

# Subtitling Translation of Foreign Propaganda Documentaries from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

-- Taking *Our Traditional Chinese Medicine* as an example

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**Abstract:** As an important component of Chinese culture, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is receiving increasing attention in the world. Documentary is a multimodal communication medium that integrates elements such as text, image, sound, animation, and so on, effectively promoting the international dissemination and development of TCM culture. Based on the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis by Delu Zhang, taking the documentary *Our Traditional Chinese Medicine* released by the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine as an example, this paper analyzes the subtitling translation of the documentary from the cultural, textual, expressive aspects, and the aspect of content, and explores the use of language, image, voice, action and other modes and their cooperation. The result shows that the subtitling translation of *Our Traditional Chinese Medicine* utilizes multiple modalities to enhance the expressiveness and logic of documentaries, thereby improving the effectiveness of external dissemination.

**Keywords:** Foreign Propaganda Documentaries, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Subtitling Translation.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) culture is a treasure of Chinese civilization and one of the cultural heritage of China. TCM builds its basic theory with ancient Chinese philosophy, yin and yang, five elements, meridians, and other theories. In the process of development, it integrates religious studies, health preservation, logic, psychology, meteorology, astronomy, and other disciplines (Hu & Wang, 2013). This unique medical system embodies the wisdom and experience of the Chinese nation for thousands of years. Nowadays, TCM has gradually entered the world stage. Documentaries on TCM can help foreigners understand its culture and promote its international dissemination. It will help to inherit and promote the essence of TCM and promote its global application and development. At the same time, it will also help to enhance the international influence of Chinese culture and increase the cultural confidence of the Chinese people.

China has released some documentaries on TCM, such as *World of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, *The Tale of Chinese Medicine*, and *China of Traditional Chinese Medicine*. However, these documentaries are explained only in Chinese and not translated into English, which is difficult for foreigners to understand. In 2018, the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine released a Chinese medicine promotional film named *Our Traditional Chinese Medicine* with English subtitles (<http://www.natcm.gov.cn/xinxifabu/shipinxinwen/2018-08-06/7615.html>), reviewing the development process of TCM and providing a detailed introduction to its current development situation and achievements. The documentary shaped a TCM image spanning the three times and space of 'yesterday', 'today', and 'tomorrow', integrating rich multimodal elements such as text, music, images, and movie videos, selecting cultural symbols that are easily accepted by

foreign audiences, showcasing the vast and profound TCM culture to the world. This study is based on the framework of multimodal discourse analysis theory and analyzes the English subtitles of *Our Traditional Chinese Medicine* from the cultural, contextual, content, and expressive levels. It explores how to subtitle translation utilizes multimodal representations such as language, visual, and auditory to enhance the expressiveness and logic of documentaries and improve the effectiveness of external communication.

## 2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Its Usage in Translation

Modality refers to the channels and media of communication, including symbol systems such as language, technology, images, colors, and music (Zhu, 2007). Urios-Aparisi and Forceville (2009) proposed the multimodal theory, viewing modality as a symbolic system that utilizes specific perceptual processes to interpret meaning, and categorizing modality into nine types, including images, verbal symbols, written symbols, sound, music, gestures, breath, taste, and contact. Multimodal discourse refers to the phenomenon of using various senses such as auditory, visual, and tactile senses to communicate through various means and symbols such as language, images, sounds, and actions (Zhang, 2009). Although language is a symbolic system that can express almost all meanings, in a specific context, language may not express certain meanings as well as other modalities. For example, images can represent the image of real things, while language, no matter how detailed it is described, cannot be as realistic as images. Communicators choose multimodal communication to utilize the strengths and advantages of various modalities to more effectively complete communication tasks (Zhang, 2018).

Since the 1970s, foreign scholars have begun to select data

from different fields for multimodal research, attempting to explore the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis. Barthes and Heath (1978) explored the interaction between images and language in expressing overall meaning. Kress and Van-Leeuwen (1996) studied how multimodal elements such as visual images, colors, and different media interact to express meaning. Jewitt (2002) conducted a multimodal analysis of mathematical discourse, attempting to construct a theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis, and also attempting to design programs for multimodal discourse analysis. Li (2003) was the first scholar to introduce the theory of multimodal discourse analysis in China. He introduced Kress and Leeuwen's visual grammar and image analysis methods and proposed that this analysis method plays an important role in the study of social symbols and English teaching. Hu (2007) discussed the difference between multimodal semiotics and multimedia semiotics and further introduced computer semiotics with dual characteristics of media and modality. Zhu (2007) provided a general overview of the generation, definition, theoretical basis, methods, and significance of multimodal discourse

analysis.

In addition, Zhang (2009) analyzed the theory of systemic functional linguistics and multimodal discourse research and believed that multimodal discourse analysis mainly includes four levels: culture context, content, and expression. The four levels of multimodal discourse analysis are not separated from each other. The four levels described the same multimodal discourse framework from different perspectives and are interrelated. Figure 1 shows the multimodal discourse framework from the interrelationships of the four levels. The cultural level is the foundation for the construction of the multimodal discourse, which determines whether the other three levels and the entire multimodal discourse can proceed smoothly. The cultural context at the macro level is represented by the specific situational context, and the three aspects of the situational context determine the three discourse meanings at the content level; The meaning of discourse is reflected through modals such as language, picture, sound, and perception, and all modalities must ultimately be implemented in both verbal and nonverbal media systems

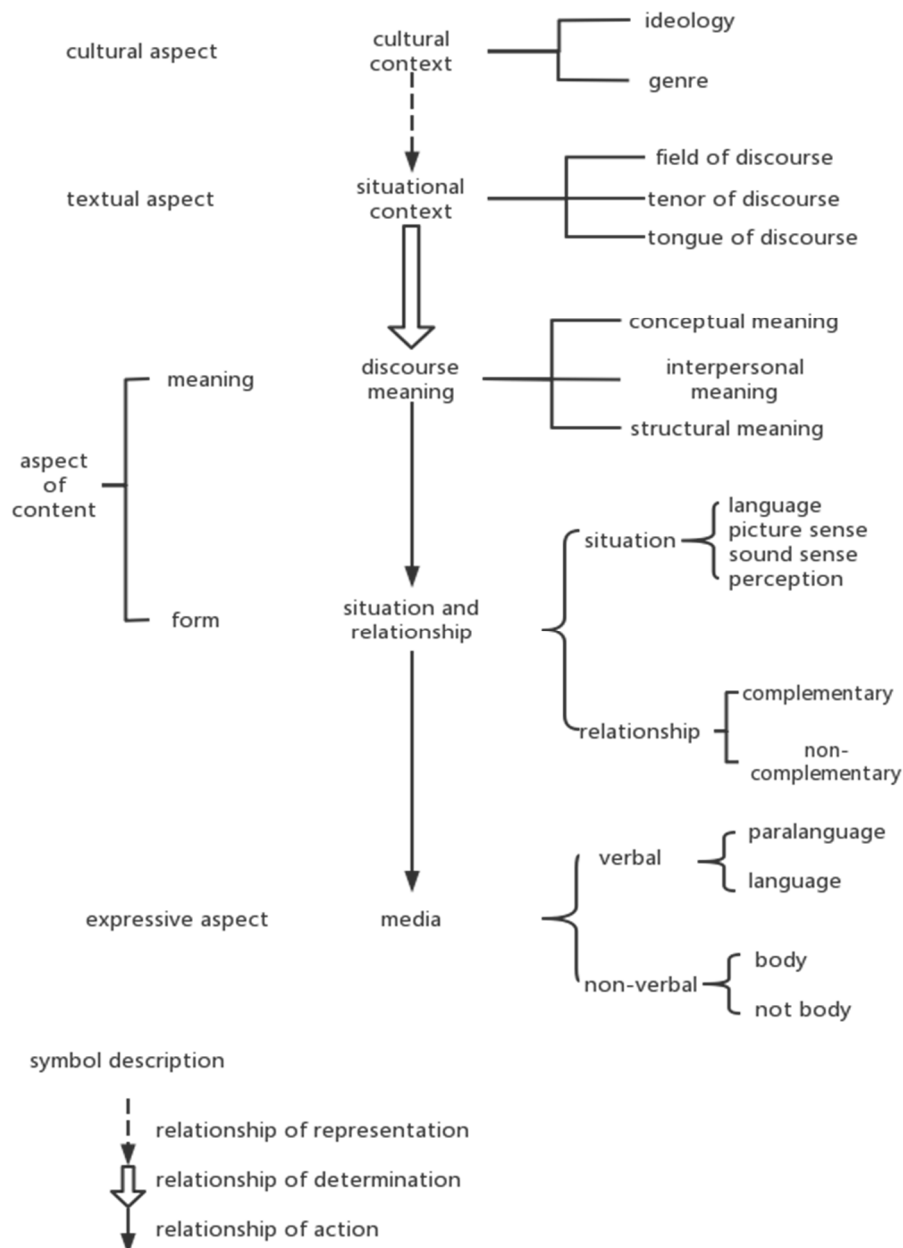


Figure 1. Comprehensive Framework for Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Many scholars have applied multimodality to translation research. In the increasingly diverse and complex environment of media forms and methods, it is necessary for translation research to explore the influence of other modal symbols on the construction and transformation of meaning (Chen & Hu, 2018; Wu, 2021). Interlingual translation has always been regarded as the core of translation research. However, as for the visualized cultural content in interlingual translation, the abstract language system is difficult to interpret the full meaning it is intended to convey (Wu & Li, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary for translation research to focus on content beyond written text and include images, videos, and other multimodal symbols in the study (Jeremy, 2004). In the process of language and text conversion, translators need to deal with more than just language and text. When encountering visual, auditory, and tactile images presented by language in the text translation, translators not only need to accurately convey textual information, but also reconstruct the multimodal content presented by visual, auditory, and other images through translation strategies (Gu, 2007; Zhu, 2015). Therefore, translation activities involve the transformation and information transmission of linguistic and nonverbal symbol systems. Drawing on the relevant theories of multimodal discourse analysis to study translation has its inherent rationality and feasibility.

### 3. Multimodal Discourse Analysis of *Our Traditional Chinese Medicine*

In the structure of multimodal discourse, multimodal symbols can mobilize the different senses of the audience from multiple aspects. Textual modes are used to directly convey content, auditory modes mobilize listening senses for communication and interaction, visual modes supplement or emphasize textual and auditory modes, and even use vision to establish connections with the audience, ultimately establishing the overall discourse structure, strengthening the audience's understanding of the overall discourse (Zhu, 2007).

#### 3.1. Cultural Aspect

The cultural aspect plays a crucial role in the process of multimodal communication, determining the form of communication. The cultural layer encompasses the ideology composed of people's attitudes, lifestyles, and all social rules, as well as the communication procedures that can achieve these ideologies (Zhang, 2009; Zhang, 2018). Documentaries usually use various semantic symbols such as images, language, and background music. Due to the significant differences between TCM culture and Western culture, it is not possible to effectively convey TCM culture to overseas audiences solely through language symbols. Therefore, when translating subtitles, *Our Traditional Chinese Medicine* combines other elements such as content, context, and scenes to express the connotation of TCM culture.

*Enjoy a plate of sweet spring leeks at the Beginning of Spring.*

*Treat a bunch of fragrant wormwood with smoke on the Dragon Boat Festival.*

*Drink a pot of warm, mellow chrysanthemum wine on the Double Ninth Day.*

*Prepare a cup of paste strengthening the body resistance at the Winter Solstice.*

This section is the opening of the documentary, introducing

four traditional Chinese festivals that appear in the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, as well as the foods made of TCM that Chinese people eat during these festivals. According to tradition, these foods are beneficial to people's physical health. This indicates the importance of TCM to the Chinese people, as it appears in various places of people's daily lives. From ancient times to the present, Chinese people have continued the custom of using TCM for health preservation. This is very different from the Western medical culture. In Western culture, medicine is used to treat diseases, and if a person is not sick, they do not need to take medicine. In order to address this difference between Chinese and Western cultures, during translation, the documentary introduces the concept of TCM through various modalities from the following aspects.

Firstly, the translation balances the cultural differences between China and the West by adding or reducing vocabulary, literal or free translation. The 'beginning of spring' and the 'winter solstice' retain the literal meaning of Chinese. The concepts of 'dragon boat festival' and 'double ninth day' are missing from the western culture, so the documentary gives up the literal meanings of Chinese. According to the symbolic events of the festivals, they are translated as 'dragon boat' and 'double ninth' respectively. Because people will race dragon boats during the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Double Ninth Day takes place on two 9's in the Chinese lunar calendar every year.

Secondly, when introducing those four festivals, the documentary featured a large number of images and videos that matched the textual content. For example, there are four images related to the first sentence '*Enjoy a plate of sweet spring weeks at the Beginning of Spring*'. This includes images of various Chinese medicinal plants sprouting, flowering, sunrise, and the seven-star ladybug picking flower powder, all of which represent the scene of spring and the revival of all things. When introducing the Dragon Boat Festival, a traditional festival for Chinese people to smoke wormwood, the documentary demonstrated the main process of this action through a video clip, in which, a pair of hands appear, holding a mugwort stick in their left hand and igniting a flame in their right hand. The ignited mugwort is placed in a ceramic container, and a wisp of green smoke rises. These pictures and videos help foreigners intuitively experience the usage of TCM. The theme of this documentary is to reflect the health-preserving effects of TCM, as well as its daily and universal usage by Chinese people.

#### 3.2. Textual Aspect

Communication is constrained by different contextual factors, including the scope, tone, and mode of the discourse (Zhang, 2009). In the context of TCM, the language used in promotional videos has a specific context. When translating, translators should not only consider the context in which TCM is used, but also consider the role of other modalities besides language, and how the multimodalities collectively reflect the meaning of communication.

*Our Traditional Chinese Medicine* shows China's support for TCM from two perspectives of individuals and the government. On the one hand, President Xi's personal words or behaviors show his support of TCM. He said, "*I also like to see TCM doctors*", "*TCM is the treasure of ancient Chinese science, but also the key to open the treasure house of Chinese civilization*", and "*Strive to realize the creative*

*transformation and innovative development of TCM health culture.*" In addition, he wrote a letter to congratulate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine and presented acupuncture and moxibustion bronze figures to the World Health Organization. On the other hand, the Chinese government issued formal TCM-related legislation and national policies, including the Report of the 19th National Congress, the Law of the People's Republic of China on Traditional Chinese Medicine, and the Outline of Strategic Planning for the Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine (2016-2030). Moreover, when introducing Chinese medicine legislation and national policies, 15 authoritative images were used in the documentary, including the images of the National Emblem of China, Tiananmen, the National Flag, the Great Hall of the People, the Supreme Court, and so on. These images, in conjunction with the context to be portrayed in the documentary, convey the dependence of Chinese people on TCM at a micro level and the support of the country at a macro level.

### 3.3. Aspect of Content

The aspect of content includes the level of meaning and the formal level. Among them, discourse meaning includes conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and structural meaning, which are reflected in the situation and relationship at the formal level (Liu, 2011; Zhang, 2009). For example, when introducing the long development history of TCM, it first lists ancient famous doctors and their contributions to TCM and then introduces contemporary famous Chinese medicine experts and diverse TCM systems. From ancient times to the present, it has been passed down from generation to generation. When translating specific medical terms, the translation strives to maintain the original TCM culture. '四诊法' is translated as 'the four diagnosis methods (look, listen, question, and feel the pulse)'. However, it also pays attention to balancing the differences with Western culture. '麻沸散' is translated as 'powder for anesthesia', conveying the two main characteristics of this TCM term. Foreigners are very unfamiliar with '麻沸散', but this translation makes it easier for foreigners to understand its powder state and anesthetic effect.

In addition, this documentary showcases TCM cultures through a large number of images, tables, data, and so on. When introducing famous ancient Chinese doctors and their contributions to TCM, the documentary lists dozens of Chinese doctors, including Bian Que, Zhang Zhongjing, Hua Tuo, Sun Simiao, Li Shizhen, and so on. Although they are famous in the history of Chinese medicine, they are strangers to foreigners. So when the documentary introduces each doctor, it displays their portraits. When introducing the rich and detailed classification of TCM, hundreds of medical systems are arranged on one screen, and over 4000 TCM hospitals are marked on the map of China. These texts, tables, and images together form the rich and diverse content of the documentary.

### 3.4. Expressive Aspect

The expressive aspect is composed of verbal media level and nonverbal media level. At the level of verbal media. The media form accompanying language plays an auxiliary role in conveying language meaning, such as the accent, tone, sound size of speech, or the layout and shape of fonts (Urios-Aparisi & Forceville, 2009; Zhang, 2009). When introducing the

beginning of spring, the documentary featured the sound of birds chirping, representing the vibrant scene of spring. Tu Youyou's original voice from the lecture hall of the Nobel Prize at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, was also used. She said in Chinese, which is translated into English as "*Chinese Medicine, A Great Treasure.*" Since that's the first time a voice speaking Chinese is heard in the Nobel Prize Lecture Hall, the original voice by Mrs. Tu is used to illustrate the contribution of TCM to world medicine. While the subtitle is shown in English to make foreigners understand the meaning of Tu's words. These sounds increase the authenticity of the documentary's content.

When introducing the '三伏贴', the documentary used videos of real treatment from Shanghai, Beijing, and Zhejiang to show the universality and popularity of TCM. '三伏贴' is translated into 'Moxibustion', which shows the core of this special TCM term. It is believed that choosing specific acupoints for moxibustion on the hottest 'three dog days' of the year can better promote the dredging of meridians, regulate the internal organs, and store yang qi for autumn and winter. If yang qi is sufficient, it is less likely to be injured by severe cold in winter. Therefore, the documentary uses several pictures and video clips to show how to make Moxibustion, how popular Moxibustion is in China that ten thousand patients are queuing up for Moxibustion in one hospital, and that all medical workers can provide Moxibustion and other appropriate TCM therapies. In addition, when introducing the Silk Road that promoted communication between East and West, images of camel bells and deserts appeared, marking the route of the Silk Road and the cities and countries it mainly passed through on the map, restoring the scene at that time. These nonverbal elements, along with language and writing, enrich the meaning of this documentary.

## 4. Conclusion

The subtitling translation of the documentary *Our Traditional Chinese Medicine* takes into account the influence of nonverbal symbols such as visual and auditory symbols based on linguistic and textual symbols. In the cultural aspect, it tries to approach the target language readers as close as possible, reduce their unfamiliarity, and enhance their acceptance of publicity. In the textual aspect, the translation matches the camera, strengthens the impact of the language on the audience, and improves the expression effect of the translation. In the aspect of content, the multi-level integration of text, images, videos, and other content, together, deepen the perception of the target language readers on the promotional content. In the expressive aspect, the verbal and non-verbal interaction, fully reproduce the sound beauty, shape beauty, and beautiful meaning, and improve the publicity effect of the documentary. The combined effect of multimodality has optimized its translation effect, strengthened the audience's absorption of TCM information, and improved the external publicity effect of the TCM culture.

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