

## An Eco-translatology Study of Subtitle Translation in the Film “Better Days”

**You Qiongqiong**

*School of Foreign Languages, Henan university of Technology, Zhengzhou, China*

**Abstract:** Using school bullying as a mirror, the film *Better Days* profoundly displays the pain endured by victims and exposes the cruelty of societal issues through the lens of high school student Chen Nian's experiences. This movie has sparked reflections on school bullying among audiences worldwide, fostering cultural exchanges. As a flagship of Chinese cinema's "global outreach," it has garnered widespread international acclaim, including an Oscar nomination. In the globalized context, subtitle translation holds immense importance for the international dissemination of *Better Days*, particularly with its profound social implications and cultural nuances. This article examines the English subtitle translation of *Better Days* through an eco-translatology lens, highlighting the intricacies of translation and providing strategic insights for cross-cultural exchanges in Chinese cinema's global expansion. The article delves into the adaptive selection of subtitle translation, analyzing the disparities between the original text and its translation within the translation environment. Through this research, the article thoroughly explores the translator's multifaceted translation strategies, aiming to uncover the significance of subtitle translation in cross-cultural exchanges and offer strategic guidance for Chinese cinema's global outreach, fostering cultural exchanges, and advancing the field of eco-translatology.

**Keywords:** Eco-translatology; Subtitle Translation; *Better Days*

### 1. Introduction

*Better Days* is a profound Chinese film that dives deeply into the issue of school bullying and the stressors confronting modern youth. Directed by Derek Tsang, it tells the tale of high school student Chen Nian, who, while preparing for her college entrance exams,

becomes a victim of intense bullying at school. Her stress intensifies further when she witnesses a classmate take their own life due to bullying. The film masterfully blends elements of friendship, justice, and revenge, captivating the audience with a narrative that challenges societal norms.

The global recognition *Better Days* has received, including an Oscar nomination, highlights its universal relevance and the timeless appeal of its themes. Despite its distinct Chinese setting and cultural nuances, the film's exploration of the psychological ramifications of school violence transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, emphasizing the global epidemic of school bullying and the shared challenges youth face worldwide. In the era of globalization, *Better Days* has effectively communicated the pressing issues of Chinese society to a global audience through the power of cinema. This has fostered cross-cultural communication and understanding, providing valuable insights and reflections on the common challenges faced by youth across the globe.

Despite the film *Better Days* gaining global recognition, current research still has some limitations. Firstly, there's a paucity of studies on subtitle translation for its international dissemination. Since subtitle quality greatly affects audience comprehension and appreciation, further research is needed to accurately convey the film's emotional depth and social value. Secondly, the examination of school bullying and its social-psychological roots revealed in the film is not comprehensive. Despite its societal impact, more interdisciplinary research is required to tackle the root causes of this issue. Additionally, research on adolescent growth environments, mental health, and social responsibility portrayed in the film also needs strengthening. These aspects are crucial for adolescents' well-being and societal harmony. Therefore, we urge scholars and experts to conduct more detailed,

diversified research to propose practical solutions.

"Young You" has garnered widespread praise from audiences worldwide for its profound portrayal of school bullying and showcase of human glory. The film's success stems not only from its superb acting and production but also from its ability to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, touching the hearts of a global audience. However, in the realm of international communication, the quality of subtitle translation is crucial for audience understanding and perception of the film. A stellar subtitle translation can accurately convey linguistic nuances, profoundly reveal cultural connotations, and fully showcase the emotional depth within the film.

Therefore, this study endeavors to utilize Hu Gengshen's ecological translation theory to thoroughly examine the subtitle translation of "Young You", evaluating its effectiveness in managing linguistic, cultural, and communication aspects of the source material. The ecological translation theory highlights the complexity of translation activities, encompassing factors such as translators, source texts, target audiences, and socio-cultural environments. Through this framework, the study delves into the adaptation and selection process in the subtitle translation of "Young You", exploring how translators make adaptive choices and creative translations based on the target audience's cultural background, linguistic habits, and aesthetic preferences.

## 2. Application of Eco-translatology in Subtitle Translation

In the globalized era, eco-translatology offers a robust theoretical base for subtitle translation. As a pivotal bridge for cultural exchange, the accuracy of film subtitle translation is paramount. Eco-translatology underscores the intricate multidimensionality of translation, urging translators to delicately adapt and transform language, culture, and communication nuances. In subtitle translation, this theory is indispensable. It aids translators in precisely grasping target language nuances, enhancing subtitle accuracy and fluency; deeply comprehending cultural connotations, bolstering subtitle cultural sensitivity; and focusing on communication objectives, optimizing subtitle communicative effectiveness. This, in turn, strengthens

audience comprehension and acceptance of film content, fostering cross-cultural exchange and understanding.

By precisely adapting and transforming linguistic nuances, cultural sensitivities, and communicative appropriateness, eco-translatology has significantly elevated the overall quality and impact of subtitle translation, enabling audiences to gain deeper insights and acceptance of film content. This further propels the widespread dissemination and profound exchange of cultures. Therefore, in subtitle translation practice, we must actively embrace eco-translatology to foster the advancement and development of this vital field.

## 3. Subtitle Translation of *Better Days* Under Eco-translatology's Guidance

Within the cultural context of globalization, subtitle translation for *Better Days* encounters significant challenges in bridging linguistic and cultural divides to convey the film's profound meaning and emotions accurately. Eco-translatology, renowned for its comprehensive and nuanced perspective, offers robust theoretical support for this translation process. Guided by this theory, the translator precisely converts linguistic elements, ensuring subtitles' grammar, vocabulary, and expressions align with the target language's norms. Additionally, the translator delves into cultural nuances, enabling the film's cultural connotations to be presented and explained in the target language. The translator also attends to the communication dimension, ensuring subtitles accurately convey dialogue content while effectively transmitting emotions and characterizations.

### 3.1 Linguistic Dimension Conversion

Translating dialogue for subtitles transcends mere linguistic conversion; it demands a nuanced understanding of timing and impact within the film's rhythm. Each translation choice is strategic, balancing the original emotions and contextual weight within the limitations of subtitle length and reading speed. In *Better Days*, dialogue often incorporates Chinese youth slang and colloquialisms. The translator's challenge lies in preserving this informal tone while avoiding alienation or confusion for an international audience. One approach involves substituting local slang with Western equivalents that mirror the original's

meaning and emotional impact. This strategy ensures the film resonates with international viewers while maintaining the authenticity and directness of the original dialogue.

Example 1:

ST: 你再帮她好好查一查, 你干吗你, 你干吗?

TT: - Please reinvestigate! - What are you doing?

Analysis: During the translation process, the translator did not replicate the original sentence structure but instead carefully considered the ecological context of the dialogue to maintain a high level of meaning consistency. This method aims to assist the audience in effortlessly grasping the original text's core intention with minimal cognitive strain, enabling them to appreciate its deeper meaning. The original text comprises a continuous spoken expression, initially issuing a clear, forceful request or command to “你再帮她好好查一查” The subsequent “你干吗你, 你干吗?” expresses interrogation or dissatisfaction, likely due to the other party's lack of immediate or expected action. The translation "Please reinvestigate!" aptly captures this request, urging a thorough reexamination. While "What are you doing?" is concise, it encapsulates the original's interrogative nature, querying the other party's actions or intentions. In subtitle translation, brevity is paramount due to length and display time constraints. Here, the translator adeptly addressed the repetition in the original text, effectively communicating its deeper meaning through context-sensitive semantic translation.

Example 2:

ST: 没必要装什么教养。

TT: Why should I bother with manners?

Analysis: Xiaobei ventured guesses about Chen Nian's feelings through mockery and probing inquiries, but his bluntness offended Chen Nian. Angered by Xiaobei's provocation, Chen Nian responded, while Xiaobei boldly stated that he was a hooligan and saw no need to put on airs of politeness. In this instance, the translator cleverly converted the statement into a question, heightening Xiaobei's dissatisfaction. Furthermore, rather than translating "There's no need to bother with manners" verbatim, the translator rephrased it as "Why should I bother with manners?"

effectively capturing the essence of “没必要装什么教养” in the original text. This translation effectively conveys Xiaobei's disdain for faux politeness, further accentuating his anger and reluctance. By altering the sentence structure and linguistic expression, the translator aptly portrayed Xiaobei's self-deprecating yet contradictory character.

Example 3:

ST: 我认为你现在带着情绪已经严重影响了你的判断能力。

TT: Don't allow emotions to cloud your judgment.

Analysis: During the discussion of the case, Zheng Yi, a male police officer, proposed releasing Chen Nian due to his compassion for her and consideration of her college entrance exam. However, this suggestion was challenged by Wang Li, a female police officer. She criticized Zheng Yi for allowing emotions to hinder his professional judgment and overlooking crucial evidence in the case. The translation aptly captures the essence of the original text, which aims to caution against emotional influence on decision-making. While omitting the phrase “我认为你现在带着情绪,” the translation uses the imperative "Don't allow emotions" to make it more direct, impactful, concise, and precise. In Chinese, “我认为” is often used as a conversational opener, and the true substance lies in the following content, not the phrase itself. Therefore, excluding it from the translation enhances clarity and brevity, aligning with English linguistic conventions and reflecting the translator's linguistic adaptability.

### 3.2 Cultural Dimension Transformation

When translating culturally specific elements like idioms, jokes, or references to local customs, it is crucial to exercise caution to guarantee that international audiences can grasp the intricacies. For example, if a joke hinges on a linguistic play exclusive to Chinese, the translator has the option to adapt it to employ a comparable linguistic play in English or search for a joke that prompts a similar response in the target culture. These decisions stem from a profound comprehension of both the source and target cultures. The translation example of the Chinese New Year celebration in the film *Better Days* highlights how translators approach such elements. Rather than translating

all cultural references directly, which may not resonate or be comprehended by international audiences, translators may opt to provide succinct explanatory notes or make minor adjustments to the scenes to maintain their intended meaning and appeal.

Example 4:

ST: 给我烧纸, 我先给你烧。

TT: You're telling me to go to hell? You can go first!

Analysis : In the original text, the phrase “给我烧纸” refers to the Chinese cultural practice of burning paper money for the deceased as a sacrificial rite, intended to express respect and mourning. Conversely, “我先给你烧” is a sarcastic or provocative remark, implying that the speaker intends for the listener to die first. This statement serves as a challenge and threat from a thug during an attack, aiming to heighten Xiao Bei's psychological pressure through verbal insults. Specifically, “给我烧纸” alludes to burning paper money for Xiao Bei upon his death, whereas “我先给你烧” is an extreme irony, suggesting that the speaker will harm or kill Xiao Bei before he can retaliate, thus eliminating the "threat" altogether.

The translation "You're telling me to go to hell? You can go first!" aptly captures the sarcastic and provocative tone. By using the expression "go to hell," it corresponds to the culturally specific act of “烧纸,” accurately communicating the cultural meaning of the original text. Since “烧纸” is a culturally loaded practice, a direct translation may confuse readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture. Therefore, the translation avoids a literal translation and instead uses the more universally understood "go to hell," preserving the sarcastic intent while preventing cultural misinterpretation. These expressions are commonplace in English and enable English readers to readily understand and sympathize with the sentiment.

Example 5:

ST: “龙生龙凤生凤, 老鼠的儿子会打洞。”

TT: "like mom, like daughter. Like a chip off the old block."

Analysis : Wei Lai invoked the Chinese proverb, “龙生龙凤生凤, 老鼠的儿子会打洞,” to disparage Chen Nian's family background, insinuating that she inherited

unfavorable traits, thus mocking her. This proverb encapsulates the concept of familial heredity and the passing down of traits from previous generations. The translation aptly captures this essence through the expressions "like mother, like daughter" and "a chip off the old block," effectively communicating the similarity in characteristics or behaviors between offspring and their predecessors. Given the unique cultural elements in the original text, like “龙,” “凤,” and “老鼠,” which lack direct English equivalents, the translator wisely retained the cultural essence while ensuring comprehensibility. The use of idiomatic expressions like "mother" and "daughter," along with "a chip off the old block," not only preserves the cultural meaning but also maintains the fluency and naturalness of the translation.

Example 6:

ST: 六条, 三万, 五万, 我也五万。

TT : Six bamboo. Three characters. Five characters. Five characters again.

Analysis : “六条,” “三万” and “五万” are terms originating from the mahjong game, carrying specific meanings and usages within Chinese culture. The translator adeptly transformed these terms into English equivalents that accurately convey their intended meanings. Despite the absence of direct English equivalents for mahjong terminology, the translator employed words such as "bamboo" and "characters", along with descriptions of the mahjong tiles' characteristics, to enable target readers to comprehend the terms' general significance. The original text discusses the gameplay of mahjong. By utilizing phrases like "Six bamboo" and "Three characters" in the translation, the translator adeptly captured and maintained the contextual nuance of the original, immersing readers in the unique charm of the mahjong game. This translation approach not only circumvented potential cultural misunderstandings, but also skillfully preserved the cultural essence embedded in the source text. Additionally, as the original text is written in a colloquial style, exhibiting a casual and unconstrained tone, this tone is aptly mirrored in the translation. The translator maintained this style through the use of straightforward vocabulary and sentence structures, ensuring that the translation remains consistent with the original in terms of tone and

style.

### 3.3 Communication Dimension Transformation

In the realm of subtitle translation, transforming the communication dimension is paramount for seamless communication between the source and target languages. The translator strives for pragmatic equivalence in this dimension through careful linguistic adjustments, ultimately ensuring that subtitles fulfill their communicative purpose and effectively convey information.

Let's consider the film *Better Days* as an illustration. The transformation of the communication dimension in subtitle translation manifests in four key aspects: Firstly, accuracy in capturing and conveying the emotions and attitudes of characters is essential. Secondly, maintaining dialogue fluency is crucial. Since subtitles are time-bound, the translator must ensure coherence and rhythm within limited timeframes, preventing translation from detracting from the audience's viewing experience. Thirdly, communicating cultural backgrounds is imperative. Lastly, the translator must consider the target audience's receptiveness. By adhering to these principles, the translator can ensure that subtitle translations align with audience expectations and preferences, ultimately enhancing their overall viewing experience.

Example 7:

ST: 这都是学问。

TT: They're essential social skills.

Analysis : By highlighting the intricacies of family education and children's interactions in the dialogue, Wei Lai's mother sought to redirect the conversation and deflect blame from Wei Lai in the suicide case resulting from Hu Xiaodie's school bullying by challenging external factors. Here, “学问” encapsulates not just academic knowledge but profound life experience and wisdom. In Chinese culture, this phrase often signifies someone's profound knowledge and experience in a given domain.

Choosing "They're essential social skills" as the translation aptly captures the essence of the original, maintaining its core message while adhering to English linguistic conventions.

During the conversation, Wei Lai's mother emphasized her rigorous education of Wei Lai, suggesting she could not have been involved in

the bullying. Her reference to “学问” highlights the intricacies and importance of educating children on social interactions, aiming to divert the discussion.

In the translation process, the translator ensured the core meaning was conveyed naturally and fluently in the context. Beyond linguistic accuracy, the translator took into account the communicative nuances and cultural context, striving for optimal communication. This adaptive approach ensures the translation remains faithful to the original while aligning with English readers' preferences, facilitating smooth cross-cultural communication.

Example 8:

ST: 想考大学啊? 考啊你。

TT: You want to go to university? In your dreams.

Analysis : Wei Lai's statement serves as a provocation and threat directed at Chen Nian, reflecting her disdain, disrespect, and predisposition towards violence and conflict. The colloquial phrase “考啊你” translates to “看你考得上吗?” conveying a tone of doubt and mockery. Appropriate English vocabulary and sentence structures must be utilized to capture this sarcastic and questioning nuance. The translator opted for the expression "You want to go to university? In your dreams." Here, "In your dreams" aptly expresses the idea that something is unrealistic and can only be envisioned in a dream, aligning perfectly with the sarcastic undertone of the original. Communicatively speaking, the translation aptly captures Wei Lai's mockery of Chen Nian's aspiration to attend university. This translation exemplifies the adaptive transformation strategy in communication, showcasing the translator's accurate grasp of the original's communicative intention and selection of apt linguistic expressions to convey it.

Example 9:

ST: 都是打不死的小强知道吗。

TT: We're both undefeatable.

Analysis : Through encouraging words and positive analogies, Chen Nian's mother conveyed unwavering belief and support to Chen Nian, helping her build confidence. This dialogue beautifully illustrates the profound emotional bond and mutual support shared between mother and daughter. In the original

text, “打不死的小强” is a colloquial Chinese phrase that typically refers to someone or something exhibiting immense vitality and resilience, making them difficult to defeat. To capture this essence, the translator wisely chose the term "undefeatable," which aptly conveys the original's communicative intent, emphasizing perseverance and indomitable strength. While "cockroach" refers to a specific insect in Chinese, here it is symbolically used to represent "tenacity." By avoiding a direct translation of "cockroach" and instead opting for "undefeatable," the translator eliminated potential cultural misunderstandings while maintaining the intended message. The word "undefeatable" is a commonly used English expression to describe someone or something that cannot be overcome, perfectly suited for the context. By considering the linguistic nuances of the target language, the translator crafted a translation that is both natural and fluent, effectively communicating the positive and inspiring emotions expressed by Chen Nian's mother in the original text.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study applies ecological translation theory to the English subtitle translation of *Better Days*, exploring the translator's adaptive selection and transformation in language, culture, and communication. Through rigorous analysis, it becomes evident that the translator demonstrates exceptional adaptability in maintaining translation accuracy and acceptability. This not only validates the effectiveness of ecological translation theory in subtitle translation but also underscores the translator's vital role in cultural mediation and cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, the study highlights the significant value of subtitle translation in enhancing global film dissemination and cultural exchange, serving as a valuable reference for future subtitle translation efforts. While the study has its limitations, it offers a fresh perspective on exploring the influence and role of subtitle translation in cross-cultural communication, suggesting that subtitle translation will play an increasingly crucial role in the global film industry, fostering the development and understanding of cultural diversity.

#### References

- [1] Buyun, L. A Study on Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Skopostheorie—A Case Study of Desperate Housewives[J]. *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, 2023, 6(3).
- [2] Dai, Y. A Study of English-Chinese Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Suprasegmental Phonemes —Exemplified by Desperate Housewives[J]. *The Frontiers of Society, Science and Technology*, 2022, 4(8).
- [3] Gu, Q. On the Translation of Culture-loaded Words in *The Lane* from the Perspective of Eco-translatology[J]. *English Language Teaching and Linguistics Studies*, 2024, 6(2).
- [4] JiaYang, & Li, C. Research on Translation Strategies of Political Texts for International Publicity from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology[J]. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, 2023, 7(12): 64-70.
- [5] Jiayu, L., & Xue, J. A Study on the Subtitle Translation of *A Long Cherished Dream* From the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis[J]. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 2022, 24(2): 14-21.
- [6] Wang, Q. On the Significance of Chinese Eco-translatology to Translation Studies[J]. *The Educational Review, USA*, 2023, 7(3).
- [7] Xie, Y., & Tian, C. Research on Subtitling Publicity Film: A Case Study of *Beautiful Jingzhou, Lovingly Pathetic*[J]. *Education Journal*, 2022, 5(4).
- [8] Xinfei, L. A Study on Film Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory: A Case Study of *Kung Fu Panda*[J]. *Lecture Notes on Language and Literature*, 2024, 7(1).
- [9] Yao, Q. A Study on Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology: A Case Study of *Empresses in the Palace*[J]. *Lecture Notes on Language and Literature*, 2024, 7(1).
- [10] Zhang, T. Movie Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of the Three-dimensional Transformations of Eco-translatology: A Case Study of the English Subtitle of *Lost in Russia*[J]. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2021, 12(1): 139-143.