Pragmatic Differences between Chinese and English：Chinese Television Drama Title Translation

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Abstract: This article analyzes the manifestation of Chinese process-orientation versus English result-orientation in television drama title translation and summarizes the corresponding translation strategy. The strategy suggests that in translation practice, translators should be audience-oriented, adhering to English's result-orientation to ensure accurate information exchanges. Meanwhile, Chinese television works still face challenges such as limited dissemination of traditional Chinese culture, excessive accommodation to English-speaking audiences, and weakened international soft power.

Keywords: Sino-English pragmatic differences; television drama title translation; result orientation; process orientation.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese TV series have frequently appeared on popular charts of overseas streaming platforms, reflecting their growing appeal among international audiences. As pivotal mediums for cultural dissemination, films and television dramas transcend mere entertainment by conveying cultural knowledge, consumption concepts, and value systems through dialogues, settings, and music. While immersing themselves in audiovisual spectacles, audiences simultaneously decode the cultural subtexts and ideological values embedded within these works (Zhao, 2016). With the continuous enhancement of China's cultural soft power, productions rich in Chinese cultural heritage and philosophical values have garnered widespread global attention and acclaim. To better communicate China's historical legacy, societal ethos, and core values, thereby deepening international audiences' understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture, the translation of titles and subtitles for these works assumes a critical role in cross-cultural exchange.

However, the profound linguistic and cultural disparities between Chinese and English render literal translations inadequate for conveying nuanced meanings. Chinese often emphasizes contextual and process-oriented expressions, whereas English prioritizes clarity and outcome-focused communication. A deep understanding of these pragmatic differences is essential to ensure accurate and effective information transfer to target audiences.

This paper explores Chinese-English pragmatic divergences through the comparative lens of "process-oriented" Chinese versus "result-oriented" English, analyzing English-translated titles of internationally popular Chinese TV series. The aim is to provide novel insights and practical strategies for translating titles of Chinese cinematic and televised works, fostering more culturally resonant and audience-adapted outcomes.

2. Pragmatic Differences Between Chinese and English

A comparative analysis of native Chinese and English speakers' interpretations of the same text reveals a key pragmatic distinction: **Chinese emphasizes process**, while **English prioritizes outcome** (Wang & He, 2014). Chinese is a dynamic language, whereas English is static. English employs rigid syntactic structures, allowing only one finite verb per clause (inflected for person, number, and tense), with other verbs appearing as non-finite forms (e.g., participles, infinitives). Additionally, English relies heavily on prepositions, conjunctions, and other function words to create compact, logically cohesive sentences. To express multiple actions, English converts non-predicate verbs into static nouns, noun phrases, or prepositional phrases.

In contrast, Chinese lacks strict morphological constraints, permitting multiple verbs within a single sentence and flexible subject-predicate relationships. Its syntax is fluid, relying on semantic coherence and contextual inference rather than explicit connectors (Shen, 2011). Consequently, Chinese sentences exhibit a "scattered-focus" structure, where each verb creates an independent emphasis, while English adopts a "concentrated-focus" structure, centering on a single or main predicate verb with supplementary elements.

Translation fundamentally involves three stages: comprehension, transformation, and expression. The transformative phase is pivotal, as Chinese and English diverge in cognitive frameworks and conceptual structures when encoding the same idea (He, 2015). Chinese tends toward **expansive, process-oriented descriptions**, meticulously detailing actions, while English favors **compressed, result-oriented expressions**, condensing information to highlight final states or outcomes. For example, consider Jiang Rong's critique of Howard Goldblatt's translation in *Wolf Totem* (cited from Zhu & Qin, 2014):

Original: 熊可牵，虎可牵，狮可牵，大象也可牵，蒙古草原狼不可牵。

Goldblatt: *You can tame a bear, a tiger, a lion, and an elephant, but you cannot tame a Mongolian wolf.*

Jiang argued that "牵" (pull) should be rendered literally, as it reflects the **process** of leading domesticated animals. Goldblatt, however, chose "tame" to convey the **result** of domestication. This illustrates Chinese's inclination toward processual action versus English's focus on definitive outcomes. Without shared cultural knowledge, literal translations risk misinterpretation. Goldblatt's "de-processualized" adaptation ("tame") aligns with English's result-oriented pragmatics, ensuring clarity for target audiences.

Chinese is a **high-context language**, where meaning relies heavily on implicit cultural and situational cues. Its expressions often "transcend literal wording" (言不尽意) yet remain "self-evident through context" (不言自明) (申, 2011). Native Chinese speakers intuitively decode unspoken meanings through shared cultural frameworks, reducing the need for explicit verbal elaboration. English, as a **low-context language**, encodes most information explicitly within the text itself, minimizing reliance on external references.

Given these differences, translators must prioritize the cognitive habits of target audiences. When translating Chinese to English, processual descriptions should be compressed into outcome-focused summaries. Conversely, English-to-Chinese translation requires expanding abstract, result-oriented expressions into processual narratives. This ensures cross-cultural intelligibility while respecting each language's pragmatic orientation.

3. Translation of Chinese TV Series Titles: Process vs. Result Orientation

The high-context nature of Chinese and its tendency toward implicit expression (言不尽意) reflect its **process-oriented pragmatics**, where narratives often embed contextualized descriptions of actions. In contrast, English, as a low-context language, prioritizes **result-oriented clarity**, directly foregrounding definitive outcomes.

3.1 Case Studies
➤ **苍兰诀:** *Love Between Fairy and Devil*

This historical fantasy drama depicts the tragic romance between Dongfang Qingcang (a demon king) and Xiao Lanhua (a fairy). The Chinese title combines the protagonists' names ("苍" from Dongfang Qingcang and "兰" from Xiao Lanhua) with "诀," which signifies a final, irrevocable farewell. For Chinese audiences, "诀" evokes both the verb "to bid farewell" and the noun "parting," foreshadowing the lovers' doomed fate. A literal translation (*Cang and Lan's Farewell*) would obscure the characters' identities and the narrative's emotional depth.

The official English title, *Love Between Fairy and Devil*, adopts a result-oriented approach:

- It explicitly defines the protagonists' roles (fairy vs. devil).

- It foregrounds the central conflict (cross-species romance).

- It implies a tragic outcome through the inherent incompatibility of "fairy" and "devil."

By compressing the processual metaphor ("诀") into a definitive outcome ("love"), the translation aligns with English's pragmatic preferences while preserving narrative essence.

➤ **去有风的地方 :** *Meet Yourself*

The Chinese title poetically alludes to a "windy place" (有风的地方)—a dual metaphor for the story's setting ("Breeze Inn") and a cultural symbol of freedom and self-discovery. Chinese audiences intuitively associate "wind" with liberation and introspection, enabling them to infer the protagonist's transformative journey.

A literal translation (*Go to a Windy Place*) risks ambiguity, as Western audiences lack contextual associations with "wind." The English title *Meet Yourself* extracts the narrative's core theme—self-reinvention—transforming a processual metaphor into a result-oriented declaration. This shift ensures clarity while retaining the story's philosophical intent.

➤ **莲花楼:** *Mysterious Lotus Casebook*

This wuxia mystery series follows Li Lianhua, a former martial arts hero turned wandering doctor. The Chinese title "莲花楼" (Lotus Tower) symbolizes both his mobile abode and his moral integrity (the lotus representing purity in Chinese culture). A literal translation (*The Lotus Tower*) misleads English audiences by emphasizing architectural details over the plot's crime-solving focus.

The official translation, *Mysterious Lotus Casebook*, achieves three outcomes:

- It highlights the investigative theme ("casebook").

- It retains the lotus's symbolic resonance.

- It omits culturally opaque references ("楼" as a mobile structure).

This exemplifies how result-oriented translations prioritize narrative essence over literal fidelity.

3.2 Translation Strategy: From Process to Result

The above cases demonstrate a consistent approach: **transforming Chinese processual metaphors into English result-oriented definitions**. Partial imagery (e.g., "windy place" as a setting) becomes holistic summaries (e.g., self-discovery), while culturally specific symbols (e.g., "lotus") are recontextualized to align with target-audience expectations.

Key principles include:

- **Partial to holistic**: Replace partial metaphors (e.g., "诀" as a farewell) with universal themes (e.g., tragic love).

- **Symbolic Retention**: Preserve core cultural symbols (e.g., "lotus") while adapting their narrative function.

- **Explicitness Over Implicitness**: Convert high-context allusions into low-context declarations.

3.3 Limitations
➤ **Limited Generalizability**:

The analysis of three cases cannot establish universal rules. Many popular series retain literal translations (e.g., *When I Fly Towards You* for 《当我飞奔向你》), prioritizing poetic resonance over pragmatic adaptation. Titles like 《三十而已》

(*Nothing But Thirty*) preserve processual metaphors ("而已" as "merely"), demonstrating diverse translation needs beyond the process-result dichotomy.

> **Cultural-Aesthetic Dilemmas**:

Titles rooted in classical Chinese poetry face irreconcilable losses in意境 (*yijing*, artistic conception). For example, 《知否知否应是绿肥红瘦》—a title quoting Song dynasty poet Li Qingzhao—was reduced to *The Story of Minglan* in English. While pragmatic adaptations enhance accessibility, they risk eroding cultural uniqueness.

Challenges include:

> Balancing poetic beauty with cross-cultural clarity.

> Encouraging target audiences to engage with cultural context.

> Training translators to bridge aesthetic and pragmatic divides.

However, over-accommodating Western preferences may inadvertently weaken China's cultural discourse power. Future strategies must balance fidelity to Chinese artistry with intelligibility for global audiences. The process-result framework offers valuable insights for translating Chinese TV series titles. However, its application requires flexibility to accommodate cultural, aesthetic, and commercial considerations. To amplify China's cultural influence, translators must innovate strategies that preserve linguistic elegance while fostering cross-cultural resonance—a challenge demanding both creativity and scholarly rigor (尹悦, 2020).

4. Conclusion

This study investigates the translation of Chinese TV series titles through the lens of Chinese-English pragmatic differences, specifically contrasting the **process-oriented** nature of Chinese with the **result-oriented** tendencies of English. By analyzing internationally popular Chinese dramas and their official English translations, the research highlights how these linguistic orientations shape translation strategies. Key findings reveal that effective translations require compressing Chinese processual descriptions into English's outcome-focused, abstract expressions while prioritizing target audiences' cognitive habits and cultural expectations.

The study acknowledges limitations, including its narrow case scope and unresolved tensions between cultural fidelity and pragmatic adaptation. Future research should expand case analyses to develop more universal strategies and explore innovative approaches to preserving Chinese cultural aesthetics—such as poetic allusions and意境 (*yijing*, artistic conception)—without compromising clarity. A critical balance must be struck: translations should neither overly dilute cultural uniqueness to accommodate foreign preferences nor alienate audiences with opaque literalism.

As globalization intensifies and cross-cultural exchanges proliferate, the role of audiovisual translation in amplifying China's cultural discourse power becomes increasingly vital. Translators must hone not only linguistic expertise but also cultural sensitivity to bridge divides, ensuring that China's profound and aesthetic cultural heritage resonates globally. By advancing strategies that harmonize artistic integrity with cross-cultural intelligibility, Chinese TV series can transcend linguistic barriers, fostering deeper international appreciation for China's storytelling traditions and contemporary creativity.

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