

A Study on Chinese Single-Player Video Game Title Translation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory



Zhixiang Li; Zhaofeng Jiang

Nanning Normal University, Guangxi, China

Abstract: As video games gain popularity worldwide and become one of the most common entertainment forms in the digital era, the game's title is given both commercial value and entertainment value. In the process of translation, in order to achieve these two values, the correct translation theory and strategy need to be adopted. Translating Chinese game titles accurately and effectively into English is challenging for Chinese translators. The idea “the end justifies the means” from Skopos Theory indicates that the translation effects decide translation strategies. Based on Skopos Theory, this paper explores the translation of Chinese game titles, and provides suggestions about translation methods for Chinese game translators to facilitate Chinese game developers' goal of going global.

Keywords: Localization; Game text translation; Chinese-to-English translation; Skopos Theory

1. *Single-Player Video Games*

A single-player video game is an electronic game that involves interaction with an input device to generate visual feedback for a player, whereby only one player is expected throughout the course of the gaming session. According to a report issued by Gamma Data (2019), the actual sales revenue of China's single-player game upped to RMB 640 million in 2019, an increase of 341.4%, reflecting the flourishing development of Chinese single-player games. Another Chinese single-player games bestselling list for 2020 shows that two single-player video games, *Gunfire Reburn* and *Pascal's Wager*, had sold over one million copies, owing to the development of Chinese games in video games digital

distribution services platforms like Steam and Wegame (Gamelook, 2021). In 2020, China Audio-video and Digital Publishing Association (CADPA, 2020) issued a report showing that the actual marketing revenue of China's independently developed games in overseas markets was US\$15.450 billion, an increase of US\$3.855 billion over the previous year, maintaining high growth momentum. In terms of regional distribution, the US, Japan, and Korea are still the main markets for China's self-developed games, with combined revenue of 60.27% of the total overseas revenue, manifesting that overseas markets are significant for China's game development.

2. *Game Localization*

For a good localization can promote a game in different regions and lead to a spike in game sales, localization is the top priority before promoting the game globally. Game localization refers to the preparation of video games before they are released in new regions or countries, including modifying the game process, changes to the game content, new physical packaging, manuals, recording new audio, and modifying good content according to the censorship requirements, and most importantly, the translation of the game text. Game translation not just means to translate the text literally but to translate the culture of the source language into the target language. Chris Crawford (1982), a game designer, defined the game as “a rudimentary cultural form”. In the backdrop of globalization, the game has become a new cultural form with the capacity to spread culture abroad. For some game players, it is Japanese games like *Dynasty Warriors* and *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* that introduce them to the historical figures of the Three Kingdoms of China (220–280). Despite China's long history and rich culture, these cultures have rarely been spread abroad successfully through Chinese games. With the increase of China's international influence, cultural communication, and media innovation, western gamers are attracted to oriental myths increasingly. It is not uncommon in some Chinese game discussion groups to see English-speaking gamers petitioning Chinese game developers to release the English versions. Therefore, as a game translator, one should be clear about the localization translation methods and strategies to translate culture.

3. *Game Titles Translation and Skopos Theory*

Game translation involves the translation of UI (User Interface), game dialogue text, plot subtitles, and so on. This paper mainly discusses the translation of Chinese single-player video game titles. The importance of the game title is mirrored in its entertainment value and commercial value. The former (the entertainment value) is to please the target players

and show them the features and the culture of the game. The latter is to stimulate their desire to buy and gain commercial profits. It is both crucial and challenging to translate the game title well, as a proper translation boosts game selling, while a bad translation may discourage the game players from buying it.

Minako O'Hagan (2013:150), the Associate Professor at the School of Cultures Languages and Linguistics, suggests that the Skopos Theory should be the guiding theory of game translation because game translation is "primarily driven by its purpose (Skopos), which is ultimately to entertain the end-user of the translated product". Skopos, a Greek word defined as "aim or purpose", was introduced into translation theory and developed by Hans J. Vermeer in the late 1970s. The idea was then extended by some Skopos theorists, most notably, Christiane Nord. According to Nord (2018:12), in the framework of Skopos Theory, the communicative needs and the culture-specific world knowledge of the intended receiver are important factors that determine the purpose of a translation. When choosing a game, gamers expect to choose a game with a catchy title that captures their interest. A good game translation should have both entertainment value and commercial value to meet players' needs. After identifying the goals of the gamers, the question is how to apply the right translation strategy to guide the game title translation practice.

According to Reiss and Vermeer (1984:90), the paramount rule for any translation should be the Skopos rule which means "the end justifies the means". It is expected to solve the existing dilemmas of domestication and foreignization. Nord (2018:28) claims that "the Skopos of a particular translation task may require a 'free' or a 'faithful translation', or anything between these two extremes, depending on the purpose for which translation is needed". In other words, domestication and foreignization are suitable for translation strategies under Skopos Theory, and they can be applied in game translation.

4. Domestication and Foreignization

4.1 Domestication

Domestication is based and centered on the target language. It adopts target language expressions that the target language readers can understand, striving to enter the target language readers' world, attempting to convey the information intended by the source language text and make the translation vivid. The advantage is that it can make the target language readers understand the source language text without obstacles. Domestication is frequently used in the translation of game titles.

The examples thereafter are Chinese single-player video games released on the Steam platform. It is noted that the translations of these games have been officially used on the Steam platform, which means all of them are officially authorized translations.

Example 1

Original Version	English Version (Official Translation)
Xī Yóu Jì Zhī Dà Shèng guī Lái (西游记之大圣归来)	Monkey King: Hero Is Back
Zhǐ Rén (纸人)	Paper Dolls
Xiān Jiàn Qí Xiá Zhuàn (仙剑奇侠传)	Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy
Liǎo Bù Qǐ De Xiū Xiān Mó Nǐ Qì (了不起的修仙模拟器)	The Amazing Cultivation Simulator
Yù Jì àn (御剑)	Flying Sword

Regarding the translation of game titles, Minako O’Hagan (2013:176) suggests using the strategy of substitution, where the original title is replaced with a reference analogous in the target culture, to achieve a similar effect on the target user. In Example 1, the official translator replaced the concepts in original versions with the corresponding ones in the target language and tried to achieve an equivalence effect on the target player. It is worth noting that only some of the English versions mentioned above are acceptable because the strategy of substitution was used correctly. “Zhǐ Rén (纸人)”, for example, literally means paper man in Chinese concerning different expressions for the same concept in different languages. Chinese people call this kind of paper man-shape toy paper man based on its material and appearance, while English speakers call it paper doll based on its material and usage. Besides, the image of paper man is a common element in Chinese horror movies and novels while foreign horror movies often use the doll as a creepy element. The translation of Monkey King: Hero Is Back also uses substitution. The translator replaced the original title “Dà Shèng (大圣)” in Chinese with “Monkey King” which is a more familiar title to the western players. Nevertheless, the translation of “Xī Yóu Jì Zhī Dà Shèng guī Lái (西游记之大圣归来)” is still debatable. Monkey king has other titles like Sun Wukong, which is more welcome in the western players because some popular games have characters named after it. Apart from it, the translation’s subtitle, “Hero Is Back”, is clearly missing an article in front of it, making the sentence less coherent.

Errors such as misunderstandings or misuses of words also occurred in the official translation versions. As an SLG game (Simulation Game) of Chinese fantasy influenced by Chinese mythology, the translation of “Liǎo Bù Qǐ De Xiū Xiān Mó Nǐ Qì (了不起的

修仙模拟器)” may be mistaken for a farming game because the word “cultivation” can not fully explain the meaning of “xiū xiān(修仙)” which means a mortal becomes a celestial being through supernatural training or practice in Chinese mythology. Even though some foreign players have accepted the word “cultivation” as the translation of “xiū xiān(修仙)”, the word “cultivation” usually refers to farming games in English games, which will give the wrong information to the target information player. Similar errors also can be found in “Xiān Jiàn Qí Xiá Zhuán (仙剑奇侠传)” which mistakes the word “Paladin” for the equivalence of “xi á(侠)”. The translation of “Yù Jì àn (御剑)” is acceptable because even though it changes the part of speech in the original word, it still conveys the correct message to the target players.

Example 2

Original Version	English Version (Official Translation)
Guǐ Gǔ Bā Huāng (鬼谷八荒)	Tale of Immortal
Zǐ Sài Qiū Fēng (紫塞秋风)	The Wind Road
Shén Wǔ Huàn Xiǎng (神舞幻想)	Faith of Danschant
Pà Sī Kǎ Qì Yuē (帕斯卡契约)	Pascal’s Wager

The famous American translation theorist Eugene Nida (2001), who advocates domestication, suggests that the reader of “a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it”. Domestication gives the reader a smooth reading experience as if reading a work in the native language. For the purpose of making the target player conceive the ideas of the original text, some images or concepts should be reformed in the target text. Therefore, it is acceptable to omit, add, or even create some concepts for the sake of coherence and expressiveness. The word “sh én wǔ (神舞)”, for example, is translated as “danschant” which is a compound word created by the translator. Since the game’s genre is related to ritual dance, the innovative translation may bring a new perspective to the players.

4.2 Foreignization

Domestication and Foreignization are not the same as literal translation and free translation, in that domestication and foreignization extend the concepts of literal translation and free translation and elevate language to an aesthetic level. Lawrence Venuti (2004:20), a famous American translation theorist, introduced the pair of translation terms of domestication and foreignization and described the foreignization

method as “an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad”.

Foreignization requires the translator to take the original text as the center so that the target language readers can experience the language characteristics, culture, exoticism, etc., of the source language. Simultaneously, the translation requires the target language readers to accept the unique features of the source language.

Today’s game industry is centered on the United States and Japan, which has drawn criticism from some scholars (Dongwon Jo, 2020). The long-term game culture domination of the United States and Japan has been drawing global gamers’ attention to these two countries, while the game culture in other countries are ignored due to their underdeveloped game industry. Consequently, most game players in China are more familiar with western game culture than westerners being familiar with Chinese game culture. Venuti (2004) argues that, “foreignization entails choosing a foreign text and developing a translation method along lines that are excluded by dominant cultural values in the target language”. His remarks further illustrate that the use of foreignization is feasible in game translation for Chinese culture is excluded by the dominant game culture in the target language.

Example 3

Original Version	English Version (Official Translation)
Gǔ Jiàn Qí Tán (古剑奇谭)	Gujian
Xuān Yuán Jiàn (轩辕剑)	Xuan Yuan Sword
Tài Wú Huì Juǎn (太吾绘卷)	The Scroll of Taiwu
Xiá Zhī Dào (侠之道)	Path of Wuxia
Dà Yǎn Jiāng Hú (大衍江湖)	Evolution of Jianghu
Jiàn Pò (剑魄)	JianPo

The examples of foreignization are also divided into two parts. In this part, the original versions all contain culture loaded words with oriental culture, such as “xiá(侠)” “pò(魄)” and “jiāng hú(江湖)”, which have no exact equivalences in the target language. In their English versions, they are all translated through pinyin transliteration. The advantage of this translation method is that it can lead the target language players to Chinese culture. As early as 2010, Oxford English Dictionary included the phrase “Wuxia” and defined the phrase as a genre of Chinese fiction or cinema featuring itinerant warriors of ancient China, often depicted as capable of superhuman feats of martial arts. Besides, Chinese phrases like “Guanxi” and “Add Oil” have been included

in the dictionary. As Chinese phrases make it into Oxford English Dictionary, it reflects the increasing acceptance of Chinese culture in the English-speaking world.

However, as mentioned above, Chinese game culture is not the dominant culture yet. Some phrases like “gǔ jì àn (古剑)”, “tài wú (太吾)” or “jiàn pò (剑魄)” are not included in the western dictionaries. If the target language players do not know Chinese culture well enough or only pay cursory attention to the related themes, they cannot get any information from it. Therefore, using transliteration to translate a game’s title may confuse the player and discourage them from buying it. On top of that, some English-speaking players may have a hard time remembering the title of the game.

Example 4

Original Version	English Version (Official Translation)
Huī Jìn Zhī Guān (灰烬之棺)	Coffin of Ashes
Bō Xī Yà Shí guāng (波西亚时光)	My Time At Portia
Qiāng Huǒ Chóng Shēng (枪火重生)	Gunfire Reborn

Apart from video games based on Chinese mythology, many games made in China are of world-contents or settings related to western culture. In this case, it is easy to find the corresponding concepts or words in English. By adopting foreignization as the translation method, the English version is smooth and readable. It conveys the information in the original language and keeps its form of the original sentence.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Chinese game industry enjoys strong growth momentum. In order to maintain rapid development, Chinese game developers should concentrate on the overseas markets and the localization translation of games. A game title is the first impression of the game. Because of cultural differences and different language usages, translating Chinese game titles accurately and effectively into English is challenging for a Chinese translator. Based on Skopos Theory, game titles can be translated by means of domestication and foreignization according to the purposes of the addressee. Both domestication and foreignization are used with high frequency in the game title translation. Besides, it is important to note that the translator must take the pragmatic differences into consideration when they translate Chinese game titles into English.

References

- CHIC. (2020). China Game Industry Report 2020 (in Chinese) [2020 年中国游戏产业报告]. Retrieved from <http://www.cgigc.com.cn/gamedata/22132.html>
- Crawford, C. (1982). The art of computer game design.
- Gamelook. (2021). 2020 Chinese Single-player Games Annual Sales Ranking (in Chinese) [乘风破浪的国产单机游戏！2020 年度销量排行榜出炉]. Retrieved from <http://www.gamelook.com.cn/2021/01/412971>
- Gamma Data. (2019). 2019 China Game Industry Annual Report (in Chinese) [2019 中国游戏产业年度报告]. Retrieved from <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1653349541342415533&wfr=spider&for=p>
- Jo, D. (2020). 'Bursting Circuit Boards': Infrastructures and Technical Practices of Copying in Early Korean Video Game Industry. *Game Studies*, 20(2).
- Limelight. (2020). The State of Online Gaming 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.limelight.com/resources/white-paper/state-of-online-gaming-2020/>
- Nida, E. A. (2001). *Language and culture: Contexts in translating*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Nord, C. (2018). *Translating as a purposeful activity: Functionalist approaches explained*. Routledge.
- O'Hagan, M., & Mangiron, C. (2013). *Game Localization: Translating for the global digital entertainment industry* (Vol. 106). John Benjamins Publishing.
- Reiss, K., & Vermeer, H. J. (1984). *Groundwork for a general theory of translation*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Venuti, L. (2004). *The Translator's Invisibility*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Shanghai.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.