

Creative Treason in the Subtitle Translation of the Film ‘Detective Chinatown 1900’ from the Perspective of Translation Studies

Yuwen Mao

*School of Literature, University of Jinan, Jinan, China
202232521219@stu.ujn.edu.cn*

Abstract. With the deepening of cultural globalization, the media of cultural exchanges have become more and more diversified. Film, as a significant tool for cultural export, has greatly facilitated cross-cultural exchanges around the world. In recent years, the “Detective Chinatown” film series has attracted widespread attention in China and abroad. Its popularity is closely related to the cleverness of subtitle translation. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the use of Domestication, Foreignization, Omission, and Adaptation strategies in the subtitle translation of Detective Chinatown 1900. This thesis found that in the subtitle translation of the film, the use of Omission and Adaptation was most prevalent, with less Foreignization. Domestication is used in a variety of ways, with Sense-for-sense Translation and Substitution being the main ones. The effective use of these strategies lays a solid foundation for the communication of humor, patriotic themes, and other elements in the film. This paper provides references for the intercultural translation of film and television and helps cultural exchange and dissemination.

Keywords: Creative Treason, Subtitle Translation, Translation Studies

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of sound films, more and more scholars pay attention to the research field of subtitle translation. In recent years, the Chinatown Detective has received widespread attention both at home and abroad as a film series combining the themes of comedy and detective work. Detective Chinatown 1900 was released on the first day of the year 2025, and its story of Chinatown in San Francisco, USA, in 1900. In this film, the Chinese, who had gathered in large numbers because of their involvement in the construction of the Pacific Railway, faced severe discrimination and ostracism. Through the intertwining of fictional characters and real historical events, the film alludes to recent historical facts such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the bloody history of the Chinese railway workers. It shows the resilience and indomitability of overseas Chinese to survive in the cracks of a foreign country. Many elements of the film are important for spreading Chinese traditional culture and historical knowledge.

In addition, the language features of this film also provide a typical case for translation studies. The film features a relatively rare cross-pollination of Chinese, English, and Navajo. Character

dialogues in Hebei, Henan, Northeastern China, and Tianjin are in multiple local languages, creating a rich language environment. It gives the audience a taste of the fascination of different regional languages and also plays a role in defusing the horror, suspenseful plot of the show. Unique linguistic features limit and guide the choice of translation strategies. This thesis focuses on how to deal with the localised expression of proverbs in the translation of the subtitles of Detective Chinatown 1900 from the perspective of Translatology. The aim is to explore the use of creative treason in subtitle translation practice, so as to provide strategic choices for future film translations.

2. Translation studies and creative treason

Professor Xie Tianzhen put forward the study of translation in the 1990s. The concept includes not only the study of translation, but also the study of cross-linguistic, cross-cultural and cross-border dissemination and reception of literature and culture [1]. Prof Xie gave an overview of the development of translation studies in the West and the USSR, and reviewed the translation standards of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” that have been mainly adhered to in the history of China. He proposed from a dialectical perspective that Chinese translation studies should be extended to the deeper study of literature and culture on the basis of ‘pragmatism’. Translation studies are concerned with the loss, distortion, addition and expansion of information in the process of conversion of the original language into the foreign language [2]. It also focuses on the unique value and significance of translation as a human practice of intercultural communication. While cinema, as a unique form of audio-visual combination, the introduction of an exotic work obliges the viewer to combine it with a ‘reading’. When the audience is accepting the plot of the film and the foreign language, the subtitle translation should be both concise and accurate. In this way, it bridges the linguistic gap for the audience, and thus aids in the completion of the aesthetic experience. Therefore, the translator must act as both the audience and the scriptwriter, and use personalised translation to satisfy the aesthetic needs of the audience while remaining faithful to the plot.

‘Creative Treason’ was proposed by Robert Escarpit [3]. This concept is divided into three layers. the first layer is that when the shell form of language is changed, it creates the “treachery” of translation; the second layer is that when the work is translated and arrives in another language system with a new identity, it completes the creativity of translation; finally, when it is read by the readers, the emotional experience and gain of each person reading it enriches the content of the work again, giving it a second life.

Escarpit acknowledges the significant influence of readers on literary works. In this context, translators can be both part of the translation process and part of the reading experience. A work that may not be a hit in its own country. However, as the translation adopts a new cultural identity, there is a good chance that it will appeal to many viewers. These works will be recognized as classics. After it was introduced to China, Prof Xie Tianzhen introduced it into translation studies. He transforms this descriptive word into a concept, deriving its three subjects and four specific manifestations. This move has given a great boost to research in the field of translation in the country.

3. Creative treason in subtitle translation

Creative treason is at the heart of translationalism. This theory is categorised according to the subject into the mediator, the receiver and the receptive environment. Among the specific manifestations of the translator's creative treason are categorised as Personalised Translations, Mistranslations and Missing Translation, Omission and Adaptation, Conversion and Adaptation [4].

The most prominent manifestation of Personalised Translation is the subjugation or subsumption of the source culture by the culture of the target language [5]. Taking into account the characteristics of film language and the particularity of subtitle translation, this paper analyzes the specific cases in the film with the main aspects of Domestication, Foreignization, Omission and Adaptation.

3.1. Domestication

“At root, translation is ethnocentric, so translation cannot simply be an exchange between two languages of equal status [6].” In the mid-to-late 19th century, China was turned into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society with troubles both internally and externally. The Chinese had to speed up their learning of advanced Western technology and literature. This has indirectly led to the long-standing phenomenon that there are many proficient English speakers in China. Further, Chinese people know more about Western culture than Westerners know about Chinese culture. Such acquired differences in each other's cultures have to be compensated for by the use of translation. Precisely, it is the use of Domestication strategies.

3.1.1. Sense-for-sense translation

The Chinese language has a large number of simple, concise and catchy phrases or proverbs. These terms are often used in a way that makes meaning for the native speakers. In the English context, these phrases then require detailed explanations, but this goes against the brevity of the film's subtitles. Therefore, the translator has to give up metaphors appropriately and use paraphrasing, which breaks free from the conceptual language and form and gets closer to the target language [7].

Example 1

Original Text: 听君一席话，胜读十年书。

Translated Text: I've learned so much from your words.

Analysis: This dialogue is in the scene where the main character Qin Fu meets Bai Xuan Ling, the patron of many Chinese in Chinatown, for the first time. Bai Xuanling described his journey from labourer to master of the hall. Qin Fu said this to flatter Master Bai. If this sentence is translated directly, it is not at all possible to feel the original meaning of the sentence. There's even the possibility of weird adverse effects. Therefore, the translator presents the entire sentence in straightforward colloquial language through Sense-for-sense Translation, 'I learnt a lot from your words.' This makes the translation more accessible to viewers in other countries. But it did lack the original Chinese banter.

Example2

Original Text: 中学为体西学为用。

Translated Text: Chinese learning with Western methods.

Analysis: This idiom comes from the guiding ideology of the foreign affairs school, which was systematically elaborated by Zhang Zhidong [8]. It means to take the Three Principles and Eight Principles of China, represented by Confucianism, as the root of one's stature. The natural and social sciences that have come from the modern West are used as the methodology. The translator transformed the meaning of the phrase into an adjective phrase in a definite-medium structure by directly summarising the meaning of the phrase. After translation, the sentence is condensed into Chinese learning and Western methods.

3.1.2. Substitution

When translators deal with equivalent texts, they can directly apply the ready-made expressions of the target language, especially the proverbs and slang of the target language, which are more likely to resonate with the audience [9]. Barriers between different cultures need to be broken down by translators. Ordinary direct translations hardly reach expressions that are truly imbued with culture. So the translator is forced to replace some words or sentences in the lines with unique expressions that are equivalent to the meaning of the original text under contextual equivalence. For this film, which has comedy as one of its themes, the translator has to focus on integrating the amusing elements of the dialogue on the basis of understanding the meaning expressed in the source language. The translator picks out slang from the target language in order to compensate for the fun component in the translation result. It also shows how the translator, as an invisible reader, recreates the dialogue of the lines.

Example 1

Original Text: 我呢虽然是个侦探，但是个小侦探。

Translated Text: I'm a detective, maybe. but a green one.

Analysis: As Qin Fu tried to excuse himself from investigating the case on the pretext of his lack of ability, he said, 'Little detective.' Master Bai immediately responded, "Detective Fu, who has solved countless cases in England, how can you use the word 'small'?" The word 'green one' appears in both sentences. If it had been translated conventionally, it might have been translated as "A little-known detective". However, in the subtitles, the translators have adopted the slang expression "green" as a way of signal inexperience and immaturity. The double quotes again imply to the audience that "green" here does not denote a colour. The humour and vividness are expanded even more in terms of expressive effect.

Example 2

Original Text: 回去娶公主,当你们印第安驸马爷。

Translated Text: Go back and marry the princess, become a prince of your tribe.

Analysis: Here Qin Fu was offering again in a joking tone to take the sister of the chief among the Agi tribe [10]. '驸马爷' is the name given to the son-in-law of an ancient Chinese emperor, referring exclusively to the husband of the princess. By translating '驸马爷' as 'prince', the translator has adopted the equivalent title in both Chinese and Western contexts to replace it. With the first half of the sentence 'princess' echo, consistent with the English context of the 'prince marrying the princess' perception.

Example 3

Original Text: Does your company engage in activities that violate U.S. law?

Translated Text: 你的公司是否从事违反美国法律的行当?

Analysis: This quote appears in the scene where the judge questions Master Bai at a meeting about whether to outlaw Chinatown. By translating 'activities' as "行当", the translator was able to easily convey the pejorative connotation of '行当', as well as the judge's contemptuous attitude.

Example 4

Original Text: For god's sake, man! Don't grovel.

Translated Text: 该死的，拜托有点出息。

Analysis: The translators combined the anger and agitation of Councillor Grant in this scenario and replaced the whole sentence with a Chinese authentic expression. The direct translation of 'don't grovel' translates into 'please show some respect'.

3.2. Foreignization

There is also no lack of preservation and mapping of exotic ethnic identities and linguistic and stylistic features in the film. The adoption of Foreignization played a direct role in the spread of Chinese culture.

Example 1

Original Text: 一日为师，终身为父。

Translated Text: Once a teacher, always a father.

Analysis: This idiom first came out of "The Family Teachings of Taigong", emphasising the importance of treating teachers with the same respect as one's father [11]. The translators have adopted the same sentence structure as in the original, based on a direct translation. It's a perfect contrast to the Chinese idiomatic sentence pattern of eight characters. This translation strategy allows foreign audiences to experience the unique charm of Chinese culture.

3.3. Omission and adaptation

Omission and Adaptation all belong to Conscious Creative Treason. Omission is a translation of only a portion of a line, while Adaptation is an alteration of the original text according to the audience's reception habits, customs, etc. Both are designed to cater for the interests of the audience in the country of translation, ease of dissemination and other considerations [12].

3.3.1. Omission

Example 1

Original Text: 我乃大清国满洲镶黄旗，尚虞备用处协理事物头等侍卫粘竿长头等侍卫兼充掌翊卫扈从事赏穿黄马褂钮钴禄氏费洋古。

Translated Text: I am from the yellow banner of the great Qing, Captain of the Imperial Guards, First Assistant and Deputy of the Intelligence Department, Head of the Secret Escort, Recipient of the Yellow Jacket, member of the Niohuru Clan, Fei Yanggu.

Analysis: Fei Yanggu was a Qing Dynasty official who travelled to a foreign land. He proudly gave details of his identity when introducing himself to the Irish mob. The positions in the lines are unique to the Chinese cultural system. If all the translations are made directly, it will cause trouble in comprehension. At the same time, the sentence is stated at a relatively fast pace, which, if annotated, would place a reading burden on the audience. Therefore, the subtitle translation team selects the centre of gravity to be translated. The use of multiple "of"s in a sentence is an effective way to clue the audience in that all the previous modifications are meant to qualify one's own identity, while bringing in a different kind of amusing colour.

Example 2

Original Text: We have gathered new evidence that contradicted your investigation.

Translated Text: 我们搜集到了很多新证据。

Analysis: The translation directly omits the part of the clause after "that" in the original text. The translation takes into account the customary expressions of the Chinese audience. And concern from this episode of the English expression more, Chinese translation short can help the audience reduce reading fatigue.

3.3.2. Adaptation

Due to the unique linguistic characteristics of the film, translators inevitably combine translation and writing in the process of translating Chinese into English and English into Chinese. In this way, the content is clear and matches the emotional tone of the film.

Example 1

Original Text: 我总结是八个字成就了我。

Translated Text: My achievement was built upon two things.

Analysis: This phrase appears in the dialogue between the Master Bai and the detective Qin Fu, who was hired for the initial meeting. Master Bai introduced this passage through his own offerings to Kwan Kung and Jesus. The eight words spoken by the White Hall Master are: Amitabha, Hallelujah. That's eight words in Chinese, but two words if it's in English. So the translators have shifted the narrative here, combining the Italian translation to summarise two common religious phrases into two things.

Example 2

Original Text: 跟天斗跟地斗。

Translated Text: I pushed on against all odds.

Analysis: This quote is from the White Hall Master's account of his own fortune. This quote expresses how difficult it is for him as a Chinese to survive abroad. However, a direct translation of such a proverb would inevitably lead to ambiguity. The translators then adopted a compilation approach, adding "all odds" for matters of struggle. The use of the phrase "push on" indicates that the sender of the action encounters difficulties and keeps encouraging himself to persevere. This translation highlights the character traits of Bai Master's initiative and durable, and promotes a deeper characterisation.

Example 3

Original Text:

我福你贵
花开富贵
荣华富贵
吉祥富贵
大福大贵

Translated Text:

Fu means fortune and Gui means wealth.

We wish you super duper rich!

King-of-the-world rich!

God of wealth rich!

Rich and lucky!

Analysis: These lines are from the end of the film. Qin Fu and Ghost discussing Ghost's name together. From this come four blessings are said., which have nothing to do with the content of the film. But the film was released just in time for the first day of the Lunar New Year. These last four lines of blessing were actually given to the audience as a way to create a festive and lively atmosphere for the Chinese New Year. Therefore, the translator adds "we wish" to the translation, supplementing the subject and verb to tell the audience that this is, in fact, the blessing that the whole film brings to the audience. The translators of the blessing focus directly on the word "riches." The translators have compiled the phrase ".....rich" in the way that people are more accustomed to in the English context. In addition, the adjectives are more exaggerated, which really

reflects the positive and joyful emotional experience that Chinese blessings bring to people in terms of their expressive effect.

Example 4

Original Text: Never touch a white man.

Never touch a white man.

Translated Text: 把你的脏手拿开，永远别碰我。

Analysis: This appears in the scene where Ghost confronts Senator Grant. Ghost wants to come open Grant's sleeve and give the media proof that Grant is his daughter's murderer. But Grant emotionally will point his gun at Ghost and say these two lines. In the original line, Grant actually repeats two of the same words, but the translator combined them by combining Grant's state of weakness and his inner discrimination against Chinese people. The first sentence was translated as 'Get your hands off me. This is more in keeping with the characterisation and plot development of the film.

4. Conclusion

This study discussed subtitling of Detective Chinatown 1900 in terms of three specific translational manifestations of creative treason: Domestication, Foreignization, Omission and Adaptation, which is based on the perspective of translation studies. The subtitling of Tang Dynasty 1900 is discussed naturalisation, alienation, abridgment and compilation. Specific examples of translation can be found: In terms of "Domestication", the film focuses on a combination of paraphrasing and word-setting. Attempts to match the unique expressions of Chinese culture to the English language, with a view to compensating for the comprehension problems caused by cultural differences. In terms of "Foreignization", the focus is on the imitation of sentence structure and direct translation of culturally loaded words. In the area of "Omission and Adaptation," subtitles emphasize the creation of mood and atmosphere, reflecting a pursuit of humorous and vivid language.

Overall, the subtitles for Detective Chinatown 1900 are a good example of the translator's recreation, presenting the audience with a historical, thought-provoking, and humorous film. It is hoped that this study will provide new case studies for the application of creative rebellion theory. This will promote cultural exchange and dissemination through the medium of film.

References

- [1] Xie Tianzhen. (2020) Introduction to Translation and Interpretation. Beijing: Commercial Press, 29.
- [2] Xie Tianzhen. (2007) Introduction to Translation. Beijing: Peking University Press, 10.
- [3] Escarpit, Robert. (1971) Sociology of Literature, translated by Ernest Pick, with a new introduction by Malcolm Bradbury and Bryan Wilson, 2nd edition, London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 137.
- [4] Liu Xiaogang. (2014) Creative Rebellion and Intercultural Communication in Translation, Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 84.
- [5] Xie Tianzhen. (1999) Translation and Interpretation. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 02, 149-150.
- [6] [U.S.] Lawrence Venuti. (2019) The Shame of Translation: towards an Ethics of Difference, translated by Jiang Tong, Beijing: Commercial Press, 6.
- [7] Wang Yunhui. (2021) A Study on the Translation of Culturally Loaded Words from the Perspective of Functionalist Purpose Theory--Taking the Subtitles of "Chinatown Detective" as an Example. Times Report (Running), 09, 82-83.
- [8] Shan Liang, Liu Shuang. (2013) Analysing the thought of "Middle School for Body, Western Learning for Use". Youth, 07, 316.
- [9] Yang Long. (2017) Study on the Naturalisation Strategy of Chinese Translation of American Drama Subtitles--Taking Sisters in Bankruptcy as an Example. Journal of Xi'an International Studies University, 25(01), 110-114.

- [10] Gona. (2012) A study of ancient Chinese marriage appellations. Shandong University, 38.
- [11] Peng Lanyu. (2022) Planet of the idioms: Watching the ancients read. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 03, 169.
- [12] Wang Yi. (2019) Research on English-Chinese Translation Strategies under Multicultural Perspective. Beijing: Beijing Institute of Technology Press, 11, 143.