



The Subtitling of Indigenous Values in the Film Seediq Bale

by Tzu-yi Elaine Lee

The movie 賽德克巴萊 [*Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale*] is a Taiwanese historical drama epic film directed by Wei Te-Sheng and produced by John Woo in 2011, based on the 1930 Wushe Incident in central Taiwan. The Wushe Incident, also known as the Wushe Rebellion, began in October 1930 after a long period of Japanese oppression and was the last major uprising by the Seediq indigenous group against colonial Japanese forces in Taiwan. In this incident, the Seediq indigenous group in the Wushe area attacked the village and killed over 130 Japanese. In retaliation, the Japanese conducted a relentless counter-attack, killing over 300 Seediq. The incident led to strong criticism of the Japanese authorities, ending up with many changes in aboriginal policy. The film is the most expensive production in Taiwanese cinema history, and is often compared by Taiwan media to the 1995 film *Braveheart* by Mel Gibson and Michael Mann's 1992 *The Last of the Mohicans*. The full version of the film shown in Taiwan is divided into two parts: part 1 is called 太陽旗 [*The Sun Flag*], and part 2 彩虹橋 [*The Rainbow Bridge*].

The film begins with Mona Rudao's successful incursion into the territory of the Bunun. During the raid, he attacks a Bunun hunting party, beheading one of the hunters and stealing a boar they had caught. For his actions, he then receives an honourable face tattooing to mark him as a real hero, a Seediq, to his people. The



Seediq believe the tattooing to be a symbol of, and a qualification for, passage into their ancestral spirit home after death. Hence, the ritual is regarded highly among the people. Flashing back to 1895, the film shows China ceding Taiwan to Japan, with the Japanese military officials regarding the Taiwan natives as blocking access to Taiwan's natural resources and hindering the overall ruling policy. Then, during the early period of Japanese rule, there are confrontations between the Japanese and the natives, including attacks led by Mona Rudao's father. The Japanese, outnumbering the natives and possessing more advanced weapons, gradually gain control of everything. The aboriginal people in Taiwan are forced to abolish their customs of keeping the heads they have hunted and of tattooing their faces. Men are forced to engage in low-wage, highly dangerous logging work, and women have to work in houses of the Japanese and give up their traditional weaving work. Late in 1930, a quarrel at the wedding of Mona Rudao's son ignites the tension between the Seediq and the Japanese. On 27 October, an attack by the natives kills almost all the Japanese men, women and children in Wushe village. The film ends with Mona Rudao sitting in the schoolyard full of bodies.

In this study, I focus on the first part of the movie, *The Sun Flag*, to explore how different languages and registers are handled in translation. The assumption is that the translator into English has used the Chinese subtitles of the film that, in turn, are the translation of the original dialogue in Seediq and Japanese. In this way, the subtitles into English could be regarded as a relay translation through the Mandarin. I then examine how the subtitler deals with the various semiotic modes of the film and finally investigate the subtitler's allegiance to Taiwan identity and the various indigenous ideologies as manifested in the translator's use of the language.

1. REGISTER IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

In this movie different registers and languages co-exist, including Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Seediq, and this can be a great challenge for the translator when translating the subtitles into English, let alone the difficulties that arise during the translation process such as tight deadlines or having to deal with culturally specific concepts and linguistic variation. Register, as defined by Catford (1965: 89), correlates with the user's social role on a given occasion. Hatim and Mason (2004: 347) define the term register as a set of features distinguishing one stretch of language from another in various contexts with a relation to the language user and/or language use. In this study, the languages spoken are Japanese, used mainly by the police and their superordinate as colonisers; Taiwanese by the Han grocer serving both the Japanese and the Seediq; the Seediq language, spoken by Seediq people, natives of the central part of Taiwan; and Mandarin, used by Japanese, the Han grocer, and the Seediq. The Seediq language, which can be regarded as a language variety or regional dialect of Atayalic language, is used by a group as a unique linguistic mark of ethnic identity in the given community.



Translating language varieties frequently challenges translators as the problem often lies in achieving equivalence between two language systems that are dissimilar in nature (Lee 2012). Due to differences in social, ethnic and geographical division between the two languages and cultures, a number of scholars, such as Sánchez (1999), Landers (2001:117), Määttä (2004), and Woodham (2006) point out that it would be impossible to replace the non-standard in the source text (ST) with an exact equivalent variety in the target text (TT). In order to tackle language variety in translation, some translators prefer using the standard target language, as it is the easiest and the most available option (Sánchez 1999: 305). Also, the use of standard language in the TT can be more favoured and readily accepted for transferring information and for avoiding commercial risks. Nonetheless, some translation scholars still express views against standardising source varieties in translation (Bonaffini 1997; Määttä 2004) and argue strongly for the signalling of any varieties, dialects and sociolects in the TTs.

While the literature on representing language varieties fails to provide a clear, unambiguous solution for translators, Lane-Mercier (1997) provides us with a new perspective on the transfer of non-standard language by shifting the focus to the role of the translators and their performance in translation. In her viewpoint, the translators' moral positioning towards ethical issues, the responsibility to and engagement towards the ST, and the choices they make in translation may all be reflected while handling the transfer of language variety. This argument leads us to focus on the role that the translator plays in the translation of the film under scrutiny in this study, her/his ethnic ideology, and the specific way in which s/he contributes to the representation of Taiwan identity through her/his use of language.

2. SEMIOTIC MODES AND SUBTITLING

Subtitling involves taking into consideration a multiplicity of verbal and nonverbal semiotic modes (Delabastita 1989, 1990). The expression semiotic modes is defined by Kress *et al.* (2001: 15) as a meaning-making resource which is worked on or shaped by culture into "an organized, regular, socially specific meaning of representation". The concept of semiotic mode is later used with multimodal communication, indicating that multiple modes of representation are involved in all kinds of meaning making. That is, semiotic modes can create meaning not merely in themselves but also by interacting with other modes (*ibid.*: 14).

Following the same line of thought, visual and aural elements in audiovisual media create meaning and the subtitler ought to pay attention to these semiotic modes during the translation activity. Some scholars, such as Gottlieb (1994), and Zabalbeascoa (1997) focus on the two channels, spoken and written, rather than simply on the transfer of information from the source language to the target language. Gottlieb (1994) defines subtitling as "diagonal translation", in which subtitlers deal with translation from spoken to the written mode, as opposed to "horizontal translation" from written to written or from spoken to spoken modes. In addition,



visual as well as aural elements such as music and sound effects should be taken into consideration when translating; a view also echoed by Delabastita (1989, 1990). Chuang (2006: 372) argues that subtitling is not “diagonal” but “intersemiotic translation,” in which all the semiotic modes involved in the film contribute to producing meaning, based on their functional specialisation. In this way, all semiotic modes in the film must be taken into consideration in the translation activity. In practice, subtitlers have to consider and integrate the meaning of the multiple modes so as to ensure equivalent wholeness between the ST and the TT. In doing so, Chuang (ibid.) believes that translators do not have to render everything in the dialogue but can leave out some information that can then be apprehended thanks to the other semiotic modes.

3. TRANSLATOR’S IDEOLOGY IN SUBTITLING

In this section, I will discuss some examples from the English subtitles of the Taiwanese movie 賽德克巴萊：太陽旗 [*Seediq Bale: The Sun Flag*], with a special focus on those which signal the influence of the various semiotic channels and on those that show the positioning of the translator *vis-à-vis* indigenous ideology and Taiwan identity. According to Chuang (2006), the translator’s decisions are often influenced by semiotics, which is illustrated in the example she provides from the movie *Farewell My Concubine* (Kaige Chen 1993), in which the translator deliberately chooses not to translate certain oral expressions and tag questions thus forcing the target viewers to resort to the other semiotic modes in order to apprehend the meaning of the ST.

This study takes a step further and does not merely investigate how the translator maximises the multiple semiotic modes to convey meaning but it also explores whether the linguistic items selected by the subtitler can provide some insight into her/his indigenous ideology. As the film focuses on the Seediq and their relations with the Japanese, both the Seediq and Japanese are used throughout the movie as well as some minor exchanges in Taiwanese. These languages could pose a great challenge for the translator if their distinctive features are to be somehow represented in the subtitles. At the same time, the investigation into the way in which the translator deals with language variety can provide insight into her/his ideological considerations. One important point to make is the fact that there is no mention of the name of the English translator on the official package of the film. Therefore, we have no way to know who the translator is, let alone the translator’s gender.

3.1 The Representation of Register

The first case brought for discussion is a scene showing the ritual in which Mona Rudao’s face is being tattooed to symbolise his becoming a man after he has honoured his ancestors with by beheading his enemy. For the Seediq, this act is a rite of passage into adulthood and necessary to become a real man. We can see in Table 1



that the translator has changed the register and resorted to more formal linguistic items in English such as in the line ‘I hereby tattoo the marks of manhood on your face’, or the one, ‘you shall abide by our ancestral spirit’. In this way, the translator reminds the audience of the importance of the ritual for the Seediq and for the leading character, Mona Rudao, as it will enable him to become a leader in the future.

Source Text	Literal Translation	Target Text
你已經血祭了祖靈	you’ve offered blood to worship ancestor’s spirits	you’ve offered blood sacrifice to our ancestors’ spirits
我在你臉上刺上男人的記號	I tattoo man’s marks on your face	I hereby tattoo the marks of manhood on your face
遵守祖律的約束	Keep within the bondage of ancestor’s law	you shall abide by our ancestral spirit
祖靈將等候你英勇的靈魂	ancestor’s spirits will wait for your brave soul	our ancestors’ spirits await the reunion with your valiant soul

Table 1

Throughout the movie, linguistic variation in Japanese, Mandarin, and Taiwanese is neutralised and rendered in standard English. It could be argued that the translator was possibly more interested in transferring the original meaning than in pointing out linguistic varieties. Nonetheless, such textual manipulation allows us to get closer to the translator’s positioning in terms of her/his ethnic ideology and allegiance, as Lane-Mercier (1997) mentions in her study.

3.2 The Translator’s Positioning

The following example is taken from the scene in which Mona Rudao’s father is telling the origin of the Seediq to young Mona Rudao, and highlighting that a Seediq has to guard his home and the hunting ground of his people. In the subtitles, two terms could suggest the translator’s sympathy towards the indigenous:

Source Text	Literal Translation	Target Text
千萬不能讓異族人進到部落…	you must not allow difference races into our clan	you must keep the intruders away from our clan
當一個真正的人	Be a real man	and be a Seediq Bale (a true man)

Table 2

The first is the source term 異族人, which can be literally translated as ‘different race/tribe’ or ‘aliens’ but has been rendered as ‘the intruders’. While Mona Rudao’s father admonishes that other races are not allowed to enter their clan’s territory, the term the translator uses forces in the audience an easy connection with the Japanese,



'the intruders', who should be banned from their Wushe tribe and from Taiwan. The use of the term justifies, in some way, Mona Rudao's later fighting against the Japanese in order to safeguard their Seediq clan and the hunting ground.

The second term for discussion is 真正的人 [real man], which has been subtitled as 'Seediq Bale (a true man)'. The use of the term acts as a reminder for the target audience that the main characters in the film are aboriginal people, whilst suggesting that the revolt led by the Seediq Bale against the Japanese is justified since the Seediq are 'true men'. In addition, the use of a gloss in the subtitle to provide extra information about the term 'Seediq Bale' enhances the translator's visibility, which Venuti (1992) greatly encourages in translation activity.

The other example to show the translator's ideological alignment is illustrated by the following extract from an educated aboriginal male who works for the Japanese as a police officer. In his dialogue with Mona Rudao, he attempts to stress that he is still one of the Seediq and that he wishes to contribute to the welfare of the tribe and fight against intruders even if he wears the Japanese uniform. In the original dialogue the police officer says the following:

Source Text	Literal Translation	Target Text
我沒忘記我和 <u>你們</u> 流著一樣的血...	I never forget I and you run the same blood	I never forget that the same blood runs in our veins

Table 3

The translator has decided to omit the personal pronouns 'I' and 'you' and replace them with the plural 'our', which strongly conveys the belongingness of the police officer in the tribe and his intent to fight the Japanese. In this manner, the translator implicitly reinforces the identity of the aboriginal group, the spirit of Seediq Bale.

The next example to showcase the translator's allegiance to the indigenous ideology comes from the Japanese accounts given by the aboriginal people in the Wushe village. Here we can see that the translator has not attempted any strategy to indicate to the audience that the language spoken on screen has shifted from Seediq to Japanese, and viewers will only have the audio channel to grasp this information. In addition, it seems that the subtitler tries to imply that these aboriginal people in Taiwan are not easy to colonise; hence the use of the verb 'manage', which seems to be an addition to the statement pronounced by the Japanese officer, as if to suggest how difficult it is to domesticate them:

Source Text	Literal Translation	Target Text
整個霧社地區的蕃族	All savaged groups in all Wushe area	We've managed to civilize
都已經被我們給文明化了	have been civilized by us	all the Wushe savages

Table 4

It is important to note that the translator foregrounds, to some extent, the Japanese people's dominating and even bossy attitude toward the indigenous folk. The lines



below are uttered by a Japanese boy scolding two groups of Taiwanese indigenous people who are fighting for their own hunting ground:

Source Text	Literal Translation	Target Text
什麼你的獵場，我的獵場？	What is your hunting ground, my hunting ground?	I don't care if it's your hunting ground or theirs
全部都是我們日本人的！	They are all ours.	because everything here belongs to us Japanese now

Table 5

The boy's arrogance is manifested through the tone of his question and the subtitle has decided to translate it adding information which is extraneous to the original dialogue, 'I don't care if it's your hunting ground or theirs', thus intensifying the boy's forceful tone. In the second line, 'because everything here belongs to us Japanese now', the translator expands the original and stresses again the authoritarian attitude of the Japanese to take 'everything' from the indigenous people.

Another example comes from a scene in which the Seediq people are lamenting their inability to stop the intruders from taking away their hunting grounds and feeling sorry to their ancestors. Mona Rudao says the following:

Source Text	Literal Translation	Target Text
我們祖先再怎樣也沒失去過獵場...	Our ancestors never lost any hunting ground whatever happened before	our ancestors never lost any of our hunting grounds in the past
而我們竟然讓異族人在這裡稱王！	and we even let these intruders claim their kingship here	I can't believe these intruders are taking them away from us now

Table 6

This example illustrates how the translator reinforces linguistically the fact that all that belonged to the Seediq people before is now being plundered by the Japanese during their colonisation. This can be seen as a way of promoting the audience's empathy towards the indigenous people for what they went through at that time, or even of stirring their Taiwanese identity and their feelings against the Japanese. The second line by Mona Rudao, 'I can't believe these intruders are taking them away from us now', distinctly shows his personal outrage by opting for the personal pronoun 'I' instead of the more generic 'we'. Most important is the change of agency as the 'intruders' are more active in the 'taking', whereas in the original it was the Seediq who 'let these intruders claim their kingship' in their hunting grounds. In doing so, the translation reminds the target audience of the fact that the Japanese, as colonisers, are actively robbing the natives of their hunting grounds, a precious and important part of these indigenous people's culture and history. The intensification of Mona Rudao's anger toward the Japanese and the change of agency in the English subtitles both



point to the translator's identification with indigenous values and her/his aversion of the colonisers.

The final example discusses the influence of the semiotic modes on the translation and highlights how the subtitler takes advantage of the various channels of communication to supplement the English translation. Mona Rudao is being compelled by the Japanese police officers to hand in all the heads he has hunted earlier, and he feels angry about losing some of the important symbols that make a Seediq Bale. More than that, Mona Rudao is forced to kneel down to show his submission to the Japanese. He then says:

Source Text	Literal Translation	Target Text
我不甘心...	I'll never submit to them...	I'll never submit to them
我不甘心...	I'll never submit to them...	I will never...

Table 7

The English subtitles show that the translator does not render the second line fully but uses an ellipsis instead. But reducing the length of the subtitle, the translator allows the viewers more time to spend appreciating Mona Rudao's angry tone of voice, appearance, and movements.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study sets out to investigate the English subtitles of the film *Seediq Bale*, a Taiwanese historical drama epic film based on the Wushe Incident of 1930, to identify her/his positioning *vis-à-vis* the portrayal of the indigenous values in the film. The dialogue exchanges switch from one language to another, from Seediq, to Japanese, to Mandarin, and Taiwanese, becoming a challenge for the translator. The subtitles do not make any attempt to reflect this multilingualism. On one occasion—the scene in which Mona Rudao's father conducts a ritual in Seediq to mark the rite of passage into adulthood of his son—the English used in the subtitles is more formal than the original Seediq, though this does not necessarily alert the viewers about the change of language that has taken place on screen. This change of register could, however, be understood as a way for the subtitler to show her/his sympathy for indigenous values by emphasising linguistically the formality of the ritual.

In another example, the translator goes beyond the original to suggest that the Seediq people are a challenge for the Japanese colonisation as they are hard to 'manage', also reinforcing the bossy and domineering attitude of the Japanese. In this way, the translator somewhat justifies the Seediq people's fight against the Japanese, showing her/his allegiance with the values of the indigenous people. All in all, the selected examples foreground the sympathies of the subtitler to the indigenous Seediq and her/his aversion towards foreign invaders of the country.



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