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On Subtitle Translation Strategies of Cultural External Promotion Short Videos — A Case Study of the Short Videos in the "Living Heritage" Column of China Daily

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Abstract:

With the advancement of globalization, cultural external promotion has gradually become an important means of cultural exchange between countries. As a key medium for information dissemination, short videos have increasingly attracted global attention. This paper takes the short videos in the "Living Heritage" column of China Daily as a case study to explore the subtitle translation strategies of cultural external promotion short videos from the perspective of multimodal theory. By analyzing the subtitle translations in the "Living Heritage" column, this study aims to reveal how to effectively integrate linguistic, visual, and auditory multimodal elements in short videos to accurately convey cultural information. Through case analysis, the paper explores the strategies for cultural adaptation in subtitle translation, the application of functional equivalence, and how to handle cultural differences during the translation process. The research finds that subtitle translation is not only a linguistic transformation but also a bridge for cultural transmission, requiring full consideration of the synergistic effect of multimodal elements. Finally, the paper summarizes the current strategies for cultural external promotion subtitle translation and provides an outlook for future research directions.

Keywords:

Multimodal Theory; Subtitle Translation; Cultural External Publicity; Short Videos; China Daily

1. Introduction

In today's society, where globalization and information technology are rapidly developing, cross-cultural communication has become an essential component of international communication. With the fast-paced development of the internet and social media, short videos, as an emerging medium of communication, are playing an increasingly important role in cultural exchange. Especially in the field of cultural external promotion, short videos can not only convey linguistic information but also enhance the effectiveness of information dissemination through multimodal elements such as images, sounds, and subtitles, thus improving the audience's cultural understanding.

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As one of China's mainstream English-language media, China Daily showcases China's rich cultural heritage and traditional culture through short videos in its "Living Heritage"column (Pu, Zhao, and Tang 2021). These short videos serve not only as a window for displaying Chinese culture but also as an important way to promote Chinese culture globally. However, in the process of cross-cultural communication, the subtitle translation of short videos becomes a key factor. How to balance linguistic accuracy and cultural transmission in subtitle translation, and how to ensure the accurate transmission of information in multimodal interactions, are research questions worth exploring (Feng, Zhang, and O'Halloran 2014).

This paper discusses strategies for subtitle translation in cultural external promotion short videos from the perspective of multimodal theory, focusing on the practices and challenges of subtitle translation in Living Heritage. By examining the subtitle translations in these short videos, the study reveals how multimodal elements (text, images, sounds, etc.) work synergistically in translation to achieve effective cultural information transmission.

This research not only contributes to expanding the application of multimodal theory in translation studies but also provides new perspectives and methods for the translation practice of cultural external promotion. By analyzing issues such as cultural adaptation, functional equivalence, and creative translation strategies in subtitle translation, this paper offers theoretical support and practical guidance on how to achieve effective cultural exchange in global communication.

2. Overview of Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory

Multimodal discourse analysis, a cutting-edge interdisciplinary research paradigm, integrates linguistics, semiotics, communication studies, and sociology. It provides a new way to analyze complex contemporary discourse. The concept emerged in the 1990s when the rapid expansion of digital media and information technology made single-modal textual analysis inadequate. Researchers thus embarked on constructing the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006).

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday in the 1950s, serves as the theoretical foundation of multimodal discourse analysis. SFL studies language as a social semiotic system, emphasizing practical functions in social communication (Halliday 1985). Kress and van Leeuwen extended SFL into the visual realm, introducing the concept of visual grammar composed of representational, interactive, and compositional meanings (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006).

Zhang Delu (2009) synthesized the achievements of SFL and multimodal discourse analysis, proposing a comprehensive framework with cultural, contextual, content, and expression layers. The cultural layer highlights socio-historical and value-based conditions; the contextual layer focuses on time, place, and event-specific meanings; the content layer examines conveyed information; and the expression layer deals with media and modes such as language, pictures, and sound (Zhang 2009; Zhang 2018).

Feng Dezhen et al. (2014) argued that multimodal discourse analysis not only emphasizes language but also the role of symbolic resources such as images, color, and sound. Chen Hong and Li Zhizhong (2011) expanded this approach by examining paralinguistic variables—volume, pitch, and speaking rate—thus broadening

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the scope of multimodal research.

As multimodal discourse theory matured, its applicability to translation studies became increasingly evident. Traditional translation focuses primarily on linguistic equivalence, but multimodal discourse analysis allows translators to consider the coordination among linguistic, visual, auditory, and kinetic modes in cross-cultural contexts. This expansion provides translation studies with new methods to manage complex communicative and cultural challenges (Feng, Zhang, and O'Halloran 2014).

Ultimately, multimodal discourse analysis presents a holistic and multi-level analytical framework suitable for modern translation practice. It enables translators to better process multimodal discourse, enhance translation quality, and improve cross-cultural communicative effectiveness.

3.Introduction to the "Living Heritage"" Short Video Series by China Daily

"Living Heritage" of China Daily, which started the year 2020, has become the pillar series of the cultural external publicity of China. With the multimodal storytelling methodology, it reconstructs the presentation mode of the traditional culture. With the series producing more than 200 episodes to date, attracting more than 120 countries and regions of the world, the highest number of video views of a single video exceeding 5 million, it has made an indelible cultural impact on YouTube and Facebook platforms.

It focuses on 12 items on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list, including Chinese calligraphic art, old zither music called the guqin, acupuncture, and the classical mortise and tenon arts. With a three-dimensional matrix of "skill decoding + cultural interpretation + community narrative," it transforms lifeless heritage into an active cultural entity. Focusing on the "Porcelain" chapter, this section illustrates how the traditional craftsmanship of porcelain-making once practiced in Jingdezhen is integrated with contemporary aesthetic design through the creative process of Jingdezhen ceramic artists. With the "Guqin" series on the other hand, the future prospect of the transmission of guqin music with the emergence of the digital era is revealed by dynamic performances by the Zide Qin Society. This is something that matches UNESCO's original concept of "community practice" of intangible heritage as well as the cultural development plan of China to "put the cultural relics kept stored inside the Forbidden City, the heritage spotted all over the vast lands, and the old texts written on the ancient volumes of books back into practice."

With the background of globalization and digitalization, the "Living Heritage"series not only serves as a pilot practice of China's cultural exchange, but also provides a "Chinese answer" to the current transmission of world cultural heritage. Its creative practice indicates that if digital stimuli could be presented to traditional craftsmanship, cultural heritage may overcome the limitation of time and space, and achieve eternal dynamism in cross-cultural exchange.

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Figure 1: Logo of the "Living Heritage"Short Video Series Column by China Daily

4.Subtitle Translation of the "Living Heritage"Short Video Series From the Multimodal Discourse Analysis Perspective

In the era of globalized communication, the “Living Heritage” series of China Daily embodies an exemplary multimodal discourse in which linguistic, visual, and auditory semiotic systems cooperate to transmit cultural meaning. Subtitle translation thus functions not only as an interlingual conversion but also as an intersemiotic mediation (Pérez-González 2014), operating within a complex network of symbolic resources. This section analyzes selected cases from three interrelated dimensions: visual grammar adaptation, audio-visual synergy enhancement, and technology-enabled multimodal translation innovation.

4.1.Visual Grammar Adaptation

According to Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar theory, images possess three layers of meaning—representational, interactive, and compositional—which correspond to Halliday’s ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Halliday 1985). When subtitles appear within this visual framework, they are no longer mere linguistic supplements but active visual signs interacting with spatial composition, color, and movement.

In the Chinese Traditional Architectural Craftsmanship episode, the translation of “ 榫卯 ” as mortise and tenon illustrates how representational meaning and visual focus reinforce each other. The dynamic close-up of interlocking wood joints visually enacts the word’s semantic field. The boldface subtitle visually anchors this focal point, guiding viewers’ gaze and constructing a multimodal “information value” zone on the screen (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). The simultaneous operation of textual and visual elements exemplifies Zhang Delu’s “expression layer,” in which linguistic and visual resources combine to materialize meaning (Zhang 2009).

Furthermore, when introducing “the Forbidden City’s vermilion walls,” the color red on screen operates as a cultural metaphor of auspiciousness and authority. The translation preserves this cultural resonance not through literal explanation but through synesthetic alignment—the subtitle’s lexical “vermilion” visually echoing the onscreen hue. This convergence across modalities enables cultural semiotics to “speak” beyond the limitations of text, realizing what Zhang (2018) calls a formal-level multimodal synergy.

The translator here functions as a visual designer, orchestrating spatial layout and typography to complement the image’s communicative purpose. This approach demonstrates that effective subtitle translation under a multimodal paradigm demands sensitivity not only to linguistic equivalence but also to the semiotic orches-

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tration among modes.

4.2. Audio-Visual Synergy Enhancement

Sound constitutes an indispensable semiotic resource in multimodal discourse, functioning as what Halliday terms the interpersonal metafunction—shaping emotional tone and viewer engagement. The Woodblock Printing feature demonstrates how auditory and visual cues converge with subtitling to construct an affective and cognitive experience.

First, the precise synchronization of the "clicking" sound of carving with the subtitle carving produces perceptual resonance: the rhythmic alignment enables the audience to feel the tactile labor behind the craft. This fulfills Kress's notion of mode affinity, in which sound and text jointly shape viewer perception.



Figure 2: Cover and Content of the Woodblock Printing Feature from the "Living Heritage" Series

Second, the continuous background of the guqin piece Guangling San operates as a sonic intertext. Its ancient melody evokes temporal depth, while the subtitle "woodblock printing, a thousand-year-old craft" situates the visual within cultural time. Together, they construct a multimodal narrative space where emotion and knowledge intersect, realizing what Pérez-González (2014) terms holistic semiotic system reconstruction.

Third, cognitive guidance emerges through sequential subtitling—Writing → Engraving → Printing → Binding—mirroring the step-by-step visual process. This linear progression, synchronized with camera motion and editing rhythm, facilitates cross-cultural comprehension. It aligns with Zhang Delu's "content layer," where multimodal cohesion aids meaning construction across languages and cultures.

Thus, audio-visual synergy in subtitling is not an aesthetic embellishment but a mechanism of experiential translation—transforming cultural practice into an embodied semiotic event.

4.3 Technology-Enabled Translation

With the rapid convergence of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and immersive technologies, the "Living Heritage" column demonstrates how technological mediation can expand the expressive power of multimodal translation. Technology here does not replace human creativity; rather, it functions as an inter-semiotic catalyst that enables simultaneous cooperation among linguistic, visual, and auditory channels. By integrating digital tools into subtitling practice, "Living Heritage" redefines translation as a dynamic process of semiotic orchestration (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) and technological remediation (Pérez-González 2014).

(1) AI Subtitle Generation Technology

Software such as Maxinda is employed to achieve near real-time multilingual subtitling across ten languag-

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es, allowing a single episode to reach audiences on multiple platforms almost instantly. In the Guqin feature, for instance, when the performer's dialectal description is rendered into English, the AI system automatically detects technical expressions—such as harmonic overtones—and emphasizes them typographically through boldface. This algorithmic modal adaptation highlights culturally specific terminology while maintaining literal accuracy, ensuring both scientific precision and cultural salience.

From a multimodal perspective, this process realizes Halliday's ideational metafunction, since technological translation helps to preserve experiential meaning by correctly classifying specialized knowledge. At the same time, the system's capacity for visual enhancement fulfills the interpersonal metafunction, shaping how viewers emotionally and cognitively engage with key cultural symbols. The resulting subtitles are no longer static linguistic representations but dynamic visual signs that participate in the composition of the screen.

Moreover, the AI-assisted workflow reduces the temporal gap between production and dissemination, enabling immediate cross-cultural feedback. Viewers can thus interact with subtitled videos in comment sections and social media threads, transforming translation into a participatory communication event—an example of what Zhang Delu (2018) calls the interactive level of multimodal discourse.

(2) Virtual Reality Enhanced Translation

Beyond AI-assisted text generation, "Living Heritage" explores how immersive technologies can deepen embodied understanding of intangible heritage. In the Chinese Silk Craftsmanship episode, the use of VR allows audiences to experience "virtual silk reeling." When the subtitle Reeling silk from cocoons appears, it is synchronized with tactile vibrations and the visualization of flowing silk threads. This integration of linguistic, visual, and kinesthetic modalities constructs what cognitive semioticians call embodied multimodal cognition—a translation experience that operates through sensation as much as through language.

Such technology-facilitated subtitling transcends the linearity of traditional translation. Meaning is generated not sequentially through sentences but spatially and temporally through interaction. Viewers feel the rhythm of the craft while reading its textual description, thus engaging in what Pérez-González (2014) terms a performative reconstruction of meaning. The translator here becomes a designer of experiential semiotics, orchestrating cross-modal relations that allow cultural heritage to be re-experienced rather than merely described.

This approach also exemplifies Halliday's textual metafunction, as it unifies diverse semiotic resources—text, movement, sound, and touch—into a coherent communicative event. By blending translation with VR interaction, "Living Heritage" transforms cultural documentation into immersive narrative translation, offering global audiences an intuitive entry point into Chinese artisanal aesthetics.

(3) Data-Driven Strategy Optimization

Another key aspect of technological mediation lies in data-driven translation design. By analyzing audience behavior and comment feedback across YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, the production team identified recurring thematic preferences among Western audiences—especially interests in wellness, balance, and traditional medicine. Responding to this insight, the episode Medicine Gets Straight to the Point adopts a dual-stream subtitling strategy combining scientific explanation + cultural interpretation.

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For instance, " 阴阳平衡 " is rendered as yin-yang balance (harmony of opposing forces), accompanied by an animated Tai Chi diagram that visualizes cyclical motion. The visual reinforces the abstract philosophical idea, achieving intermodal redundancy, which reduces cognitive load and enhances cultural accessibility. In this way, big-data analytics provide empirical grounding for multimodal translation, aligning textual representation with audience cognition and expectation.

This feedback-loop model embodies the social-semiotic nature of multimodal discourse (Halliday 1985; Zhang 2009) technological insight informs linguistic choices, which in turn reshape intercultural reception. Data-oriented optimization exemplifies what can be called the ethics of transparency in external publicity—translation driven by real communicative effectiveness rather than by mechanical literalism.

Collectively, these three sub-dimensions—AI-assisted subtitling, VR-enhanced embodiment, and data-driven adaptation—illustrate that technology in multimodal translation is not merely a tool but a semiotic partner. It extends human translators' capacity to manage simultaneity, synchronize sensory channels, and bridge cognitive as well as cultural gaps. Within Living Heritage, technology therefore functions as both mediator and meaning-maker, embodying the contemporary shift of translation studies from textual fidelity toward experiential interactivity and semiotic design.

4.4. Cultural Adaptation and Meaning Enhancement

The translation practices of subtitles in China Daily's "Living Heritage" column reveal the underlying multimodal translation principles that govern effective cultural external communication. They demonstrate that translation in the digital era is no longer a linear textual act but a semiotic negotiation among verbal, visual, and auditory modes—each carrying its own cultural code. Through systematic observation, three major strategies emerge: hierarchical processing of culturally laden terms, modal enrichment of community narratives, and real-time adaptation to dynamic viewing environments.

(1) Hierarchical Processing of Culturally Laden Terms

In cross-cultural contexts, certain terms—especially those tied to traditional practices or philosophy—carry deep cultural connotations that cannot be adequately conveyed through literal translation alone. The "Living Heritage" series employs a dual-mode approach that combines literal translation with visual concretization for tangible cultural elements and free translation with auditory metaphor for abstract concepts.

For example, when introducing the tea ceremony, the subtitle retains the literal phrase "tea ceremony" but synchronizes it with real-time footage of tea preparation and ritual gestures. This synergy between linguistic precision and visual embodiment actualizes what Halliday (1985) calls the experiential metafunction—the representation of lived human activity through semiotic form. Similarly, in the episode on mortise and tenon architecture, close-up shots of wooden joints reinforce the linguistic sign visually, enabling foreign audiences to grasp meaning through perception rather than explanation.

However, when confronting culturally abstract terms such as " 和敬清寂 " (harmony, respect, purity, tranquility), direct translation risks cultural flattening. Instead, translators adopt a metaphoric transcoding method—rendering the four-character idiom freely while pairing it with the harmonic overtones of the guqin. The auditory resonance constructs an affective metaphor that transcends linguistic barriers, activating both cogni-

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tive and emotional reception channels. This combination of linguistic, visual, and sonic equivalence reflects Zhang Delu's (2009) "cultural layer" of multimodal discourse, in which the semiotic interplay of form and context allows deep cultural values to be transmitted implicitly.

Through such hierarchical processing, multimodal translation maintains cultural heterogeneity—preserving the authenticity of Chinese cultural imagery—while simultaneously lowering the comprehension threshold for international audiences. It thus fulfills what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe as the compositional harmony of multimodal communication: balance among information value, salience, and framing.

(2) Modal Enrichment of Community Narratives

Another distinctive strategy lies in modal enrichment, which transforms static cultural symbols into living narratives by combining multiple representational modes. This is particularly evident in episodes focusing on Kunqu opera, porcelain-making, and paper-cutting.

In the Kunqu feature, the phrase "stylized performance" is supported by scenes of the inheritor's daily practice (visual modality) intertwined with the actor's recitation of ancient lyrics (sonic modality). The result is a multimodal intertext that corresponds with UNESCO's (2003) principle of community-based preservation, emphasizing that intangible heritage survives only through embodied repetition and collective practice. Here, the translator functions not only as a linguistic mediator but also as a cultural ethnographer, curating a narrative of living transmission rather than static documentation.

The synergy among skill interpretation, cultural explanation, and community storytelling establishes what might be termed a three-dimensional semiotic matrix—"skill interpretation + cultural description + community storytelling." Within this structure, multimodal resources enable what Halliday's theory would call the interpersonal metafunction to operate across languages: emotional engagement and cultural empathy are elicited through tone, rhythm, and imagery. As a result, the intangible becomes visibly and audibly tangible, transforming immovable cultural heritage into a mobile cultural entity capable of global circulation.

This enriched representation also challenges the notion of translation as substitution. Instead, it situates subtitling within a performative ecology of modes, where meaning emerges through interactional affordances rather than textual equivalence. Thus, modal enrichment constitutes both a translation strategy and a semiotic reconstruction of cultural life.

(3) Real-Time Translation for Dynamic Environments

The third strategy, real-time adaptation, addresses the changing habits of global digital audiences. In the Paper-Cutting feature, the caption "Symbolizing happiness and prosperity" appears instantaneously as the red paper cutout unfolds against a black background. The simultaneity between visual revelation and textual expression generates cognitive immediacy: viewers construct meaning within approximately 1.5 seconds of visual processing, aligning with the human perceptual rhythm identified in multimodal cognition studies.

This synchronization illustrates what Pérez-González (2014) calls temporal isochrony—the alignment of linguistic and visual timing to facilitate comprehension. It also reflects the textual metafunction of Halliday's model, ensuring that all semiotic elements—text, image, rhythm, and movement—cohere into an integrated

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communicative whole.

Moreover, real-time multimodal translation reveals a fluid and adaptive quality that distinguishes digital cultural communication from traditional media. Subtitles are adjusted not only for linguistic accuracy but also for the tempo of perception and the emotional cadence of the visual scene. For Western viewers unfamiliar with the symbolic role of red in Chinese culture, this synchronization provides both denotative clarity (through the phrase "happiness and prosperity") and connotative learning (through emotional association with the image).

In this way, real-time translation functions as a cognitive bridge between visual immediacy and cultural depth. It embodies Zhang Delu's (2018) idea of the expression layer in multimodal discourse, where the coordination of modes allows meaning to flow seamlessly across temporal and cultural boundaries.

Collectively, these three strategies demonstrate that cultural external communication requires translation to operate at the intersection of modes, media, and meaning. Literal accuracy alone cannot fulfill the communicative function of global cultural diplomacy. Rather, through multimodal synergy—visual concretization, auditory metaphor, narrative embodiment, and real-time adaptation—translation becomes an act of semiotic design that recontextualizes Chinese culture for the global imagination.

5. Conclusion

As globalization deepens, cross-cultural communication becomes increasingly vital. This paper applied multimodal discourse analysis to the subtitle translation of China Daily's "Living Heritage" short videos, confirming the complexity and uniqueness of such multimodal translations.

Subtitle translation for cultural external promotion is not merely linguistic substitution but a cooperative multimodal act. Translators play a central role, requiring both cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural competence (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Zhang 2018). Applying multimodal theory enables translators to understand text functions, manage mode relations, and adapt subtitles to audience expectations, thus enhancing communicative effectiveness.

The study also demonstrates the practicality of integrating theory with case-based translation analysis. However, further research is needed on how various modes interact in translation and how technology can optimize multimodal processes. Future exploration should deepen the theory's application in cross-cultural communication, fostering mutual understanding among civilizations.

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