

Original Paper

On the English Translation of Culture-Specific Items in *the Gua Sha Treatment* Based on Domestication and Foreignization

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Abstract

The film, The Gua Sha Treatment, is regarded as a global success in spreading Chinese culture internationally. Its subtitles are normally loaded with culture-specific items which may directly or indirectly influence the acceptability of film audiences. By collecting and classifying the culture-specific items in the subtitle translation of the film, the paper analyzes its subtitle translation from the perspective of domestication and foreignization. It demonstrates that the subtitle translation of culture-specific items in the film prioritizes domestication, with foreignization as a secondary option. Free translation is frequently employed in translating those items loaded with Chinese culture, followed by literal translation and transliteration. This facilitates the international dissemination of Chinese culture by making subtitles easily comprehensible to target audiences. In addition, the translation model can provide references for the ongoing subtitle translation of the film characterized with Chinese culture.

Keywords

Subtitle Translation, Culture-specific Items, the Gua Sha Treatment, Domestication and Foreignization

1. Introduction

As globalization prospers, China is increasingly merged into the global environment. However, it is still quite difficult for China, a culture-loaded country, to be understood by the foreign world. Today, many forms, such as books and films with Chinese characteristics, are used to promote China internationally. Even though considerable efforts are made, the outcomes are still not satisfactory. It is crucial to share Chinese culture with the rest of the world. For one thing, it can be beneficial to the whole to recognize China further. For another, because of its distinguished culture, many foreigners could be attracted, which is conducive to the development of its culture and tourism. Under this

circumstance, a great deal of research is conducted in an effort to provide a more efficient means facilitating cultural exchange. In the film sphere, the study towards translation is inadequate. For example, in a Chinese film, *The Gua Sha Treatment*, the study towards it places too much emphasis on cultural communication and cultural conflicts. Some talked about the cultural conflicts, the cultural exchanges between China and the United States, the conceptualization of face in the Chinese culture, individualism and collectivism, the communicative approach, and social habits in the two different cultural backgrounds (Wang Can, 2020). Yue Jiang-ying also concentrated on the Chinese interpretation of *The Gua Sha Treatment*, interpreting China's Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), collectivism, the Chinese concept of "Face", and the Chinese worship of the Monkey King (Yue Jiang-ying, 2016).

The film *The Gua Sha Treatment*, released in 2001, is about a Chinese family living in a foreign country. Its movie plots are easy to follow. The film's leading role is Xu Datong, who achieved the American dream through his efforts. His achievements in his career were recognized by his boss. His wife also achieved professional success. They both belonged to the middle class of American society and had a very adorable son named Dennis. However, the perfect life was somewhat disrupted by an incident. The couple brought their father to the United States to reside with them. One day, their son had diarrhea, but his grandpa did not comprehend the English introduction to the medication, so he used the Traditional Chinese Medicine, Gua Sha, to treat him, leaving red traces on the skin. Therefore, Dennis's skin traces were discovered by doctors when their son was sent to the hospital for his falling, triggering a series of unanticipated incidents.

Numerous renowned translators and theorists have put forward their insights into the translation strategy for culture-specific items. Eugene Nida expressed his theory of "functional equivalence", which emphasizes that the translator's responsibility is to make the target readers understand the source-cultural information in the target text (Nida, 1993). In other words, the translation should create an effect that could be equally comprehended and appreciated by the target reader just like the source reader, so the translation is much more domesticated. On the other hand, Lawrence Venuti considers foreignizing practices to be a 'highly desirable...strategic cultural intervention' that aims to 'send the reader abroad' by taking the receiving culture aware of the linguistic and cultural difference inherent in the foreign text (Munday, 2016, p. 226).

In recent years, the Chinese culture-themed film has been translated frequently into English and other languages. The quality of the translation looms large in the spread of Chinese culture. *The Gua Sha Treatment*, as a film that caused a sensation in the foreign world could be served as an essential object for us to extract the experience in translating the film concerning the Chinese culture so as to increase the understanding and acceptance of foreign audiences in the traditional Chinese culture. The Traditional Chinese Medicine, as Chinese-specific culture, has aroused the interest globally, especially under the time of COVID-19, catching the eyeball of the medicine world. The successful translation of expressions concerning TCM can be conducive to the development and spread of the Chinese medicine. It can also pave the way for the spread of Chinese culture abroad and the expansion of China's global

influence.

2. The Culture-Specific Items and the Introduction of Domestication and Foreignization

2.1 Culture-Specific Items

Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) are also referred to as cultural references, culture-specific references, culture-loaded terms, socio-cultural terms and cultural elements. However, according to Aixela, they are often ill-defined, “arbitrary and static”. Regarding the definition of culture-specific terms, different scholars have given their insights. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere (1990) asserted that “There is always a context in which the translation occurs, a history from which a text emerges and into which it is transposed. Translation as an activity is always doubly contextualized since the text has a place in two cultures (Bassnett, 1990, p. 11)”. Javier Franco Aixela defined them as Culture-Specific Items (CSIs): “Those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translating problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text (Aixela, 1996, p. 58).” “In other words, in translation a CSI does not exist of itself, but as the result of a conflict arising from any linguistically represented reference in a source text which, when transferred to a target language, pose a translation problem due to the nonexistence or to the different value (Whether determined by terminology, usage frequency, etc.) of the given item in the target language culture (Aixela, 1996, p. 57).” To illustrate, it is quite common for a translator to come across some culture-specific words when doing translation, since two words are of great departure from each other under different cultural backgrounds. Baker once defined: “The source-language word may express a concept which is unknown in the target culture. The concept in question may be abstract or concrete; it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or a type of food. Such concepts are often referred to as culture-specific” (Baker, 2018, p. 20). Under this circumstance, it would be quite difficult for a translator to present the exact meaning to the target reader. Thus, a particular translation strategy must be advocated to help the target reader understand those culture-specific words.

In China, translation experts have also provided their explanation towards culture-specific items. “Culture-loaded words are loaded with specific cultural information of a particular nation and represent a profound national culture. They are the direct or indirect reflection of the national culture at the structure of words” (Hu Wenzhong, 1999, pp. 10-14). “Culture-loaded words signify words, phrases and idioms in a specific culture, directly reflecting a different lifestyle which was gradually formed in history” (Liao Qiyi, 2000). “Culture-loaded words could also be referred to as word gap, which means that some culture-specific words could not be found in the target culture so that the specific culture of the source culture could not be presented” (Bao Huinan, 2004).

Eugene Nida (1993) defined them into five categories: ecological culture-loaded words, material culture-loaded words, social culture-loaded words, religious culture-loaded words and linguistic culture-loaded words. According to Aixela (1996), the translation towards culture-specific items could

be divided into two major groups separated by their conservative to substitutive nature, i.e., by the conservation or substitution of the original reference(s) by other(s) closer to the receiving pole (Aixela, 1996, p. 61). For conservation, the translation methods include repetition, orthographic adaptation, extratextual gloss, and intra-textual gloss, while for substitution, the methods include synonymy, limited universalization, absolute universalization, naturalization, deletion, and autonomous creation (Aixela, 1996, pp. 61-62).

To sum up, culture-specific words are distinctive in a specific culture, which means it could be quite challenging to locate the exact expressions in another culture. The paper uses the official translation version of subtitles downloaded on the Internet and makes double checks by watching the film. In the film, *The Gua Sha Treatment*, the culture-specific words could be divided into five categories: the TCM words with Chinese characteristics, slang in China, four-character (in Chinese) idioms, communicative languages with Chinese characteristics and expressions loaded with traditional Chinese culture. In order to successfully present a film with thick Chinese culture abroad, it is imperative to adopt efficient translation methods so that the target audience can grasp the contents of the film. As a result, they may grow their interest in Chinese culture, which is quite advantageous for the propagation of Chinese culture and China's international influence.

2.2 *The Introduction of Domestication and Foreignization*

The two terms put forward by Lawrence Venuti, "Foreignization and Domestication", were coined from Friedrich Schleiermacher. For Schleiermacher, it seems impossible to do a perfect translation since the ST meaning is couched in language that is very culture-bound and to which the TL can never fully correspond, and the real question is how to bring the ST writer and the TT reader together (Munday, 2016, p. 48). He considered there to be only two paths open for the 'true' translator: "Either the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him, or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him. (ibid)" Against the background of the dominant place of the Anglo-American culture, the logically or nationally cultural works, especially from marginal nations, were severely influenced by British and American translation culture. Venuti bemoaned the phenomenon of domestication since it involves "an ethnocentric reaction of foreign text to receive cultural values" (Munday, 2016, p. 225). By contrast, in order to avoid being assimilated by the dominant cultures, he advocated foreignization or minoritizing translation. In this kind of translation strategy, "a target text is produced which deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original" (Shuttleworth, 2014, p. 59). For Venuti, foreignization "entails choosing a foreign text and developing a translation method along lines which are excluded by dominant cultural values in the target language", so he considered foreignizing practices to be a 'high desirable... strategic cultural intervention' which seeks to "send the reader abroad" by making the receiving culture aware of the linguistic and cultural difference inherent in the foreign text (Munday, 2016, p. 226).

When doing a translation, translators may have their preferable translation methods to achieve certain

goals. However, just like some translation theorists have put forward, to make the translated work accepted by the target reader, it is not advisable to be confined to only one translation strategy. For instance, Ge Haowen, a famous sinologist, is noted for his translation of the book *The Red Sorghum*, written by Mo Yan, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his translation works, we can clearly see the choice of the translator. Although Mr Ge has a deep affection towards the Chinese culture, he has to consider the acceptance of the publisher and target readers' acceptance. Thus, his translation considers both the source text and the market, so his translation is equally faithful and flexible (Wang Baorong, 2014). In short, his translation is characterized by foreignization and domestication, which could be a sound reason for his translation popular in the English-speaking culture.

Therefore, in the translation of a Chinese film loaded with Chinese culture, it is also impossible to adopt one translation strategy, either domestication or foreignization. If only domestication were utilized, the target audience could not appreciate the alien culture, which is unsuitable for the spread of the culture. Likewise, if foreignization were singularly adopted, some alien words which could not be found in an exact explanation in the target culture could be too difficult to be understood by the target reader. In a bid to spread the Chinese film loaded with Chinese culture efficiently, this paper proposes to flexibly use domestication and foreignization. From the translation of the film *The Gua Sha Treatment*, we can see that the two strategies are employed wisely.

3. Culture-Specific Items in *The Gua Sha Treatment*

3.1 The Features of Subtitles in the Gua Sha Treatment

“Subtitling may be defined as a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavors to recount the original dialogue of the speakers, as well as the discursive elements that appear in the image (letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, placards, and the like), and the information that is contained on the soundtrack (songs, voices off) (Cintas, 2014, p. 8). According to Basil Hatim and Ian Mason, “there are four main strains on subtitling, which create particular kinds of difficulties for the translator: 1. The shift in mode from speech to writing. 2. Factors that govern the medium or channel in which meaning is to be conveyed. 3. The reduction of the source text as a consequence of (2) above. 4. The requirements of matching the visual image (Venuti, 2000, p. 430).”

As for the features of subtitles in the film *The Gua Sha Treatment*, they are similar to some Chinese films, but they are also distinctive since it is also a film pertaining to the Traditional Chinese Medicine. First, although the film is mainly acted by Chinese actors and actresses, its entire setting is in the United States, so the main roles mostly speak English with the exception of the migrant couple's father. Second, four-character idioms are commonly used in the film, including other expressions loaded with Chinese culture, like slang and communicative languages. Third, since it is a film related to the Traditional Chinese Medicine, some expressions are concerned with the TCM, which may be too challenging to be presented. The film also shows that the conflict between the East and the West rose

from the treatment. Therefore, the challenges of translating these subtitles are substantial. By downloading official subtitles on the website and checking the translation by watching films, this paper manually chooses those culture-specific items with those repeated ones omitted. There are 33 typical sentences, and they can be divided into five categories: the TCM words with Chinese characteristics, slang in China, four-character (in Chinese) idioms, communicative languages with Chinese characteristics and expressions loaded with traditional Chinese culture. Involve a transl.

3.2 The Analysis of the Subtitle Translation of the *Gua Sha Treatment* from the Perspective of Domestication and Foreignization

The paper adopts data collection and example analysis to analyze the subtitle translation of *The Gua Sha Treatment*. For data collection, it can provide insight into what translation strategies are used in translating the culture-specific items in the film, while as for example analysis, it can be used to describe the translation process, including: how to define the denotative meaning of culture-specific items and their cultural implications; whether an assessment could be made to evaluate the target reader's understanding to the culture-specific items; choose a specific translation strategy and method (Wang Baorong, 2016). As stated previously, there are 33 culturally rich sentences, with repeated ones removed. The majority of these culture-specific items employ free translation, literal translation, transliteration, and omission.

Table 1. The Statistical Table of Culture-Specific Items in *The Gua Sha Treatment*

	Free Translation	Literal Translation	Transliteration	Omission	Transliteration + Literal Translation	Transliteration + Annotation
TCM Words with Chinese characteristics	0	1	5	0	1	0
Slang in China	1	0	0	0	0	1
Four-character (in Chinese) Idioms	9	0	0	0	0	0
Communicative Languages with Chinese Characteristics	8	4	0	1	0	0
Expressions Loaded with Chinese Culture	2	0	0	0	0	0
Total	20	5	5	1	1	1

The Table reveals that free translation is mostly used, followed by literal translation and transliteration,

with omission, transliteration + literal translation, and transliteration + annotation each being employed once. For free translation, it has been used for 20 times for translating slang in China, four-character (in Chinese) idioms, communicative languages with Chinese characteristics and expressions loaded with Chinese culture. For literal translation, translating TCM words with Chinese characteristics is used for one time, but the translation of communicative languages with Chinese characteristics is used for four times. Transliteration is mainly used to translate TCM words with Chinese characteristics. The following are examples to elaborate on the translation of culture-specific items in *The Gua Sha Treatment*.

Example 1: 我们好像本末倒置了, 律师.

Translation: I think you put the cart before the horse, the counsellor.

Example 2: 你这一说, 不是授人以柄吗?

Translation: They will use it to against us.

According to example 1 and example 2, we can see that free translation is used in translating four-character idioms. As a matter of fact, the collected eight sentences concerning four-character idioms are all freely translated. "Free translation produces the target language text without the style, form or content of the original" (Newmark, 1988, p. 81). The four-character (in Chinese) idioms always contain abundant meaning in the four characters, which is difficult to be grasped through literal translation or transliteration, as the kind of expression is typical in China. This method is much more oriented to the target reader, as its central core is to convey the essential meaning of the source text to the target reader. Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that to translate the four-character idioms needs to adopt free translation, since it can facilitate the understanding of the target reader to the source text. In other words, their understanding of the film about Chinese culture could also increase, which helps the international spread of Chinese movies.

Example 3: 总得有人去擦屁股.

Translation: Somebody has to do the dirty work.

Example 4: 老板正独自逍遥呢!

Translation: Boss is taking a sweet time!

Free translation is also applied in translating a majority of communicative languages with Chinese characteristics. From example 3, we can see that "擦屁股" means brushing buttocks literally, so its literal meaning is quite different from the bottom meaning of the source text. In the film, the sentence is about a lawsuit that needs to be solved. Then, the one who takes the task could be expressed as a person who does the dirty work. Thus, we can see that the denotative meaning of this sentence is quite different from its literal meaning. Likewise, example 4 means that when a group of people are in trouble, some of them may get away from these troubles. There is no equivalent expression in English, so free translation, only providing the essential meaning of the original text, could be a better way of notifying film audiences. In comparison, literal translation and transliteration, good in containing the original flavour, may fail to successfully transfer the meaning of the original.

Example 5: 延续许家的血脉.

Translation: And continue the Xu's family blood line in the circle of life.

Example 6: 给你面子, 懂吗?

Translation: Do give your face, you know?

“Literal translation: in which the SL grammatical constructions are converted to their nearest TL equivalences, but the lexical words are again translated singly, out of context (Newmark, 1988, p. 81).”

Literal translation is used in translating examples 5 and 6. For communicative languages with Chinese characteristics, they are mainly translated through free translation, followed by literal translation. Compared with examples 3 and 4, examples 5 and 6 are more distinctive concerning traditional Chinese culture. However, they are not too typical to be grasped by the target reader. ‘Family blood line’ is about the clan system in China, which could also be seen in the foreign world. For example 6, “face culture” is quite typical in China, as Chinese see self-esteem as part and parcel of life. In the film, Xu Datong beat his son in order to give a face to his boss, which can be understood by watching the film. Therefore, by applying literal translation, the original flavour of the source text could be reserved. Moreover, it is a good way for the target audience to learn about the Chinese culture.

Example 7: 刮痧

Translation: Gua Sha

Example 8: 几千年来中医认为人有七经八脉.

Translation: For thousands of years, Chinese medicine recognized that there are seven “Jing” and eight “Mai”.

Examples 7 and 8 are about Traditional Chinese Medicine, and they are transliterated. The transliteration method is used in translating all subtitles of TCM words with Chinese characteristics in the film. “The term transliteration is defined as a process of replacing or complementing the words to meanings of one language with meanings of another as sometimes the exact equivalence or exact meaning might not exist” (Regmi, 2010). Baker once defined: “The source-language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. The concept in question may be abstract or concrete; it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or a type of food. Such concepts are often referred to as culture-specific” (Baker, 2018, p. 20). Although transliteration is always called a kind of zero translation, foreigners may still fail to understand the meaning of the translation. However, there is no certain equivalence found in the foreign language, and free translation or literal translation may distort its original meaning. Transliteration is preferred. Moreover, the film is picture-oriented, which means foreign audiences may find out what is “Gua Sha” and “Seven ‘Jing’ and Eight ‘Mai’” in the film. In this way, the Chinese culture can also be disseminated efficiently.

Example 9: 好儿子, 难得你一片孝心.

Translation: Good son.

Example 10: 留得青山在, 哪怕没柴烧.

Translation: Your honor if my wife lives, we can always have children, but if she dies...

Example 9 uses omission, only being translated as “Good son”, but the source text also contains other expressions, like “filial piety”. The omission is adopted to avoid unnecessary troubles, as “filial piety” is quite alien in the foreign world, so it would be difficult to be acquired by the target reader. The primary function of the film is to provide essential information to audiences, so some unnecessary parts that may be misunderstood could be omitted. Example 10 is special in the film because the whole sentence is transliterated, even if some equivalent expressions could be found in the target language. The reason is that the words were spoken hurriedly, and the explanation was followed, as Xu Datong clearly knew that foreigners would not understand his words.

To sum up, free translation is used chiefly in translating culture-specific items in *The Gua Sha Treatment*. In other words, domestication is preferred in translating subtitles loaded with culture. As we can see that the main function of the film is to provide information for film viewers so as to facilitate their understanding of the film. Literal translation and transliteration are second choices in translating some culture-specific items.

4. Conclusion

This paper lists the culture-specific items in the subtitles of *The Gua Sha Treatment* and attempts to classify them. From the perspective of domestication and foreignization, the subtitle translation of the film takes domestication as the first choice, followed by foreignization, and some translations use both strategies. The prime intention of the film is to transfer messages to the target audience, so free translation should be taken into consideration first and foremost in translating those culture-specific items which could be quite difficult to be understood by the foreign audience. Literal translation is preferred in translating those sentences that are not quite distinctive in one culture or the target audience could also understand their literal meaning. Transliteration could be mainly used in those culture exclusive items, such as TCM. Given this, information about the film could be understood by film viewers efficiently, which is also conducive to the international spread of Chinese culture. This type of translation model could serve as a reference for the subsequent translation of film subtitles loaded with Chinese culture.

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