

A Tentative Study on Translation Tactics of Culture-loaded Words Based on Domestication and Foreignization: A Case Analysis of *The Last Emperor* Film

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of globalization, the world has become interdependent, and cross-cultural communication between countries is more often than before. As a modern mass communication medium, the film plays an overriding role in cross-cultural communication between different cultures. However, the ever-ballooning domestic demand in China for international films sheds light on the importance of subtitle translation. Yet, cultural differences make it hard to translate many culture-loaded words with unique national hallmarks in the original films. Revolving around the 1987 film *The Last Emperor*, this paper selects several typical representative culture-loaded words from the film subtitles. This paper examines factors that may sway the selection of translation tactics for culture-loaded words through the lens of domestication and foreignization. In addition, it delves into the translation methods for translating such words. In doing so, it is hoped that the cultural connotations behind the language could be faithfully conveyed and that the cultural exchanges between countries and nations can be better promoted.

Keywords: culture-loaded words, domestication, foreignization, translation tactics

1. Introduction

1.1 Research background

The role of translation is pivotal and self-evident in human history, civilization, and cultural exchanges. It has facilitated the interaction between languages and promoted cross-cultural communication. Yet, the role of the translator has been controversial since ancient times, and there is a noted saying in ancient Rome that “the translator is the rebel.” The reason is that no matter how hard the translator strives for fidelity to the original, he cannot fully achieve the effect of the original. Translation is the exchange of two cultures, and for a genuinely successful translator, familiarity with two cultures is even more important than mastery of two languages. Film subtitle translation differs from other forms of translation in that it is not simply a language conversion but also involves cultures (Bi, 2002). Language, as a carrier of culture, is a prominent part of the culture. Therefore, culture-loaded words, the concentrated expression of traditional culture, play a paramount role in cross-cultural communication. Excellent literary works are the epitome of a country’s culture, serving as a window for potential readers worldwide to know more about China. For this reason, the following principles should be followed when translating culture-loaded words.

- (1) Reproduction of the meaning of the source language vocabulary is preferred to the reproduction of the form.
- (2) Word selection should take into account the context in which the source language vocabulary is used.
- (3) Key implicit meanings of source language words should be translated into non-implicit meanings.

The Last Emperor, a 1987 epic biographical drama film, relates the story of Aisin Gioro Puyi from the emperor of the feudal dynasty to the ordinary citizen of the Republic. The English film with a strong Chinese flavor was well-received when it premiered in Italy. Some specific terms and common sayings with folk characteristics in the movie set off a wave of understanding of Chinese culture abroad. *The Last Emperor* is a restoration of Chinese history, which inadvertently spread Chinese culture to the whole world. In 1988, the film won the 60th Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Cinematography, and nine other awards; it broke through film technology at that time, setting numerous new movie records. In light of this, studying culture-loaded words in such a film is significant and persuasive.

1.2 Research purpose

Translation can break down the barriers of language. In a globalized world, cultural exchanges between different countries are frequent, and subtitles of films serve as a vital form of cultural and artistic communication, according to Chen (2010). For example, although foreigners shot the film *The Last Emperor*, its theme is still Chinese, so many culture-loaded words appear

in the film and represent Chinese culture. Nowadays, most people choose to acquire cultural knowledge by watching films, so the study of the subtitle translation of *The Last Emperor* is of cultural significance.

Since the original lines of the movie *The Last Emperor* are in English, the following issues regarding the translation of the culture-loaded words in the film should be considered:

- 1) Did the foreign director modify or distort Chinese cultural elements in the film's subtitles?
- 2) What translation strategies, domestication, or foreignization, did the translators use for the Chinese culture-specific vocabulary during the Chinese translation of the film with the addition of Chinese subtitles?
- 3) Is domestication or foreignization appropriate for translating this film?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous research on subtitling translation

Fodor (1976) studied the dubbing translation of film and television works systematically from the perspectives of linguistics, semiotics, psychology, and aesthetics and so on. Karamitroglou (1998) found that the attempt in film translation nowadays is rather to describe the various subtitling conventions being followed. Thus, according to him, there is a lack of fresh or trending translation methods in subtitling. As a consequence, Karamitroglou (2000) concentrated on the make-up of the realization of all kinds of translation products in subtitling translation. Besides, Dananb (2002) assumes that the choice of either dubbing or subtitling is based on major factors extending the cultural identity of a nation. Xu and Zhang (2002) defined domestication and foreignization in this way: "domestication and foreignization refer to the cultural transformation involved in translation, the former being source language culture oriented, i.e., culture-oriented, and the latter being target language culture oriented, i.e., culture-oriented. Foreignization assumes that the translation should try to adapt to and accommodate the culture of the source language and the wording habits of the original author. Domestication, on the contrary, advocates that the translation should try to adapt to and take care of the cultural habits of the target language. To help readers remove linguistic and cultural barriers when they read translated works, Professor Xu (1980) published *Culturally Loaded Words and English Language Teaching* in Modern Foreign Languages.

2.2 Previous research on translation purpose, text type, readership, and ideology

To achieve a particular translation purpose, Guardini (1998) suggested that translators approach the practice of subtitling with a background in the theory of translation and subtitling. Li (2005) maintained that every human activity has a purpose, and so does the translation. Some Western scholars put forth teleology, the rudimentary functionalism theory. Throughout the history of Chinese translation, domestication and foreignization have each taken the lead due to the different purposes of the translators. For example, Yan Fu and Lin Shu, representatives of the modern Chinese translation community, advocated domestication translation for foreign cultures. In contrast, Lu Xun espoused foreignization for foreign cultures. Yan Fu's translation of *The Treatise of Heavenly Evolution* is deemed a model of domestication translation, which was translated for a particular audience at a certain time and with a specific purpose. To make the scientific views in the original text more understandable to the Chinese people and attract Chinese readers, Yan Fu intentionally rewrote the source-language text. Lu Xun's apparent tendency toward foreignization was dictated by his purpose in translation, which was to develop Chinese culture through foreign culture.

According to Mao (2013), text is the basis for translation, as it is the rudimentary unit that carries the meaning. When translating, the translator must consider the type of text, because different text types affect the choice of translation strategy. Translations from this perspective can be divided into instrumental and documentary translations. Instrumental translation refers to translation as a tool to convey information in communicative activities. This type of translation emphasizes the transmission of information and mainly includes non-literary works, such as advertisements, news, reports, scientific and technological materials, promotional materials, official letters, etc. By harnessing domestication translation, the message can be better conveyed, and the strategy of using the target language and culture as the home is more helpful in achieving the transfer of foreign information. Documentary translation refers to the communicative activity of translation as a medium to express the actual color of the source culture to the target audience. In this case, the specific linguistic form of the source language author or speaker is as important as its content, and translators have to utilize foreignization strategies to deal with it.

Readership is another factor that influences the choice of translation strategy. In the relationship between author, work, and reader, the reader is a vital, historical, active, and creative force. Thus, Yan (2008) held that a thousand readers will have thousands of different interpretations of *Hamlet*. The target readers are foreigners, so through foreignization, translators can introduce a country's culture to foreign readers while preserving the style of the source language, making the readers feel fresh and curious about the city. On the other hand, suppose the target readers are natives or foreigners conversant with their own culture. In that case, domestication can curtail the distance between the text and the target readers and make the readers read with ease and comfort. Ideology is the product of a particular society and culture. When human beings emerged and

fostered a culture, they also created ideology. As an act of cross-language and cross-cultural communication, translation is inevitably marked by ideology from the beginning, according to Li (2001). When introducing the ideas contained in the discourse of a foreign culture into the local culture, translators will inevitably make their value judgments about the foreign culture's values and then decide whether the translation strategy should be straightforward or bent to its meaning. Cultures with robust economic and political foundations have entrenched ideologies that generally dub foreign cultures inferior and thus repudiate other cultures. Therefore, in translating the source language and culture, translators intentionally add, delete, or domesticate translations to suit the ideological needs of the target culture.

Admittedly, there has been a wealth of research on subtitling translation from different perspectives. Also, studying the translation of culture-loaded words has captured the ever-growing attention of foreign language scholars and linguists in China and beyond. Nevertheless, it seems to the authors that there remains a void in translation subtitles from the angle of history, society, and language itself. Thus vindicated, this paper intends to make a tentative study to approach the subtitle translation by taking *The Last Emperor* as an example. In doing so, it is hoped that the cultural connotations behind the film could be loyally tapped, dissected, and conveyed to the target viewers, thus facilitating cross-cultural exchanges beyond borders.

3. Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in *The Last Emperor*

3.1 Translation of Culture-loaded Words about History in *The Last Emperor*

The Last Emperor was directed by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci and co-produced by Italy, China and Britain. The film premiered in Italy in October 1987. The film relates the story of Aisin Gioro Puyi, from the emperor of the feudal dynasty to the ordinary citizen of the Republic. The English film with glaring Chinese chrematistics was well-received when it was rolled out in Italy. Some specific terms and common sayings with folk characteristics in the film prompted a wave of understanding of Chinese cultures abroad. Besides, *The Last Emperor* is a vivid restoration of Chinese history and objectively spreads Chinese culture to the outside world, according to Fan (1998). In 1988, the film won the 60th Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Cinematography, and nine other awards; it broke through the film technology of its time and set numerous new movie records. Thus vindicated, studying culture-loaded words in such a film is significant and persuasive.

History has rendered specific cultural connotations to the vocabulary, and hence each culture has its own unique historical and cultural phenomenon with the characteristics of time. Long (2011) held that the translation of culture-loaded words between China and the West in different historical and cultural contexts is a linguistic exchange and a cultural collision. Take the translation of the emperor's name as an example:

Translation example 1.

Source text: 袁家决定立你为新的万岁爷。

Source text Romanized: Āi jiā jué dìng lì nǐ wéi xīn de wàn suì yé.

Target translation: I have decided that you will be the new Lord of Ten Thousand Years.

China has been a country of etiquette since ancient times, so many "honorific" terms lie within the Chinese language. Throughout Chinese history, emperors also have various "honorific titles," "万岁爷" (wàn suì yé) being only one of them. The word "wàn suì yé" expressed the ruler's desire to live a long life and was also used to show the ruler's supremacy. Therefore, the translator cannot simply translate "wàn suì yé" as "the emperor," which will omit the cultural connotation and fail to achieve the purpose of spreading Chinese culture. The "lord" symbolizes supreme power and status in the West, just like the Chinese emperor. The translator uses domestication to translate "lord" to denote "emperor." Yet foreignization is adopted to translate "wàn suì yé" directly as "Ten Thousand Years." Finally, married with domestication and foreignization, "wàn suì yé" was translated as "the Lord of Ten Thousand Years." This translation not only allows foreign readers to understand the emperor's status, understand the emperor's different names in China, and spread Chinese history and culture but also conforms to the Chinese translation rules so that Chinese speakers can accept it.

Translation example 2.

Source text: 我住在这宫里好多个年头了，他们叫我老佛爷。

Source text Romanized: Wǒ zhù zài zhè gōng lǐ hǎo duō gè nián tóu le, tā men jiào wǒ lǎo fó yé.

Buddhism is a major player in Chinese culture, and together with Confucianism and Taoism, it forms the core of traditional Chinese culture and exerts a far-reaching influence on Chinese culture. Thus, Buddhism becomes the trust of people's souls and their aspiration for a better life in the future. In Chinese, there are many words and expressions with regard to Buddhism. The term "Master Buddha" was originally a respectful term for Sakyamuni (Buddha) but later evolved into a term used by Qing Dynasty subjects for the emperor, symbolizing the emperor's power and respect for the emperor. The most familiar in history is the old Buddha Cixi. Consequently, when translating such words, translators should not overextend them but adopt a direct domestication strategy. Thus, "老佛爷" (lǎo fó yé) is translated as "old Buddha," which not only allows foreign readers to read intuitively but also retains the cultural flavor behind it to the greatest extent.

In addition to the unique titles of the characters, the film also contains some particular place names that epitomize traditional Chinese history and culture.

Translation example 3.

Source text: 你知道吗，天黑以后，紫禁城里不准有男人。

Source text Romanized: Nǐ zhī dào ma, tiān hēi yǐ hòu, zǐ jìn chéng lǐ bú zhǔn yǒu nán rén.

Target translation: Men, you know, are not allowed in the Forbidden City after dark.

In ancient China, the emperor claimed to be the son of heaven to the outside world, and the place where the emperor lived was the imperial palace. The royal court could also be called the Purple Palace to underscore the supremacy of power. Why is the Purple Palace? Zhuang (2010) argued that purple was a symbol of nobility and power in the eyes of the ancient Chinese; many nobles in ancient China donned purple clothes, representing respectability. The emperor wields supreme power, the palace can only accommodate the emperor, and commoners are banned from entry, so the palace was a forbidden place in ancient times. The Purple Forbidden City is the residence of the emperor, which is directly translated as “The Purple Forbidden City.” Foreign readers who do not understand the origin of “Purple” will have an understanding that it means “Some purple no-entry place,” thus creating ambiguity. To better highlight the history and culture behind it, as well as to facilitate the understanding of foreign readers, the translator used addition and subtraction in domestication, omitted the translation of “purple,” and highlighted the feature of “Forbidden” to show the supremacy of the imperial power. The translator translated the “紫禁城” (zǐ jìn chéng) as “the Forbidden City.” This type of translation makes more sense and is easier to grasp.

3.2 Translation of Culture-loaded Words about Society in *The Last Emperor*

Social culture involves all aspects of people’s lives, such as customs and social traditions, different festivals and customs, different ways of addressing and greeting people in different cultures, etc.

Translation example 4.

Source text: 可是今天皇帝龙驭宾天了。

Source text Romanized: Kě shì jīn tiān huáng dì lóng yù bīn tiān le.

Target translation: But the emperor is on high, riding the dragon now!

The meaning of “龙驭宾天” (lóng yù bīn tiān) is: Riding the dragon to the sky and being a guest in the sky. The term is a euphemism for the death of an ancient emperor. In traditional Chinese culture, the dragon symbolizes power, nobility, and honor. The emperor believed that he was the “dragon,” so he had to leave riding on the dragon after his death. Nonetheless, in Western cultures, they argue that dragons are evil, standing for greed and brutality. The translator adopts the direct translation method in foreignization to translate the phrase “lóng yù bīn tiān” as “riding the dragon.” If people in western countries do not know the symbolic meaning of “dragon,” it would be hard to understand this euphemism of “death,” thus causing the misunderstanding of “the emperor rides the dragon.” Likewise, there are also euphemisms about death in the West, such as “be in heaven,” which should be translated as “But the emperor is in heaven now!” “Employing the domestication strategy will help Westerners better interpret the meaning of “lóng yù bīn tiān.”

Translation example 5.

Source text: 您瞧，它给皇上叩头呢。

Source text Romanized: Nín qiáo, tā gěi huáng shàng kòu tóu ne.

Target translation: Ahh, see? He is kowtowing to Your Majesty.

In ancient feudal China, to show respect to their superiors, subordinates would usually crouch their bodies and kneel when facing their superiors, knocking on the ground with their foreheads, an act the Chinese call “叩头” (kòu tóu). Since foreign countries tend not to kowtow, it is fair to say that “kòu tóu” is a culture-loaded word bearing Chinese hallmarks. Thus, the translator adopts domestication and directly translates “kòu tóu” as “kowtow,” which can faithfully disseminate traditional Chinese culture to foreign viewers.

In addition, there are some words that reflect the unique customs of China.

Translation example 6.

Source text: 我建议你们坦白直相，否则别想过好日子。

Source text Romanized: Wǒ jiàn yì nǐ men tǎn bái zhí xiàng, fǒu zé bié xiǎng guò hǎo rì zǐ.

Target translation: I advise you to be frank and sincere. Otherwise, things can still go very badly for you.

Since ancient times, the Chinese have sought to live decent lives. Chinese people tend to pick an auspicious day for some festive events such as marriages and funerals, harbingering that the coming days will be smooth and safe. Here the translator does not dwell on the vocabulary and syntactic structure of the original text and does not directly translate “好日子” (hǎo rì zǐ) as “good day” but transmits the critical information of the original text into the translation, translating “别想过好日子” (bié xiǎng guò hǎo rì zǐ) as “go very badly for you.” If the translator of the film adopts the strategy of foreignization and translates “bié xiǎng guò hǎo rì zǐ” as “you do not have a good day,” English speakers will feel odd because the direct translation is “你

没有好的一天(Nǐ méiyǒu hǎo de yītiān)” and they can’t understand the meaning of “hǎo rì zǐ.” Hence, the translation is “go very badly for you, “which can retain the true intention behind it to the greatest extent.

3.3 Translation of Culture-loaded Words about Language in *The Last Emperor*

As one of the crucial components of culture, language also embodies culture. Idioms bear distinct Chinese cultural characteristics and are the essence of the Chinese language. Sometimes, the meaning of idioms cannot be inferred from the meaning of a single word in a phrase.

Translation example 7.

Source text: 中饱私囊。

Source text Romanized: Zhōng bǎo sī náng.

Target translation: Filling their own rice bowls.

Here, “中饱私囊”(zhōng bǎo sī náng) means making money from one’s official duties for one’s benefit. Idioms are a feature of traditional Chinese culture, with fixed structural forms and sayings that indicate specific meanings. Therefore, it is difficult for idiom translators to find words with the same imagery in the translated language to express the culture behind them. At this point, the translator should focus on idiomatic meaning expression rather than imagery and cultural transmission so that the audience can understand the meaning. The translator of the film uses the domestication strategy to translate “zhōng bǎo sī náng” as “ill one’s rice bowl, “which is a correct way to transmit the meaning of the source language.

Translation example 8.

Source text: 皇上赐您二品顶戴花翎。

Source text Romanized: Huáng shàng cì nín èr pǐn dǐng dài huā líng.

Target translation: The Emperor awards you with the order of the Ruby Hat Button.

“顶戴花翎”(dǐng dài huā líng) is the decoration of the officials of the Qing Dynasty. “顶戴”(dǐng dài) is the official with the hat, the top of the cap inlaid with precious stones; “花翎”(huā líng) is a special reward of the emperor inserted in the hat decorations, generally made of peacock feathers. “dǐng dài huā líng” is the emperor’s reward to meritorious individuals or those who have made indelible contributions to the country. Besides, the top of the plume is also a symbol of power and status. If the translator simply translates it as “a hat, “the essential meaning of the word will be discarded, and foreign readers will be baffled. If an explanation follows the annotation, the length of the subtitles will increase again, which is not conducive to the viewers’ understanding. Here, the film directly translates “dǐng dài huā líng” as “the order of the Ruby Hat Button.”

There are also some familiar phrases in the film that are worth studying.

Translation example 9.

Source text: 人之初，性本善。

Source text Romanized: Rén zhī chū xìng běn shàn.

Target translation: Man, his nature originally good.

“人之初，性本善”(rén zhī chū xìng běn shàn) is excerpted from the traditional Chinese enlightenment book *Three Character Primer*. The *Three Character Primer* has become a widely known and familiar phrase because it is short, concise, and catchy. The everyday language, with its fixed wording, tight semantic integration, and phonetic harmony, is a lexical unit that operates independently in the language. Therefore, it is difficult for the translation of a familiar language to find an exact cultural equivalent of the intended language in the translated language to express its cultural connotation. Therefore, the translator of the film translates “rén zhī chū xìng běn shàn” as “Man, his nature originally good, “translates “人性(rén xìng)” as “nature, “ and uses “originally” to modify “good” to convey the meaning of “人性本善(rén xìng běn shàn).” The phrase uses a domestication strategy to reproduce the original grammatical sentence structure in English when there is no way to retain the original syntax to achieve a natural flow and functional equivalence at the syntactic level of the target language.

4. Conclusion

This paper examines the translation strategies in *The Last Emperor* through domestication and foreignization to dissect culture-loaded words. It is discovered that some of these translations of historical and culture-loaded words leverage both domestication and foreignization, but mostly domestication, which provides an easy-to-understand expression of the translation and allows foreigners to grasp Chinese culture better. Some translators adopt domestication, while some harness foreignization when dealing with culture-loaded words. This paper argues that domestication is better because culture-loaded words mainly bear complex cultural imagery. If foreignization is adopted, it could make the target viewers misunderstand as they do not understand the meaning. Hence, approaching social culture-loaded words with domestication can explain the meaning behind the source language and avoid misunderstandings emanating from cultural differences. Due to the different linguistic habits and cultural traditions of different nationalities, there are often cases when the translation of culture-loaded words in the language is not known. This is the most appropriate time to use domestication, which can convey the meaning

of the source language without causing the audience to have an unpleasant viewing experience owing to the lack of understanding of the meaning of the subtitles.

Simply put, the use of both domestication and foreignization cannot be ignored. In addition, efforts should be made to analyze specific problems and strike a balance between these two strategies, not simply adopt one and completely reject the other. Instead, different tactics should be utilized to deliver a translation that meets the actual purpose or needs. In so doing, the translation of culture-loaded words can better play its role in cultural exchange.

At the same time, in the translation process, a qualified translator should always be aware of cross-cultural communication, which in turn calls for translators to be familiar with the cultural differences between China and the West, in a bid to surmount the difficulties encountered in the translation process.

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