

Original Paper

The Applications of Domestication and Foreignization in the Translation of English and Chinese Movie Titles

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Received: August 20, 2021 Accepted: September 2, 2021 Online Published: September 6, 2021

doi:10.22158/selt.v9n4p34 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v9n4p34>

Abstract

Taking domestication and foreignization as the research object, this paper is meant to explore the applications of domestication and foreignization in English and Chinese film titles. Firstly, it probes into the main factors that have influence on the translation of film titles, namely ways of thinking, aesthetic concepts, business values and translators' understandings of the cultural background of the source language. Secondly, by introducing translators like Venuti, Fu Lei, Qian Zhongshu and Eugene Nida, the paper demonstrates domestication and foreignization, and then discusses them in the film titles. Finally, the paper elaborates the reasons and examples behind domestication and foreignization and a combination of the two. According to the study, the usage of domestication or foreignization is closely connected with the linguistic characteristics and cultural background of English and Chinese. Besides, these two translation strategies reinforce each other and are closely interwoven.

Keywords

Domestication, foreignization, English and Chinese film titles, translation

1. Introduction

Ever since its emergence, film has been well-liked among individuals with its unique and lingering charm. As an art form that combines sounds and images together, film is a miniature universe of the real world. Through movies, people are likely to have a deeper understanding of the lives of commoners across different regions and from distinct cultural backgrounds. In this sense, film, in essence, is a way of mass cultural communication and dissemination. Currently, movies have become an indispensable type of entertainment in our daily lives. With increasing exchanges with other countries after the introduction of the reform and opening-up policy, Chinese films have gradually entered the foreign film market. Moreover, more and more foreign films have also attracted the attention of Chinese people and have become a crucial part of our leisure time and foreign language

learning. Due to the advancement in and prosperity of the USA film industry, English movies account for the largest share of all international ones. Because of language differences, foreign films need to be translated into Chinese as soon as they enter the domestic market. By the same token, only by converting into other languages can Chinese films be understood and appreciated elsewhere.

As a representative ingredient of movies, movie titles not only need to be concise, but also profound and thought-provoking. Moreover, since films are a carrier of culture, cultural factors will also be embodied in the film titles. At first glance, the translation of film titles seems to be easy. Nevertheless, on second thoughts, it is rather an arduous task to convey the cultural elements of the title and to be appreciated by scholars and commoners alike. “When we get in touch with a movie, the primary focus is on whether the film’s title is appealing enough to catch people’s attention. In the increasingly competitive international movie market, a good film title is concerned with box office and word of mouth. And it is also a issue well worth studying to transform foreign films into native languages which are suitable for all ages in a vivid and accurate way without affecting their commercial features”. As an art form, movie acts as a cultural communicator. Besides, the purpose of the film title is “to summarize the content of films and TV series in a succinct way, to reveal the theme in a concise and comprehensive manner, and to profoundly ignite the imagination of the ordinary people”. As a result, film plays a significant role in cultural transmission. The paper will discuss the factors that influence the translation of film titles, and the roles that domestication and foreignization play in the translation of film titles respectively and how they are used.

2. The Main Factors That Influence the Translation of Film Titles

As the epitome of films, it is imperative for film titles to showcase both artistic and commercial values. The artistry of films requires a concise and general title, that is to say, even a single word contains abundant information to some degree. The commerciality of films determines the fact that the box office can hardly be ignored, otherwise it will be difficult for movies to survive in the cut-throat market competition, no matter how brilliant they are. Therefore, the title should appeal to the audience at the greatest extent, so much so that ordinary people cannot wait to watch them. All in all, the translation of the film titles is under the influence of thinking patterns, aesthetic concepts, commercial values, and understandings of the cultural background.

2.1 Ways of Thinking

Under the influence of different geographic conditions, methods of production, and lifestyles, East and West think in profoundly different ways. Chinese people pay more attention to ethics, whereas their European counterparts focus more on cognition; the Chinese value holistic and comprehensive thinking while Europeans attach importance to individualism and analytical thinking; Chinese people tend to be more intuitive, whereas Westerners emphasize solid evidence; the Chinese give a strategic priority to imaginative thinking while their European counterparts prioritize logical thinking. The distinctions between Chinese and Western ways of thinking directly affect the style of their film titles. Under the

circumstances that the Chinese pay close attention to the generality of the topic, chances are that film titles can summarize the content of the entire film and play a crucial role in the theme or tone of the film. The titles tend to be artistic and aesthetic, and use metaphors and four-character structures such as 《中国医生》 (*Chinese Doctors*), 《流浪地球》 (*The Wandering Earth*), 《红海行动》 (*Operation Red Sea*), and 《中国机长》 (*The Captain*). By a sharp contrast, however, Western people embrace simplicity and clarity, and the film titles are usually simplified and the language is somewhat random. Important figures, events, and things are usually taken as titles such as “*Forrest Gump*”, “*Mr. and Mrs. Smith*”, and “*Waterloo Bridge*”.

2.2 Aesthetic Concepts

Language is not only a carrier of culture, but also a carrier of the aesthetics of nations. Aesthetics have every possibility to lead the direction of language development in ethnic groups. Traditional Chinese aesthetics regards symmetry as something beautiful. For example, Chinese architecture and calligraphy art all display a symmetrical beauty. Chinese people’s preference for duality is exactly the embodiment of Chinese aesthetic concepts. The titles of Chinese films lay emphasis on artistic conceptions and atmosphere and seek the symmetry of the texts as can be seen in 《孤男寡女》 (*Needing You*), 《卧虎藏龙》 (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), 《东邪西毒》 (*Ashes of Time*) and so on. Cultural differences make Western aesthetics extremely different from their traditional Chinese equivalent. Chinese aesthetics attach great importance to poetic imagery with an integration of poetry, painting, and calligraphy, whereas its Western counterpart emphasizes realism. Chinese is paratactic while English is hypotactic. Although English movies also pay much attention to the rhythm of the titles including the use of alliteration like in “*Rat Race*”, “*Beauty and Beast*” and etc. On the whole, however, English film titles are mostly objective and straightforward such as “*Shoplifters*”, “*Avengers: Endgame*”, and “*Avatar*”, which directly point out the protagonists and the themes of the films. These titles are more in line with realism, an artistic style, and the aesthetic principles in the West. When translating them into Chinese, it is necessary to take the aesthetic concepts and language habits of Chinese audiences into consideration. The once-popular English movies, “*Gone with the Wind*” and “*The Bridge of Madison County*” were translated as 《乱世佳人》 and 《廊桥遗梦》, which cater to the aesthetic preferences of Chinese people and could be considered as translation masterpieces of English film titles.

2.3 Commercial Values

Film is an art that is both cultural and commercial. The title is both the guide and advertisement for the entire film. In this sense, the nature of film title translation is an advertisement translation. Advertisements are informative, aesthetic, expressive and vocative. Therefore, the translation of film titles cannot merely emphasize faithfulness to the original text, but should be flexible, so that film titles are likely to gain recognition from audiences to the greatest extent, and finally achieve the purpose of publicity. This requires translators to fully grasp the cultural characteristics and aesthetic tastes of the target text and create film titles that satisfy popular tastes without changing the meaning of the source

text. For example, the English film, “*Hilary and Jackie*”, was translated as 《她比烟花寂寞》 (she is more lonely than fireworks), exactly the same title as the novel by a famous Hong Kong writer Yi Shu (Isabel Nee Yeh-su). Whether the translator adopted plagiarism or not is still unknown, but judging from the translation of the English film title, the topic is very novel, unique, and fascinating. In addition, there is much likelihood that audiences can vaguely tell what the story is all about and in which what kind of lonely women there is from the title, which properly shows the vocative function of the film title translation.

2.4 *Understandings of the Cultural Background of the Source Text*

As movie titles often imply strong cultural intentions, if translators fail to have a deep understanding of the background information or social conditions behind the film, it will be difficult to grasp the translation of the film title. Take “*The Pumpkin Eater*” as an example, some people translated the film title as 《食南瓜的人》 (someone who eats pumpkin). In fact, this term derives from a very popular English language nursery rhyme, “Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater, had a wife and couldn’t keep her”. Considering the story and the name of the film, it is more appropriate to translate it as 《太太的苦闷》 (troubles of a married woman). When it comes to the translation of “*American Beauty*”, frankly speaking, the current one, 《美国丽人》 and the previous one, 《美国美人》, are both inappropriate because they are direct translations without being understood the cultural background. American beauty is a kind of red rose native to the United States. Roses are beautiful and pure and also a symbol of pure love, especially red ones. In the movie, the heroine is compared to roses and her feelings are expressed through them. Consequently, she is closely connected with roses. Taiwanese film translators translated it as 《美国心玫瑰情》, using Chinese roses to replace American ones, which not only expressed the theme of the film and displayed the American culture, but also made it much easier for the Chinese audience to accept. It is, indeed, a quality translation.

3. Domestication and Foreignization: The Theories of Film Title Translation

3.1 *The Definition of Domestication and Foreignization*

Domestication and foreignization are translation strategies, regarding the degree to which translators make a text conform to the target culture. Domestication is the strategy of making text closely conform to the culture of the language being translated to, which may involve the loss of information from the source text. Foreignization is the strategy of retaining information from the source text, and involves breaking the conventions of the target language to preserve its meaning.

These strategies have been debated for hundreds of years, but the first person to formulate them in their modern sense was an American translation theorist, Lawrence Venuti, in his book *The Translator’s Invisibility*. He believes that domestication is meant to help the foreign language texts conform to the values of the target language and to bring the author into the culture of the target text by taking the attitude of ethnocentrism. In the preface of the Chinese edition of “*Le Père Goriot*”, Fu Lei proposed that in terms of effect, translation should be like a painting, and what it pursued was not similarity in

form, but in spirit. Qian Zhongshu argued that the ideal of translation was “sublimation”. He believed that sublimation was converting one language to another while completely preserving the native color without any trace of rigidity.

Either “similarity in spirit” by Fu Le or “sublimation” by Qian Zhongshu, in essence, emphasizes domestication. Eugene A. Nida, a representative of domestication, advocated “dynamic equivalence” or in other words, “functional equivalence”. This translation view is “to use the most natural equivalents to reproduce information of the source language in the target text from semantics to linguistics”. He argued that “the relationship between readers and the target text should be basically the same as that of the original text”. By a violent contrast, however, “foreignization designates a type of translation in which a target text deliberately breaks target conventions by retaining something of the foreignness of the original”. Venuti firmly insists that foreignization is “deviating from the local mainstream values and preserving the differences in the language and culture of the original text”. For instance, as for the translation of “to be armed to the teeth”, it could be converted into “武装到牙齿” if we adopt foreignization, whereas it would be “全副武装” if we use domestication. When it comes to the translation of film titles, domestication tries to meet the needs of the targeted audience through smooth and fluent language. The typical feature is a considerable amount usage of expressions that Chinese people can easily accept, which is easy to comprehend. In this way, it is likely to overcome the differences in languages and cultural background so as to publicize the film and boost cultural exchanges. By contrast, foreignization advocates that the abandonment of the expressions of the target language to a certain degree is a must. The typical characteristic is to seek novel and unfamiliar expressions of the foreign language text, which is expressed as the “language difference” and the “cultural difference” in translation, thus showing the pragmatic intention of the foreign language text and retaining the foreignness of the foreign culture.

3.2 Domestication in the Translation of English Film Titles

By catering to the cultural psychology and aesthetic needs of the Chinese audience and adapting to their comprehensive capabilities, domestication properly shifts the source language to the target language. With the help of the following examples, domestication will be explained in the cultural background of the audience and the use of the target text. The film “*Lolita*”, transliterated as 《洛丽塔》, is about a middle-aged man’s infatuation with a young adolescent girl. If it is transliterated, it seems not enough. However, the quotation from Su Shi (a Chinese poet of the Song dynasty) ‘s verse, “一树梨花压海棠” (the January-May marriage), appears to be much more appropriate. In the process of translation, it is necessary to pay attention to the grammatical rules and interestingness of the translated language. Deviation from the Chinese translation and the English film title can explore the spirit of a film so as to achieve a kind of coincidence. The film “*Babel*” was transliterated as 《巴别塔》 (the Tower of Babel). According to biblical allusions, “Babel” comes from Chapter 11 of the *Bible Genesis*, which tells that at the beginning of creation, human beings boasted only one language and great power. People desired to build a tower of heaven, Babel, to prove that human beings were omnipotent. When

God knew it, he angrily separated human beings in all directions and differentiated their languages so that they were not able to communicate with one another. However, not every Chinese is familiar with the classical stories of Christian doctrines. With domesticating method, Babel is translated as 《通天塔》 (a tower tall enough to reach heaven), which reminds the Chinese audience of “举头三尺有神明” (there is something above us), and reflects the fear brought by “heaven” in Chinese culture. Therefore, 《通天塔》 is a perfect combination of film plots and the Chinese language connotations and is a role model for the application of domestication. The film “*Cleopatra*”, transliterated as 《克里奥帕特拉》, is the name of the last queen of the Ptolemaic dynasty in ancient Egypt. For the Chinese audience who lack understanding of this history, this name alone will not attract people’s interest and it will also be difficult to understand. In contrast, being translated as 《埃及艳后》 (the beautiful Egyptian queen) through domestication, it achieves the commercial requirements of conciseness and attractiveness, thereby appealing to the audience who may wonder how gorgeous the queen really was.

3.3 Foreignization in the Translation of English Film Titles

Foreignization fully considers the communication and dissemination of culture, which is based on the openness and clout of a language. The translation of English film titles through alienation reveals the exotic customs and culture to the Chinese audience through user habits and cultural characteristics of idiomatic expressions in English, and allows the Chinese people to appreciate their cultural charm by themselves. Foreignization may not only gradually penetrate into the targeted language, but also transform the targeted language itself. “*The Seven Year Itch*”, translated as 《七年之痒》, tells the story of a middle-aged publisher who has been married for 7 years and has actively coped with his marital crisis in his life. “《七年之痒》” is a fruitful outcome of foreignization, and the wide spread of the film has made this new word well accepted by the public. “seven-year itch” in Chinese refers specifically to the marriage bottleneck after the freshness of the marriage and family life has faded away, and later it has extended to other areas, especially the challenges faced by working adults in their mid-career stage. Therefore, it goes without saying that the foreignizing method can add new words to the Chinese language and stay relevant in the 21st century as well. Foreignization emphasizes that translation is supposed to be faithful to the cultural and social lives behind the source text under the scenario that the targeted audience can understand and accept. In particular, citizens of the targeted language need to be able to obtain the advanced scientific knowledge and raise cultural awareness of other countries, and to gain perceptual knowledge and a sense of identity of the historical background and social customs of foreign countries, thus achieving the purpose of promoting cultural communication and cooperation.

4. The Applications of Domestication and Foreignization in the Translation of English Film Titles

4.1 The Applications of Domestication in the Translation of Film Titles

Domestication can accurately convey the original information, which is easy to understand and can avoid polysemy or ambiguity at large. Therefore, using domestication to translate film titles, drawing on some Chinese idioms and buzzwords, adopting expressions that are compatible with the Chinese

culture and familiar to Chinese audiences can eliminate the strangeness of the audience towards different cultures. Under such a scenario, the audience are likely to acquaint with the film and the film will achieve a fruitful result. For example, “*The Bathing Beauty*” and “*Waterloo Bridge*” were translated as 《出水芙蓉》 and 《魂断蓝桥》 respectively. The translation borrowed a sea of materials from ancient Chinese poetry and myths and legends, and reflected the content and style of the film, which greatly attracted the attention of the Chinese people, thus becoming household classical works. In the process of translation, when the language habits or cultural phenomena of the original film titles and the translations are incompatible due to cultural differences, domestication can be used.

Firstly, when the original title is too short, the method of amplification shall be employed in translation in order to gain a stronger appreciation of films. Therefore, “*Twilight*” was translated as 《暮光之城》 (the city of twilight); “*The Reader*” as 《生死朗读》; “*The Piano*” as 《钢琴别恋》; “*Ghost*” as 《人鬼情未了》 (ghost-human love story); “*Tarzan*” as 《人猿泰山》; “*Pretty Woman*” as 《风月俏佳人》 and so on. This kind of translation is not only catchy and pleasing to the ear, but also suitable for Chinese aesthetics.

Secondly, if the original film title contains an unfamiliar cultural element, the audience will be completely perplexed. In this way, it is conducive to adopt domestication to translate it as something familiar to the audience. For example, the film “*One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*”, was once translated as 《飞跃杜鹃窝》 and 《飞跃喜鹊巢》. It is crystal-clear that the translator did not realize the real meaning of “cuckoo’s nest” at all. Because the extended meaning of “Cuckoo’s Nest” is an insane asylum and the whole film revolves around a new patient at a mental institution, it would be more accurate to be translated as 《飞越疯人院》 (*One Flew over an Insane Asylum*).

Thirdly, if the original film title is a noun or a noun phrase, there is no denying that verbal noun phrases or more adjectives in front of a noun is more likely to follow the Chinese-language habits so as to appeal to the audience and maximize commercial values. For example, it will be more vivid and lively to translate “*A Walk in the Clouds*” and “*Home Alone*” as 《云中漫步》 and 《小鬼当家》 rather than as 《云中的漫步》 and 《独自在家》. Besides, “*The Transporter*” is converted into 《非常人贩》, adding an adjective before the noun. In this way, the audience will probably generate a sense of curiosity and excitement.

Lastly, when an unknown character serves as the film title, the domesticating strategy should be properly applied. Because in the Western world, individualism is deeply rooted in people’s mind and “independence, autonomy, freedom, and equality” are deeply engraved in the Constitution and even in the heart of everyone. This philosophy embraces the viewpoint that all things are people-centered, and individuals are valuable. Therefore, in English movies, individuals are given top priority, and their names are emphasized as the most prominent personal identities including “*Patton*” and “*Kramer vs. Kramer*”. However, in China, it is a different story because Chinese people prefer the typical collectivism, emphasizing that collective interests outweigh personal interests. Besides, under the imperceptible influence of class distinctions, it is hard to imagine using the name of some nobody as

the film title. Thereby, it is a necessity to utilize domestication.

4.2 *The Applications of Foreignization in the Translation of Film Titles*

By preserving linguistic and cultural features of English, there is high likelihood that foreignization can bring viewers a brand new feeling and help them comprehend the English language and culture. It highlights the status of the source language and culture, and embodies the reader-centered translation principle, which allows translation to play a critical role in cultural exchanges. When using the foreignizing approach to translate the film title, translators need to keep both the spirit and the style of the original title as much as possible. In translation, literal translation, transliteration, and transcreation could be used to bring the exotic customs and traditions of English movies to the Chinese audience, so that they are likely to be interested in foreign cultures. When it comes to movies with famous names, places, and historical events or literary works that are familiar to the audience as titles, it should be translated literally or transliterated, like the movie “*The Scarlet Letter*” (《红字》), “*The Da Vinci Code*” (《达芬奇密码》), and “*Gandhi*” (《甘地》). Secondly, if the title can directly reflect the theme and the content of the film, it ought to be translated literally when using foreignization. For instance, “*Sleepless in Seattle*” is translated as 《西雅图夜未眠》; “*Original Sin*” as 《原罪》; and “*Dances With Wolves*” as 《与狼共舞》. These titles not only conform to the original style, but also preserve the essence of the original ones.

To sum up, they, as great translations, have achieved the effect of the source texts in terms of form and meaning. The Chinese translation of the film “*Moulin Rouge*” is 《红磨坊》. The story revolves around a young man with a high artistic talent and passions for creation who encountered the famous “shiny diamond”, a prostitute, in the most distinguished nightclub in Paris at that time, and around their love story. “*Moulin Rouge*”, the nightclub, famous for colorful singing and dancing performances, was the best testimony to the extravagant and luxurious life in Paris. This has created generations of smash hits and dances, and has attracted a group of highly accomplished scholars. Currently, the red windmill that rotates on the roof of the “*Moulin Rouge*” has become a symbol and an ideal destination that tourists all over the world yearn for. Due to the good reputation of “*Moulin Rouge*” and the cultural significance it contains, the direct translation of the film title as 《红磨坊》 will help the audience to further understand the background of the film and then imagine that the story which takes place in a city with glamour and extravagance should be romantic and exciting.

4.3 *The Combination of Domestication and Foreignization in the Translation of English Film Titles*

It can be seen from the above mentioned that these two methods have their own advantages and disadvantages. Domestication is easy to strike a chord with the audience, but it cannot fully express the culture and information behind the source text. By contrast, foreignization could preserve the connotation of the original text and make the translation more exotic, but it will cause difficulties for people to understand. As a consequence, not only will it be hard to attract the attention of the targeted audience, but it is also hardly possible to realize its commercial values. Nevertheless, the two are not only not contradictory, but also complementary. In the translation of film titles, the combination of

domestication and foreignization can preserve both the components of the source text and of the target text, which can be faithful to the original text and satisfy the demands of the audience. For example, “Cowboy” in the film “*Midnight Cowboy*” means “牛仔” (a horseman skilled at tending cattle), which is a product of American culture. Its translation as 《午夜牛郎》 is not only in line with Chinese habits and can reflect the content of the original title in a better way. “*Forrest Gump*” is translated as 《阿甘正传》, which not only displays the content and the style of the film, but also conforms to the Chinese expression used to describe the things done by a nobody. It combines domestication and foreignization in the translation of the film title in a terrific way. All in all, it has attracted the audience, realized the commercial values, and the film has become popular with the Chinese viewers.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses the translation of Chinese and English film titles from the perspective of foreignization and domestication. Previously, the discussion on domestication and foreignization mostly touched upon literary works. However, this paper focuses on the domestication and foreignization’s influence on film titles which have something in common with literary works. Firstly, it probes into the main factors that affect the translation of film titles, namely thinking patterns, the sense of beauty, business values, and understandings of the cultural background of the source language. Secondly, by introducing translators’ understandings of translations such as those of Venuti, Fu Lei, Qian Zhongshu, and Eugene Nida, it naturally introduces the two translating strategies known as domestication and foreignization, and discusses their applications in the film title translation. Lastly, the paper elaborates the reasons and examples behind domestication and foreignization and a combination of the two.

Film is an intellectual product with artistic features. At the same time, it is also a material product that enters the global market through distribution channels and has its commercial characteristics. The duality of films determines the duality of film titles. In other words, duality refers to the artistic values and commercial needs. The title is the highlight of the film content and the essence of film advertising. We should fully understand language and cultural differences in translation, grasp the audience’s acceptability of the foreign culture, take into account the commercial features of films, and properly use domestication and foreignization. To master the principle of moderation, we should neither over-domesticate, nor over-foreignize, and strive to strike a balance between both of them. After all, whether using domestication or foreignization is not important because what is suitable for our needs is the best.

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