemen | |
| 5 | | enjoy the show | |
| 6 | | see your perform | |
| 7 | | patronage | |
| 8 | | You're very kind. | |
| 9 | | 包涵 | be patient |
| 10 | | 招呼 | say hello |
| 11 | 别介 | Don't be foolish. | |
| 12 | | Don't get upset. | |
| 13 | | Don't! | |
| 14 | 大子儿 | copper coins | |
| 15 | 甭 | don't | |
| 16 | (人得自各儿)成全(自各儿) | Each person is responsible for his or her own fate. | |
| 17 | (把你)成全(出来) | help make you what you are | |
| 18 | 成全(他) | on his side | |
| 19 | 成全(自个儿) | make yourself | |
| 20 | 小爷儿 | my little man | |
| 21 | 大拿 | authority | |
| 22 | 今儿个 | today / tonight | |
| 23 | 正经八辈儿(的中国人) | Chinese to the core | |
| 24 | 悠着点儿 | You shouldn't exert yourself like that. | |
| 25 | 根节儿上 | at key moments | |
| 26 | 囫圇个儿地 | in one piece | |
| 27 | 欢实 | make her come to life | |
| 28 | 挣蹦(出来) | hurt himself | |

| | | |
|----|-----------|------------------------|
| 29 | 支愣着耳朵（异化） | wait with bated breath |
| 30 | 小力笨儿 | a coolie |
| 31 | 小催帮儿 | a stagehand |
| 32 | 小跟包 | a follower |
| 33 | 唱栽 | fall down in this role |

Chinese Idioms

| No. | Source Text | Target Text |
|-----|-------------------|---|
| 1 | 衣食父母 | a fairy godmother |
| 2 | 老规矩 | an old rule around here |
| 3 | | custom has it |
| 4 | 少年裘马 | (You) have done grandly for yourselves. |
| 5 | （一个个都他妈）忠臣良将（的模样） | Who the hell do they think they are? |
| 6 | 驴年马月的事了 | Only you remember that kind of thing. |
| 7 | 发祥宝地 | Where you two became stars |
| 8 | （座是）汪洋汪海 | There's a sea of awestruck people |
| 9 | 久仰久仰 | It's an honor. |
| 10 | 不负盛名 | Your reputation turns out to be well-deserved. |
| 11 | 纯青之境 | lift it into a higher realm |
| 12 | 转世再现 | come back to life |
| 13 | 黄天霸 | a gangster putting on airs |
| 14 | 踏雪访梅 | exchange poetic thoughts |
| 15 | 出条子应饭局 | be asked out to dinner |
| 16 | 凤凰栖高枝 | The phoenix roosts on the highest branches |
| 17 | 傍头牌 | specialize in high-class |
| 18 | 宁在花下死，做鬼也风流 | Such a death would be ecstasy. I'd be a very happy ghost. |
| 19 | 武二郎碰上西门庆 | the old story about Pan Jinlian's husband meeting the man who screwed her |
| 20 | 从一而终 | Stick together until the day you die. |
| 21 | 风华绝代 | The Beauty of the Age |
| 22 | 当牛做马 | wait on you hand and foot |
| 23 | 洞房花烛夜 | Candlelit Night in the Bridal Chamber |
| 24 | 偷工减料 | cut corners |
| 25 | 洒狗血 | overplay your part |
| 26 | 恭候大驾 | wait for you |
| 27 | 费了大周折 | go to great trouble |
| 28 | 踏破铁鞋无觅处 | One searches far and wide for something, only to stumble upon it by chance. |
| 29 | 红尘知己 | my most intimate friend |
| 30 | 吃喝嫖赌 | indulge yourself and go whoring |
| 31 | 断子绝孙 | The Duan family line will stop with you! |
| 32 | 兵临城下 | It (the Republic) is being overthrown |
| 33 | 江山易主 | The empire may change hands |
| 34 | 盖世英雄 | a great hero |
| 35 | （走你的）阳关道 | go your own way |
| 36 | 牛鬼蛇神 | Cow Demons and Snake Spirits |
| 37 | 避重就轻 | avoid the real issues |