

Analysis of Domestication and Foreignization in Chinese-English Subtitle Translation —A Case Study of *Hi, Mom*

LIU Fei, GAO Wen-cheng

College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

In recent years, with the booming development of the film industry, film subtitles play an increasingly important role in modern society. As one of the key links in cross-cultural communication, the quality of film subtitle translation affects the box office and viewing experience. *Hi, Mom*, a Chinese comedy based on the theme of mother's love, which topped China's box office during the Chinese New Year in 2021 and ascended to the third place in the global box office, high-quality subtitle translation is indispensable to its success. This paper discusses the subtitle translation of the film *Hi, Mom* based on the domestication and foreignization perspectives, so as to provide a reference for the Chinese-English translation of Chinese film.

Keywords: subtitle translation, domestication, foreignization, *Hi, Mom*

Introduction

With the improvement of China's cultural soft power and comprehensive national strength, foreign audiences' interest in and demand for Chinese culture are also increasing, which prompts the creation of films to pay more attention to content and quality. Chinese films have developed almost steadily in the creative paradigm of realism. Generally speaking, a director's debut film will especially start with his familiar life, draw materials from real life, and record familiar people and things (Chen, 2023, p. 75). The film *Hi, Mom* uses plain language and pictures to show the real side of life. The film tells the story of the heroine who travels back to the 1980s and tries her best to help her mother make the "right" choice. The film is a huge success at the domestic box office, receiving rave reviews, and was released in several countries around the world, including the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Based on the film *Hi, Mom*, this paper analyzes the application of domestication and foreignization strategies in subtitles.

Literature Review

Xu Jiayi and Feng Libo (2023) point out in the translation of culture—specific words in the subtitle of the film *Lighting Up The Stars* (《人生大事》) from the perspective of domestication that Chinese culture—specific

LIU Fei, MA, MA student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.
GAO Wen-cheng, Ph.D., Professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.

words often contain extended meanings, and if they are translated directly, foreign audiences will not understand the true meaning of the words. Therefore, taking into account the feelings of foreign audiences, skillfully using domestication strategies to transform complex words into expressions familiar to the target language audience is conducive to the audience's understanding of the film story.

Wu Feiyan (2022) analyzes the subtitle translation of the film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (《长津湖》) based on domestication and foreignization strategies. She enumerates several examples and draws a conclusion that domestication translation strategy can quickly and accurately make the audience understand the plot and reflect the cultural connotation. However, foreignization translation strategy is used as a supplementary method to introduce characters and locations. Only by holding the balance between these two strategies can excellent translation works be created.

Chen Wu and Li Meiqian (2023) analyze the subtitle translation strategies of Gansu dialect film from the perspective of domestication and foreignization—taking *Return to Dust* (《隐入尘烟》) as an example. They find that subtitle translation featuring dialects should try to convey the meaning behind the dialects to the audience through free translation. In addition, domestication and foreignization strategies are not two isolated strategies. In the specific application, translators should mainly focus on domestication strategy with the assistance of foreignization strategy, accurately delivering the content of the film to the target language audience.

Domestication and Foreignization Translation Strategies

In 1995, Lawrence Venuti proposed two important translation strategies, domestication and foreignization, based on the theory put forward by German philosopher and theologian Schleiermacher in 1813, who argued that “there are two ways to help the target readers to understand the original text accurately and completely”. “One is to keep the author as still as possible, and to lead the reader to the author; The other is to keep the reader as still as possible and let the author to approach the reader” (Sun, 2002). Domestication is oriented towards target language readers, trying to make the information reflected in the source language close to the expression of the target language culture readers, and minimize the influence of external factors by replacing obscure elements with content that can be understood by the target language readers. American translation theorist Eugene Nida is a representative who advocates domestication translation. He believes that successful translation is to make the target language readers produce similar reactions to the source language readers. Due to the great differences in cultural and historical backgrounds, such reactions can never be exactly the same, but there should be a high degree of equivalence, otherwise translation cannot achieve its purpose. Foreignization gives extraordinary accentuation on holding the social kinds of the source language and empowers the audience to have an outsider understanding encounter, consequently fostering the attention of the audience to social contrasts. It includes purposely breaking the shows of the objective language to save its importance. Meanwhile, it can meet target readers' expectation of strangeness.

Case Analysis

Domestication

Example (1) 那叫一个风光

Translation version: You were so envied

“风光” is a Chinese word that refers to landscape, scenery, and the bustling scene, and is often used as a dialect word to represent extravagance, hustle and bustle, and decency in colloquial speech. In the film, at Jia Xiaoling’s promotion banquet, the factory manager uses the word “风光” to praise Wang Qin for being the first person in the factory to buy a TV. Combined with the background of the story, in the 1980s, television was not as popular as it is now, and “buying a TV” and “watching TV” were luxuries at that time, which would attract the envy of others. Here, “风光” is translated as “envied”, so that the foreign audience can understand the meaning of what the actor is trying to express in a limited time. Meanwhile, the sentence is not translated according to the Chinese way of expression, but the passive voice is used, and the corresponding subject is added which is in line with the expression of the target language and enables the audience to better understand the conversation between the characters.

Example (2) 天大的好事

Translation version: A-life changing opportunity

“天大的好事” often appears in daily communication, used to describe something extremely wonderful, the extent of which is beyond people’s imagination. From ancient times to the present, people have always been in awe of “heaven” and often associated it with things in their live. In the film, Bao Yumei uses this line to answer Jia Xiaoling’s question of “什么好事”, and at the same time sets up the suspense for the film. The film reveals that the good thing here is that Shen Guanglin (Shen Teng), the son of the factory’s manager, has taken a liking to Li Huanying and asked his father to arrange a blind date with her. Since Li Huanying didn’t play in the tournament that year, she missed out on this “good opportunity”. Here, the translator adopts the strategy of domestication to translate “天大的好事” as “A-life changing opportunity”, which accurately conveys the meaning to the audience. If it is translated as “It’s a wonderful/great thing,” it will be too bland and not relevant enough. At the same time, the translation will also arouse the audience’s curiosity to continue watching the film.

Example (3) 前半夜咋起起不来好像鬼压床

Translation version: From sunset to midnight, I couldn’t seem to get up. It was like that I was possessed or something.

“鬼压床” is a folk saying, known as sleep paralysis in sleep neuromedicine, which refers to a person who is in a state of incomplete wakefulness, aware of his surroundings but still unable to move or speak, usually accompanied by hallucinations and a sense of fear, as if possessed by a ghost and unable to move. In the film, Guixiang is unable to participate in a volleyball match because she wakes up bald and describes her painful experience at night with “鬼压床”, which is not unfamiliar to the domestic audience, but it takes more time for foreign audiences to understand. The translator here takes into account the feelings of the target language audience and translates it as “was possessed”. “Be possessed by” is often used with “devil or demon” meaning being haunted by the devil/demon, which is in line with expression of the target language audience.

Example (4) 咱俩的想法不谋而合

Translation version: I’m totally on board with you.

The Chinese idiom “不谋而合” comes from Jin Gan Bao’s *In Search of the Supernatural* (搜神记), Volume 2. In the film, Shen Guanglin wants to prove that he is capable to gain Li Huanying’s recognition by taking part in the art show. His idea is exactly the same as Jia Xiaoling’s, so here Jia Xiaoling uses the phrase

“不谋而合” to express that their purposes are the same, and the translator uses the domestication strategy to translate the phrase “不谋而合” into the English phrase “be on board with sb”. It is equivalent to “in favor of”, “approve of” and “agree with”, which is in step with the English expression and facilitates the audience to better understand the content of the lines.

Example (5) 我会看相你不知道吗?

Translation version: I know physiognomy

“看相” is a folk belief and cultural phenomenon in traditional Chinese culture. It belongs to the category of *Book of Changes* (易经), which mainly refers to measuring and judging a person’s temperament and destiny by observing and analyzing his physical appearance, mental temperament. In the film, Jia Xiaoling says to Li Huanying, “You’ll marry a very good man in the future,” and then adds “我会看相，你不知道吗?” This line is a point of interaction between the character and her mother, which sets the stage for the subsequent plot development. In addition, this line also carries a certain sense of humor, adding a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere to the film. The translator here translates “看相” as physiognomy. In the *Oxford Dictionary*, “physiognomy” is defined as “the supposed science of judging a person’s character or future from their face or features.” So the translation is concise and clear without too much modification and conforms to the English expression habit. Simplicity and cultural adaptability can further help the audience better understand the plot of the film.

Example (6) 挺能得瑟的啊

Translation version: She’s a cocky one.

The word “得瑟” often appears in the northern dialect, especially in the northeast, meaning “to act frivolous, show off, or arrogantly after doing something that is not worth mentioning,” which carries a certain derogatory connotation. However, in certain contexts, especially in this film, it often carries an ironic meaning, adding a touch of humour and comedy to the film. In the film, the factory manager uses this phrase to describe the way Jia Xiaoling acts when she helps Li Huanying get a TV. “得瑟” here is reasonably translated as “cocky”. In the *Cambridge Dictionary* “cocky” is used to describe a young person who is confident in a way that is unpleasant and sometimes rude. Combined with the images of that time, it cleverly expresses Jia Xiaoling’s cheerful and proud appearance in that context, which helps foreign viewers to better understand the character’s personality.

Example (7) 你手腕真硬

Translation version: You do have some tricks.

“手腕” here does not relate to human body parts, but its derivation of the meaning of “competence and ability”. Its specific meaning should be understood according to the specific context. In the original line, the young Jia Wentian burned boilers for the factory, and in the conversation between Jia Xiaoling and him, Jia Xiaoling used the phrase “你手腕真硬” to tease him about his profession, not really complimenting him on his ability. If it is directly translated as “You have a hard wrist”, it will cause obstacles for foreign audiences to understand. The translator adopts the domestication strategy and translates it as “tricks”. Besides, “trick” as a noun is often used in conjunction with “pull a trick”, “fall for a trick”, which contains a derogatory meaning. Therefore, this version adapts to the audience’s expression. More importantly, the implied tone and attitude is

consistent with the original lines, accurately conveys the character's emotion and facilitates the audience to understand the character's inner activities.

Foreignization

Example (8) 现在是3号, 郎平

Translation version: Number 3, Lang Ping

“郎平” is a Chinese volleyball player. In the film, the crowd is gathering around the TV to watch the 1981 volleyball match. Instead of using the expression already existing in English, i.e. Jane Lang, the translator follows the translation of the names of other characters in the play, such as Huanying, Yumei, Zhangjiang, etc., which preserves the Chinese expression and prompts foreign audiences to understand the famous Chinese characters and further spreads the Chinese culture.

Example (9) 上来就找妈妈,你是小蝌蚪啊!

Translation version: Come up and find your mother. You are a tadpole!

The story of the tadpole looking for his mother is familiar to the Chinese people. This sentence is what Li Huanying said to her daughter Jia Xiaoling. Jia Xiaoling is regarded as a tadpole. When she gets home in her childhood, she shouts her mother's name downstairs. If there is no response, she will directly call out her mother's name. It shows the deep affection between mother and daughter and the daughter's dependence on her mother. The translator directly translated “小蝌蚪” into “tadpole” to convey the story and meaning behind the sentence to the foreign audience. It can make audience better understand the scene of the film and really feel the feeling between mother and daughter. The translator adopts the foreignization strategy, which not only highlights the theme of the story but also helps foreign audiences to understand Chinese children's stories.

Example (10) 老李哭吧不是罪

Translation version: Mr, Li Crying Is Not A Crime

This line is taken from the song 《男人哭吧哭吧不是罪》 by the famous Chinese actor and singer Andy Lau, and is used to express the release of emotions and stress for men. “罪” is not really a crime but an emotion of shame. In the film, Yan Hua uses this line to welcome Lao Li and encourage him to vent his feeling. Here the translator employs the foreignization strategy to translate “罪” as “crime”, retaining the characteristic expression in the source language, so that foreign audiences can understand the origin of this line and its special meaning in Chinese culture while watching the film, and stimulate their interest in learning Chinese culture.

Conclusion

Through the research on the subtitle translation of the film *Hi, Mom*, it is found that the quality of subtitle translation has a direct impact on foreign audiences' understanding of the film content, especially the dialects, idioms and colloquial expressions causing obstacles to foreign audiences. Translators should comprehensively consider various factors that affect the accuracy of subtitle translation, including thinking mode, cultural background, language habits, etc., combine domestication and foreignization translation strategies to present the cultural connotation contained in subtitle and the emotions as well as values to be conveyed to foreign audiences. At the same time, translators should appropriately retain the characteristics of the source language during translation, so as to strengthen foreign audiences' learning of Chinese culture. The film *Hi, Mom* is an excellent domestic film both in terms of plot setting and subtitle translation, which helps to speed up the pace of

Chinese culture going global, and plays a reference role for the Chinese-English translation of film subtitle in the future.

References

- NIDA, E. A. (2004). *The theory and practice of translation*. Shanghai: Foreign Language Education Press.
- VENUTI, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. London: Routledge.
- 陈吉. (2023). 当代中国喜剧电影表演美学的传承与创新——以《你好，李焕英》为例. *东岳论丛*, 44(06), 75-82.
- 陈武, 李梅倩. (2023). 归化与异化视域下甘肃方言电影字幕翻译策略探析——以《隐入尘烟》为例. *现代商贸工业*, 44(15), 249-251.
- 孙致礼. (2002). 中国的文学翻译：从归化趋向异化. *中国翻译*, (1), 39-43.
- 徐佳奕, 冯立波. (2023). 归化视角下电影《人生大事》字幕中文化特色词的翻译. *英语广场*, (25), 28-31.
- 武飞艳. (2022). 浅析电影《长津湖》字幕翻译中的归化与异化策略. *大众文艺*, (10), 91-93.
- 张燕清. (2008). 影视字幕翻译方法研究. *电影文学*, (10), 137.