

# The Construction and Communication of National Image by Publicity Documentary Subtitle Translation from Multi-Modal Perspective: A Case Study of China on the Move

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**Abstract:** *With the evolution of globalization, the world pattern has become more open and diverse. A good national image is the strategic capital for friendly exchanges and cooperation between countries. The shaping and dissemination of national image have become the most important game strategy for countries in international political and economic competition. As one of the most important media of external communication, publicity documentary fully embodies the construction of national image. This study is based on the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis, using the cultural, contextual, and content dimensions of the multimodal discourse analysis framework proposed by Zhang Delu as the specific research and analysis path. The bilingual subtitles of the documentary China on the Move are used as the corpus, and an overall example analysis is conducted from the cultural and contextual levels. Then, a specific analysis is conducted from the content level on the modality in the documentary. Through subtitle translation, explain how documentaries achieve precise construction and accurate communication of the national image through multimodal cooperation.*

**Keywords:** Multimodal discourse analysis; Publicity documentary; Subtitle translation; National image.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China pointed out that we should accelerate the building of China's discourse and narrative system, tell Chinese stories, spread Chinese voices, and present a trustworthy, lovely and respectable image of China. In order to meet the 20th National Congress and commemorate the 10th anniversary of the proposal of "Chinese Dream", the documentary *China on the Move* emerged. As a top topic for the "Record China" communication project of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and the "14th Five-Year Plan" documentary of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China, this documentary is of great significance to the external communication of China's image. Therefore, the translation research conducted on this documentary has reference value for similar documentary subtitle translation to a certain extent.

This documentary includes themes such as poverty alleviation, resumption of production and work in China, as well as China's system, economy, science and technology innovation, ecology, and people's livelihood. It does not shy away from sensitive topics. In response to the doubts and challenges posed by the international community to China, China sincerely engages in dialogue with mainstream Western discourse, showcasing the Chinese people's enthusiasm in work and vitality in life through authentic and relevant images and fast-paced stories. It not only contributes China's plan and wisdom to the world, and it showcases China's attitude and responsibility, showcasing a full and vivid image of China.

This study attempts to analyze the subtitle translation of this documentary from four levels within the framework of multimodal discourse analysis theory, exploring how translators integrate their relationships and possible strategies at various levels to obtain a translation.

## 2. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Multimodal discourse refers to the phenomenon of using various senses such as auditory, visual, and tactile senses to communicate through various means and symbolic resources such as language, images, sounds, and actions [1]. Forceville, a Dutch linguist, once put forward the multimodal theory, which regards "modality" as a sign system that uses specific perceptual processes to interpret meaning [2]. Multimodal translation essentially belongs to the field of linguistics, but more and more scholars have found that in translation research, the use of modern technology in multimodal translation can help us continuously deepen and broaden our understanding and research on translation.

Barthes, a French scholar, was the first overseas scholar to systematically analyze multimodality. From the perspective of semiotics, he explored the relationship between image and language in the construction of meaning and how they interact, extending the concept, interpersonal and textual functions of language to other symbols [3]. The formal formation of multimodal discourse analysis is marked by Kress and Van Leeuwen's book *Reading Images: the Grammar of Visual Design* published in 1996, which developed a visual grammar framework specifically for multimodal discourse analysis. It is believed that the combination of different symbolic modalities in the communication process can be called multimodal [4].

Li Zhanzi first introduced the theory of multimodal discourse into China, and China began researching multimodal discourse since then [5]. Subsequently, numerous domestic scholars conducted in-depth research on multimodal discourse. Zhang Delu studied multimodal discourse from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics and summarized a comprehensive theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis, which includes four levels: cultural level, contextual level, content level, and expression level [6]. This is also the theoretical framework that this study relies on.

### 3. RESEARCH ON SUBTITLE TRANSLATION UNDER MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS THEORY

*China on the Move* adopts a daily perspective and employs almost straightforward techniques, and there is a large amount of dialogue and narration in the language. Due to the limitations of time and space on the screen, the translator needs to appropriately delete some irrelevant information. On the basis of full understanding, the translator needs to make appropriate translations according to the context. Besides, this documentary involves many dialogues between characters, and the subtitle translation should be concise and comprehensive in order to effectively receive sufficient information in a limited time and space for the audience. It is necessary to cooperate with the language, images, background, sound, etc. in the documentary to jointly interpret the deep meaning.

Throughout the documentary, the multimodal discourse of this documentary can be roughly divided into three categories: visual modality, auditory modality, and language modality. At the same time as filming, the audience's audio-visual experience was taken into consideration, coupled with the use of a continuous camera technique throughout the documentary, forming a perfect fusion of motion and stillness, further enhancing the documentary's recording effect.

#### 3.1 Culture Level

The culture level is the key to making multimodal communication possible, determining the form and technique of communication. Without this level of situational context, there is no explanatory power [7]. This level mainly includes ideology and communication procedures, which determine the traditions, forms, and techniques of communication. Language, as a cultural carrier, its textual expression indirectly or directly reflects the characteristics of the culture to which it belongs. In the English translation process of subtitles for promotional documentaries, special attention should be paid to the influence of cultural factors on the audience's perception and cognition of the documentary. Minimize the differences between the source language and the target language as much as possible, while also combining specific images, downplaying symbolic vocabulary for appropriate cultural transformation, and assisting in constructing movie discourse that can convey the true meaning of the movie, so that the audience can better understand the discourse meaning conveyed by the movie and build a reasonable and beautiful image of China.

##### Example 1:

贞丰县坐落在中国西南部的高山里，这里生活着一群古老的少数民族，千百年来布依族在这片青山绿水中过着传统的生活。

Translation: In the high mountains of the southwest, Zhenfeng County is home to an ancient community. For over 1,000 years, the Buyi people have led a traditional life here in these green slopes.

Buyi embroidery is a traditional folk art that integrates painting, paper cuttings and skills, and reflects the local customs of the Buyi people. Buyi embroidery has a coordinated and vibrant color scheme, rich in patterns, delicate and unique in design, simple and elegant in style. It is a precious heritage based on Chinese national culture and has been listed as a national intangible cultural heritage. The video shows a group of hardworking Buyi women living in the mountains of Zhenfeng County, Guizhou Province. They rely on their embroidery skills to make Buyi embroidery shine at the International Fashion Week. They are self-reliant and a beautiful scenery on China's path to poverty alleviation.

Therefore, when dealing with the subtitles of this section, the translator translated the “布依族” into "Buyi People" and presented concrete images in the middle of the picture, with dynamic images on both sides. Through intuitive means, the hardworking image of the Buyi people was brought to the audience, helping overseas audiences better understand the embroidery culture of the Buyi people. While helping overseas audiences understand the courage and diligence of the Chinese people, and also build a Chinese image that strives to achieve poverty alleviation.

##### Example 2:

在家里就是帮当地的人绣那个背小孩的被面，费用很低。

Translation: I used to embroider baby carriers for others, the pay was low.

Quilt cover, also known as swaddling clothes in ancient times, is a traditional culture of ethnic minorities. It is a cloth bag used for carrying infants, and has a special significance among ethnic minorities. It accompanies children through infancy and

childhood until they can walk on their own. Quilt cover not only has practicality, but also serves as a carrier for the inheritance of local ethnic culture. In many ethnic minority areas, these quilts are made of brightly colored fabric and embroidered with intricate patterns, which have been passed down from generation to generation and even become a unique handicraft.

When introducing Buyi embroidery in the video, representational embroidery works are presented in the middle of the screen, including quilt cover, which have unique Chinese cultural characteristics but are not within the cognitive range of foreign audiences. Therefore, when dealing with the subtitles of this section, the translator will translate the “被面” into “baby carriers”, bringing the unique cultural image of China to the audience in an intuitive way.

### 3.2 Context Level

The purpose of documentary subtitles is to convey information, and the carrier of information is subtitles, which are also constrained by context. Therefore, the translation of subtitles should consider contextual factors more. The context layer includes a contextual configuration composed of discourse scope, discourse tone, and discourse mode, with specific applications mainly including contextual context, situational context, and cultural context [7]. Context can restrict the transmission of information and also supplement it to a certain extent. To some extent, subtitle translation may also serve as a connecting link between the preceding and the following. When translating subtitles, translators should make appropriate adjustments, additions, and deletions to the information based on the context. The selection of specific vocabulary should also be examined in conjunction with different levels of context [8], in order to accurately convey the meaning of the text.

#### Example 3:

一项中国政府报告数据显示, 2015 年中国农村地区有近 5600 万绝对贫困人口, 中国制定了一个目标, 到 2020 年底, 让现行标准的农村贫困人口全部脱贫。

Translation: According to Chinese government report, in 2015, almost 56 million people in China's rural areas were living in extreme poverty, the country set itself a target that by the end of 2020, that number should be zero.

Poverty alleviation is an important strategic deployment for building a modern country. The picture presents impoverished areas in the deep mountains of Guizhou, indirectly reflecting the difficulty of poverty alleviation work. The translator adopted the liberal translation, omitting the translation of the actual action of “completely lifting out of poverty”. By combining multiple multimodal discourse modes such as video and commentary, as well as background sound, the subtitles demonstrate the Chinese government's determination to eliminate absolute poverty from both auditory and visual perspectives, accurately conveying a responsible national image.

#### Example 4:

我们使用科学技术是为了服务于人, 技术的应用是以人为本。

Translation: We use this net for all. We use technology to serve people rather than we transform the city only for technology itself.

At first glance, many people may translate this sentence according to its literal meaning, focusing too much on the surface meaning of the sentence without considering the context, which can lead to misunderstandings. To do a good job in subtitle translation, we need to combine context, not only focus on text, but also on the content of the screen, pronunciation, intonation, and other forms that may express the true content [9]. Before this sentence, the documentary talked about the digital governance of cities through “One Net for All management” technology. The footage reflects the manipulation of computers by technology personnel, connecting the entire city with digital technology. Combining subtitles and footage, it can be understood that this sentence aims to emphasize the starting point of scientific and technological progress, serving people, rather than just pursuing technological progress itself. Although the English translation in the example does not correspond to the original text in form, it perfectly explains the meaning of the original text. Therefore, based on comprehensive considerations, free translation is a better approach to build the image of a technological powerhouse.

### 3.3 Content Level

The content level includes the discourse meaning level and the formal level. Discourse meaning refers to the conceptual, interpersonal, and textual meanings conveyed in language expression. In general films, subtitles include narration and dialogue [9]. In documentaries, the subtitles are mostly narrated by the narrator. Therefore, this may require translators to pay more attention to the accuracy of subtitle expression when translating, and their stance may need to reduce some subjectivity and try to use objective and formal language for translation.

#### Example 5:

中国的科技创新, 正在首次走在世界舞台的中央, 各国都应该正视这个现状。

Translation: The world is experiencing Chinese innovation for the first time and having to face up to it.

Firstly, let's look at this example from the perspective of meaning level. The original text roughly means that China's rapid development of technological innovation refers to the speed of innovation in the context of the new era. The translator used a very ingenious technique to create a rapidly developing and stable image of China in the third person form from an objective perspective. At the same time, when translating “中国的科技创新”, in order to emphasize China's progress, it is also a good way to directly translate it into "Chinese innovation". Secondly, at the formal level, different forms of expression interact and jointly construct discourse meaning. In documentaries, often relying solely on subtitles cannot fully showcase the content.

Example 6:

我们用一网统管这个词来描述数字治理，这个网是一个数字网。

Translation: And we use this term called One Net for All. This net is a digital net.

Example 7:

我们创造了绿色用工这样一个机会，能够让当地的一些贫困户能够参与到这个绿化的进程当中。

Translation: We have created an opportunity for green employment to enable some local poor households, to participate in this greening process.

The translator uses literal translation to showcase China's unique creativity in poverty alleviation and digital governance. If we rely solely on subtitles, the audience cannot know what “One Net for All management” and “green employment” are and what their functions are. But with the vivid and eye-catching display of images, we can clearly see the important role of One Net for All management in achieving digital governance in cities, and we are deeply impressed by it; We can see that the so-called green employment refers to hiring impoverished households in Gansu Province to plant trees. In this way, the combination of visuals and subtitles provides the audience with a good cognitive experience.

### 3.4 Expression Level

The expression level is composed of language media level and non-language media level. At the level of language media, two main methods are used to construct meaning: sound symbols and written symbols. Subtitles belong to the written symbols of language media, and the corresponding English letters also belong to the written symbols. In the process of translating the source language into the target language, it is necessary to comprehensively consider the characteristics of the media, such as background music, the size of subtitle fonts, and the spatial layout of subtitles [8].

Example 8:

中国政府治理国家时最显著的特点是非常专业，并且广泛听取意见，这也是为什么它能够做到自己承诺的事情。

Translation: One of the striking characteristics of Chinese governments is basically, it's very professional, it's very well informed. That's why it has managed to do what it's managed to do.

As the documentary draws to a close, the achievements of China's commitment to achieving efficient government governance are showcased in front of the audience. Although the documentary is subtitled in Chinese, the narration is narrated simultaneously by an English translator, achieving language and media expression.

Example 9:

中国为人民在经济增长方面取得的成功，是我们有生之年见证到的世界奇迹之一。

Translation: Success in the overall growth of the economy, for its citizens remains one of the miracles that's occurred in the world in our lifetime.

This is the concluding remarks of the documentary, but the duration did not immediately end here. Instead, some scenes were filmed, which also reflect the current real economic situation in China. Among them, one scene is of transportation workers from UTOPILOT Automatic Driving Group driving autonomous trucks, shuttle over the East Sea Bridge, highlighting the common progress of China's technology and economy, and revealing from another perspective that China is in line with the world. Although the subtitles of the documentary have come to an end, the nonverbal media techniques used at the end, namely the visual expression, have also achieved the same effect, echoing the subtitles at the end, once again indicating the theme.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study takes the English subtitle translation of the movie *China on the Move* as an example, and uses the framework of multimodal discourse analysis theory to explore the best ways to achieve the subtitle translation of Chinese foreign propaganda

documentaries from the cultural, contextual, content, and expression levels. Through the above research and analysis, it can be found that a single English subtitle text is difficult to fully express the discourse meaning, and must be combined with more modalities such as visuals, intonation, actions, music, etc. to complete the construction process together. The English subtitles of *China on the Move* accurately grasp the modal forms of multimodal discourse during the translation process, flexibly analyze the relationships between modalities, reasonably reduce cultural differences between China and the West, accurately convey the meaning of the discourse, and achieve a smooth transition between images. Through the combination of English subtitles with other modes in the documentary, foreign audiences can understand Chinese stories, understand Chinese concepts, and experience Chinese roads, which is conducive to building a positive image of China.

Finally, applying multimodal discourse research methods to building a national image is not limited to studying a single language modality, but also adds research on image modality, sound modality, and multimodal complementarity. This not only provides validation materials for multimodal discourse analysis in China, but also provides content and method references for domestic documentaries to better serve the national image's "going global" strategy, This provides a relatively new perspective for the creation and research of documentaries shaping the image of China in the future, and can explore the practical application of multimodal discourse analysis in the era of mobile internet, thereby expanding the practical application scope of multimodal discourse in interdisciplinary fields and enriching the theoretical connotation of multimodal discourse analysis.

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