

A Study on the Translation Strategies of Chinese Culture-loaded Words: Taking the Subtitle Translation of the Film "Big Fish & Begonia" as an Example

Zhixi Liu^{1,a,†}, Shuyue Sun^{2,*,b,†}, and Xinyi Xu^{3,c,†}

¹Department of English, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China

²Department of Spanish, Qingdao University, Qingdao, Shandong Province, China

³Department of Spanish, Jiangsu Normal University, Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, China

a. 952805115@qq.com, b. ssun012@fiu.edu, c. 3020201110@jsnu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

[†]These authors contributed equally.

Abstract: Chinese animation film originated in the 20th century, and after a difficult process of exploration, it gradually developed in the 21st century. It is well known that film is one of the most widespread and influential art forms, and Chinese animated films are, as a rule, more loaded with numerous traditional Chinese cultural elements than ordinary films. Therefore, launching Chinese movies out of China is an effective way to spread China's excellent traditional culture, translation of culturally loaded words in movie subtitles determines whether the cultural export will be successful. On this premise, this paper will take the Chinese animated film *Big Fish & Begonia* as an example, analyze the translation strategies of culturally loaded words in the context of the characteristics of subtitle translation, summarize the desirable features of the translation strategies adopted, and at the same time point out the shortcomings and propose modifications to inspire the use of culturally loaded words translation strategies in the subtitles of Chinese animated films in the future, to promote the dissemination of excellent Chinese traditional culture.

Keywords: Big Fish & Begonia, translation strategies, culture-loaded words, subtitle translation

1. Introduction

In the context of internationalization, films aim to enhance national cultural confidence and shape the country's image. The translation of movie subtitles not only affects the audience's viewing experience but also influences the exchange and communication of different cultures and even Chinese cultural export. Therefore, subtitle translation is the primary way for domestic movies to spread the connotation of Chinese excellent traditional culture and its values. Nevertheless, improper subtitle translation can become a significant obstacle for foreign audiences to understand Chinese films and cultural exchange between China and abroad. Culturally loaded words refer to words within a specific culture, carrying unique linguistic and cultural information, and are direct and indirect reflections of national culture in the language vocabulary; therefore, the culturally loaded words appearing in movie subtitles are the key to the success of subtitle translation or even cultural communication.

Big Fish & Begonia, a Chinese animated film released in North America in 2018, has been well received and loved by foreign audiences upon its release. The film is based on ancient Chinese classics such as Zhuangzi - The Journey of the Free, Shanhaijing, and Sojourn of the Gods, and incorporates ancient mythological elements such as "Nuwa mending the sky," which is full of mysterious and magnificent oriental flavor, whereas, it is meaningful and valuable to use Big Fish & Begonia as a text for subtitle translation study. There are relatively few studies related to the culturally loaded words in the subtitles of Big Fish & Begonia, which are mainly analyzed under the guidance of other theories such as Multimodal translation theory, Communicative Translation Theory, Functional equivalence theory. (e.g. (1) CHALLENGES IN FILM TRANSLATION FROM A MULTIMODAL PERSPECTIVE: A CASE STUDY ON CHINESE-ENGLISH SUBTITLED AND DUBBED FILMS, (2) On Translation Strategies of Film Subtitles from the Perspective of Communicative Translation: A Case Study on English Translation of Big Fish & Begonia, (3) A Contrastive Study of English and Spanish Subtitles of the Chinese film Big Fish and Begonia: A Trilingual Approach) [1,2,3].

This paper will figure out what English translation strategies of culturally loaded words had been used in the subtitle translation of "Big Fish & Begonia" by combining the characteristics of subtitle translation with the methods of the text reading and literature research. By analyzing these strategies, this paper aims to point out the merits of the translation strategies used in literal translation, liberal translation, additional translation and retranslation, and some of the existing problems. Hoping that it will inspire and help the translation of subtitles of Chinese films in the future and promote the dissemination of excellent Chinese film culture and traditional culture.

2. Features and Principles of Film Subtitle Translation

Film subtitles refer to non-visual content in the form of text that appears below the film screen to display dialogue, monologues, etc. in the film. Film subtitles have two characteristics: instantaneous and spatially limited [4]. First of all, movie subtitles need to be switched along with the switching of movie scenes, and the cut-in and cut-out of subtitles should not be too different from the continuation time of the characters' mouths in the movie. Unlike the text in literature, which is not limited by time and space, readers can repeatedly ponder the connotation expressed in it, film subtitles are bound to be limited in terms of pop-up time and scope in order to satisfy both the visual and auditory effects of the audience. The so-called movie subtitle translation is to translate the text of the original language movie subtitles into the target language, and due to different cultural backgrounds, it is impossible to achieve an exact match between the original language subtitles and the target language subtitles. The translation of film subtitles must apply to the requirements based on the characteristics of film subtitles—transience. In addition, there are two other characteristics of film subtitle translation: mass and emotional [5]. Firstly, compared with literature, literature is more selective to audiences due to readers' preference. Conversely, movies are influenced by economic benefits and their contents must serve the public. accordingly, the translation of movie subtitles needs to give priority to facilitate audiences' understanding of movie plots, that is, the translation of movie subtitles needs to be simple and concise enough to let target language audiences understand movie plots and the contents of dialogues between movie characters within the limited viewing time. Secondly, due to the different cultural backgrounds, the translation of movie subtitles should be reasonably translated according to the emotional expressions of the target language audience, so that the target language audience can have emotional resonance as much as possible.

Based on the above characteristics, the translation of movie subtitles should also follow the principles of faithfulness, conciseness, and accessibility [4]. The principle of faithfulness applies to basically all types of translations, i.e., the translation should follow the connotation expressed in the original as closely as possible. In film subtitle translation, faithfulness to the original language is

conducive to the spread of the original culture. Therefore, the translator should adopt appropriate translation strategies to make the target language audience understand the cultural connotation of the film as much as possible to promote the exchange between cultures; as the film subtitles are limited by length and time, the translation of the film subtitles should also be as concise and easy to understand as possible to enable the target language audience to accurately grasp the immediate content of the film.

To sum up, unlike ordinary translation, the translation of movie subtitles will also be limited by objective factors brought by the characteristics of movie subtitles, and translators should consider them comprehensively and make a reasonable choice of translation strategies.

3. Strategies for Translating Culturally Loaded Words in the Translation of Big Fish & Begonia Subtitles

3.1. Liberal Translation

Liberal translation is a type of translation that emphasizes conveying the meaning and intent of a text rather than a strict adherence to the original wording and sentence structure. From the perspective of film subtitle translation, choosing the strategy of liberal translation can relatively make it easier for the target language audiences to understand the connotation of the culturally loaded words in the film, i.e., it corresponds to the characteristics of the popularization in subtitle translation.

Example 1: 灵婆

Translation: The Lady of Souls

The cultural background of the Lingpo can be traced back to the ancient Chinese culture of witchcraft. In ancient China, it was common to believe in the existence of spirits and gods, as well as in the supernatural ability of some people to communicate with spirits or to exorcise demons and ward off evil spirits, these people were often called shamans or witches. As times change, witchcraft culture has gradually evolved into Taoism, Buddhism and other religious cultures. In southern China, especially in southern Fujian, this culture has been widely inherited and developed. In Big Fish & Begonia, Lingpo is an elderly female figure with a fish head and a human body who can manipulate life and death and is in charge of the souls of all dead humans. For audiences of the target language who do not understand Chinese culture, if the name of such a functional character is simply phonetically translated as "Ling Po", it may be difficult for them to connect the storyline with the character in the film. In conclusion, the translation of "the Lady of Souls" well explains the functional meaning of the character, reduces the difficulty of understanding and helps the audience to grasp the plot easily.

Example 2: 孟婆汤

Translation: Mengpo Potion

Mengpo Tang is considered a magical drink in traditional Chinese folk beliefs, and those who drink it can forget the memories of their past lives and be reincarnated. This concept first appeared in ancient texts such as the Classic of Mountains and Seas and Huai-nan Tzu, but its true cultural background can be traced back to Buddhist culture after the Han Dynasty. In Buddhism, reincarnation is an important concept, believing that after death, people are reborn according to the karma of their previous lives. In order to be liberated after rebirth, Buddhism often performs transcendental rituals to dissolve people's past-life ties. In the corresponding scene of Big Fish & Begonia, Qiu found Deer God with bitterness and pain and wanted his help to relieve it, and then Deer God brought out a bowl of "Mengpo Tang" for Qiu to drink and said that by drinking it, he could forget all the painfulness in his life. "potion" refers to a liquid with magic power (Oxford Dictionary). In the case that the target audience does not know the cultural background, translating "soup" as "potion" according to the cultural background and storyline is appropriate for the audience to understand the functional

meaning of “Mengpo Tang” — this magic power drink can make people forget their pain and regain their lives.

Example 3: 逆天而行

Translation: It goes against the law of nature.

“Ni Tian Er Xing” appears in the ancient Chinese texts Zhuangzi - The World of Man and Shiji - The Book of Xiang Yu. In ancient China, people universally believed in the existence of the gods of heaven, and believed that human behavior was monitored by the gods, and that anyone who disobeyed the will of the gods would be punished. This idiom is now commonly used to describe an idea or action that is contrary to the generally accepted truth. In *Big Fish & Begonia*, Chun wants to defy the objective laws of nature and resurrect the dead kun in the human world. And it is a well-known law of nature that people cannot come back from the dead, independent of regional and cultural background. The translator adopted the translation strategy of liberal translation, translated “Ni Tian Er Xing” into “it goes against the law of nature”, which accurately and concisely summarizes the plot of Chun’s attempt to revive the dead Kun. In addition, from the perspective of subtitle translation, the length of the translation is in line with the “transience” characteristic, and it is easy for the target audiences to understand the storyline and faithful to the content of the movie.

3.2. Literal Translation

The literal translation is based on the characteristics of the source language and the target language to ensure that the content and form of the original language are retained to the greatest extent possible without losing the original semantic meaning. Most importantly, literal translation is not a rigid translation, but a translation that is as straightforward as possible, with the aim of transmitting the cultural characteristics of the source language, while fully translating the content and meaning of the original text [6,7].

Example 4: 明明上天，临照下土；神之听之，介尔景福

Translation: The sun above shines on the earth below; And the friendly gods, their blessings bestow.

The phrase “明明上天，临照下土；神之听之，介尔景福” comes from a passage in the book of Confucianism, *“The Analects of Confucius.”* It highlights the crucial role of one's character, behavior, and actions in shaping their destiny. According to this passage, heaven is high above, and its light shines upon the earth, which suggests that there is a divine presence that watches over us. The spirits are aware of our deeds, and they reward those who are virtuous and righteous. In essence, this phrase is a reminder that good actions and noble deeds bring good fortune, while bad actions and vices attract misfortune. It is a call to cultivate one's virtues, morality, and wisdom, and to strive to become a better person, not just for oneself but for the benefit of society as a whole. In *Big Fish & Begonia*, before all the children who have reached the age of 16 are about to enter the human world, Grandpa Houtu uses these words to warn them that they should always remember not to have any contact with humans during the seven days of the tour to earth, and emphasizes that this is a rule of heaven that must never be violated. The English translation of the first line uses the words “above” and “below” in a literal translation, interpreting that the heavens are watching the people on the earth below, which fits the original meaning of the verse. The phrases “friendly gods” and “blessing bestow” in the second line also convey the traditional Chinese cultural belief that the heaven blesses people on the earth. In addition, the rhythmical beauty of the verse is also reflected in the English translation of “below” and “bestow”, and in terms of word count, the translation also follows the rules of neat counterpoint in Chinese verse. Overall, in terms of expression effect, the translation of the line is well integrated with the storyline and conveys the connotation of traditional Chinese culture; in terms of Chinese poetry, the line follows the beauty of rhyme and neat counterpoint, which is also a reflection of spreading traditional Chinese culture.

3.3. Adaptation

Adaptation mainly refers to changing the content of the original translation according to the language expression habits and cultural traditions of the target language audiences, adding or deleting certain information appropriately so that the target language audience can understand the storyline. The application of retranslation method in movie subtitle translation is mainly to conform to the language habits of the target language audience to achieve the purpose of attracting the audience [8].

Example 5: 这个季节人间的星空真美啊！

Translation: Look! Sister Leizu's woven a new sky for the humans.

Leizu is a figure from the ancient period of our country, and is also the yuan consort of the Yellow Emperor, Xuanyuan. She invented silkworm breeding, silk reeling and silk weaving techniques and popularized them to the common people, which strongly promoted the development of ancient Chinese civilization. She invented silkworm breeding, silk reeling and silk weaving techniques and popularized them their citizens, which strongly promoted the development of ancient Chinese civilization. In the story of *Big Fish & Begonia*, the sky of the human world is "woven" by Leizu. Accordingly, if the sentence is translated directly as "The starry sky on earth is so beautiful this season," it may be difficult for the target audience to associate the scene of "Leizu weaving" in the movie with the "starry sky in the human world". However, the sentence adopts a retranslation method, corresponding to the scene in the play where Leizu takes the woven cloth from the loom and puts it into the water to dye the sky of the human world. The word "woven" helps the target audience associate the character of "Leizu" with "weaving", which effectively portrays the cultural image of Leizu without hindering the audience from understanding the content of the film.

3.4. Addition

The addition is a way to express the meaning of the source language more accurately and fluently, which means adding some words or phrase based on the context according to the way of thinking and expression habits of the target language audience [9,10]. The use of Addition in film subtitles helps translators to add some explanatory words or sentences when translating cultural information which is unfamiliar to the audience, with the aim of allowing the target audience to better appreciate the film work and deepen their understanding of Chinese culture [11].

Example 6: 死是永生之门

Translation: Death is not an end just as birth is not a beginning. They are just stops on the path of eternity.

The saying "death is the door to eternal life" can be found in similar forms in various cultural contexts, but it is particularly common in Chinese culture. In traditional Chinese culture, death is often seen as an important turning point, and it is believed that the spirit and soul can achieve eternal life through death. This belief stems from ancient Chinese Confucian and Taoist philosophy, as well as the influence of Buddhism. In these belief systems, death is seen as a transitional stage that allows the soul to leave the body and continue to exist in another world. In Confucianism, people emphasize the pursuit of moral and spiritual perfection, believing that the soul can continue to exist in future generations after death and be passed down through descendants. In Taoism, people pursue immortality and believe that death is only a stage that can be overcome through cultivation and meditation. In Buddhism, people believe in the theory of reincarnation, in which the soul can be transferred to another body after death, until ultimately achieving Nirvana, or liberation. A similar idea is also reflected in English literature. In *Death Be Not Proud*, John Donne mentioned that "One short sleep past, we wake eternally", meaning that death is only a short sleep, and after waking up, the dead person can get eternal life. In this cultural context, the translation of "死是永生之门" in the subtitles can be considered as a bridge between the two cultures. It allows the target language

audience to understand the concepts of "life" and "death" in Chinese culture, and at the same time, it integrates the target culture and allows the audience to better understand the content of the film.

Example 7

The use of Addition in the translation of the incantation part in *Big Fish & Begonia*

The season pass before us all, Earth and Heaven, Moon and Sun, tied by the elements. Dragon of the sea and the sky, awake! Let the gateway be opened!

This subtitle appears in the *Big Fish & Begonia* in the Chu grandmother wearing a mask to recite the incantation, summoning the dragon king to open the door of the Gateway. In traditional Chinese culture, the sun, moon, and dragon all have deep cultural significance and background. The sun represents brightness, warmth, vitality, and vitality in traditional Chinese culture. It was also considered the center of the world, and its movement was also considered a sign of time and season. The moon represents softness, beauty, and sensibility in traditional Chinese culture. It is also an important element of ancient Chinese culture and religious beliefs, such as moon gods and moon worship. In Chinese culture, the moon is closely related to emotional feelings such as family, friendship, and love. The dragon represents strength, nobility, auspiciousness, and wisdom, it is also closely related to the emperor, power, and rule in traditional Chinese culture. In the Chinese version of the movie, the incantation does not have corresponding subtitles and the audience cannot understand the content of the incantation. In the English version, in order to let the audience understand the object and the purpose of the incantation, the translation of the incantation has been added to help the target language audience understand the content of the movie and enhance their understanding of the ancient Chinese image of the Dragon King and distinguish it from the evil image of the "dragon" in Western culture.

4. Shortcomings in the Translation of Culturally Loaded Words in *Big Fish & Begonia*

Example 8: 谷雨

Translation: Wheat Harvest

"Gu Yu" is one of the 24 solar terms in China, usually falling around April 4th or 5th each year, marking the beginning of a new phase in spring. Its name comes from the meaning of "rain nourishing all grains", indicating that at this time the earth begins to rain, which is beneficial for the growth of crops. The subtitle of *Big Fish & Begonia* mistranslated the culturally loaded word "Gu Yu" as "Wheat Harvest", which means the season of wheat harvesting. This not only causes confusion in the film's timeline, but also does not meet the translation purpose of spreading traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, this paper suggests that the translation of "Gu Yu" should be more appropriately translated as "Grain Rain", which is the most widespread translation version for 24 Chinese solar terms [12]. It can also, to a certain extent, play the role of spreading Chinese traditional culture.

Example 9: 自摸，清一色

Translation: Mahjong! I win!

Mahjong originated in China during the Qing dynasty and was initially played with paper cards. And it was first introduced to the United States in 1920 [13]. Later, the game evolved into the familiar tile-based version that is popular worldwide today. In Mahjong, "self-draw" (自摸) means that a player draws the winning tile themselves, rather than claiming it from another player's discard. When a player wins by self-draw, they receive a higher point value for their winning hand. "Pure one suit" (清一色) refers to a hand in which all tiles belong to a single suit (either bamboo, character, or dot), without any honor tiles or bonus tiles. This hand is considered a higher-ranking hand and earns more points than a standard hand. In the film's subtitles, the corresponding lines do not directly use the two mahjong proper names, but simply use "Mahjong, I win! However, according to the expression habits of the target language audience, after winning a game, they do not call the game by its name, and

such an expression is incorrect. Accordingly, this paper suggests that the subtitle of this line can be revised to "self-draw, pure one suit, I win!" and the caption above the screen can be added as "self-draw, pure one suit: winning rules in Chinese Mahjong", which can not only popularize Chinese Mahjong to foreign audiences, but also conform to the normal speech habits.

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to figure out what English translation strategies of culturally loaded words had been used in the subtitle translation of "Big Fish & Begonia" by combining the characteristics of subtitle translation with the methods of the text reading and literature research. Through analyzing cases from *Big Fish & Begonia*, the research questions of this paper draw the following conclusions.

Translation of movie subtitles is different from translation of other texts and literature. In the translation process, translation of movie subtitles requires the selection of translation strategies according to the characteristics of movie subtitles, which means that translation of movie subtitles cannot be carried out simply under the guidance of one of the principles of translation, and translators often need to take comprehensive consideration in the selection of translation strategies. What is more, the translation of culturally loaded words in the movie subtitles needs to meet the constraints imposed by the characteristics of the movie subtitles, while at the same time serving to transmit the culture of the original language, which makes the translation work even more difficult. By analyzing the translation of culturally loaded words in the subtitles of *Big Fish & Begonia*, this paper summarized four translation strategies: Liberal translation, Adaption, Literal translation, and Addition. It also analyzes the advantages of these strategies for the audience's viewing effects and cultural transmission with the characteristics of subtitle translation. Several inappropriate translations were also analyzed and suggestions for improvement were made. In addition, this paper takes *Big Fish & Begonia*, an animated movie loaded with a large number of traditional Chinese cultural elements, as an example to fill the gap in the study of translation strategies for culturally loaded words in movies with similar themes, and the specific problems and solutions involved in it also provide some reference values for similar translations, i.e., translators can combine the examples in the text and select translation strategies according to specific situations when translating, and also the possible errors in translation can be avoided according to the shortcomings listed in this paper. Finally, through the study of the translation of culturally loaded words of the film subtitles, the researchers hope that this paper can be used to promote Chinese domestic animation to the world, and at the same time promote the dissemination of Chinese excellent traditional culture and enhance national cultural confidence.

References

- [1] Xu Yihang. (2021). *CHALLENGES IN FILM TRANSLATION FROM A MULTIMODAL PERSPECTIVE: A CASE STUDY ON CHINESE-ENGLISH SUBTITLED AND DUBBED FILMS* [D]. Shanghai International Studies University.02.
- [2] Yu Mengya. (2018). *On Translation Strategies of Film Subtitles from the Perspective of Communicative Translation: A Case Study on English Translation of Big Fish & Begonia* [D]. University of Jinan.02.
- [3] Paula Gonzalez Freire. (2020). *A Contrastive Study of English and Spanish Subtitles of the Chinese film Big Fish & Begonia: A Trilingual Approach* [D]. Xiamen University. 01.
- [4] Xie Qing. (2017). *On the Features and Principles of Film Subtitle Translation*. *Tomorrow's Style* (01), 284.
- [5] Li Jun. (2022). *Analysis on the Characteristics and Strategies of English Subtitle Translation of Foreign Films from the Perspective of Cultural Differences*. *Overseas English* (13), 15-16+27.
- [6] Hu Meirong & Wang Xiaoli. (2021). *Research on the subtitle translation strategy of "Hi, Mom"*. *JinGu Creative Literature* (47), 124-126.
- [7] Fan Zhongying. (1994). *An Applied Theory of Translation*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. Beijing. 90-92.
- [8] Wang Jianxiong. (2017). *The Film Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory: A Case Study of Black Coal, Thin Ice*. *Journal of Jingdezhen University* (04), 27-32.

- [9] Dong Xiaobo. (2012). *"Introduction to Translation" [M]. University of International Business and Economics Press. Beijing. 97.*
- [10] Wei zhao. (2022). *Chinese-English Subtitle Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Communicative Translation Theory: A Case Study of China from Above by Knny Png and Klaus Toft. 8th International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Inter-cultural Communication (ICELAIC 2021), Volume 652.*
- [11] Hao Jian. (2020). *Research on the English Translation of Film and Television Works from the Perspective of Cross-cultural Communication—Taking "Empresses in the Palace" as an Example. Northern Literature (12), 98-99.*
- [12] CCTV.com. (2016). *China's '24 solar terms' listed as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage. Retrieved from China's '24 solar terms' listed as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage.*
- [13] Merriam-Webster. (2023). *Mah-jongg. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mah-jongg>.*