



# A Brief Analysis of Chinese-English Subtitling Translation of the “NEZHA” from Cultural Translation Theory

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Received: 09 Mar 2024; Received in revised form: 22 Apr 2024; Accepted: 02 May 2024; Available online: 10 May, 2024

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**Abstract**— In recent years, China has made significant breakthroughs in animated films. Qualified domestic films have been highly praised domestically and gained popularity in Western countries. Based on Cultural Translation Theory, the paper takes the film “NEZHA,” rich in elements of excellent traditional Chinese culture, as an example, examining its English subtitles and putting forward several suggestions on Chinese-English subtitle translation, with the hope to promote Chinese animated films to spread overseas.

**Keywords**— cultural translation theory, subtitle translation, NEZHA

**摘要**— 近年来，我国动画电影发展迅猛，高质量的国产影片不仅在国内备受称赞，在西方国家也很受欢迎。本文以饱含中华优秀传统文化元素的《哪吒之魔童降世》为例，以文化翻译观审视该电影英译字幕，并在此基础上提出几点建议，以期推动中国动画电影更好更快地“走出去”。

**关键词**— 文化翻译观；字幕翻译；哪吒



## I. INTRODUCTION

Released on July 26, 2019, the film “NEZHA” depicts a famous Chinese mythological tale in animation. Its innovative character designs and dialogue imbued with contemporary relevance have captivated many viewers in China, garnering praise from them. Upon its release overseas, the film also attracted numerous viewers from Western countries. The mythical and historical backdrop of the film, “NEZHA,” along with its protagonist’s unwavering personalities, offered a refreshing perspective for viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds, allowing them to appreciate a different aesthetic charm. The character Ne Zha’s unwavering commitment to righteousness in the film represents the national spirit that has persisted in China

for thousands of years. However, the different historical and cultural backgrounds of China and the West have led to numerous differences in thinking patterns, language structures, lifestyles, and religious beliefs. How can Western viewers appreciate the charm of Chinese culture based on their understanding of the film’s content? Avoiding cultural conflicts, ensuring translation quality, and fully leveraging the excellence of traditional Chinese culture depend on the “integrative perspective” of cultural translation, which is essential in subtitle translation.

Having “cultural translation theory” as the keyword, the author searched for the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) platform to examine the publication status of related journals. The result indicates

that since 2011, there have been over fifty papers published annually based on this theory, reaching as high as eighty papers in 2021. The applications primarily include the translation of classic literary works, external propaganda translation, and subtitle translation, among others. It is evident that in the past decade, there has been an increasing emphasis on “culture” studies among inter-lingual translations. However, there are only about five academic papers on subtitle translation on average per year, indicating insufficient attention from various sectors of society towards subtitle translation.

### Theoretical Basis

Since the 1980s, culture has gradually gained attention from scholars as one of the external factors influencing translation. Susan Bassnett (1990), in her collection of essays titled *Translation, History, and Culture*, discussed the “cultural turn” in translation which redefines translation not merely as a linguistic activity but as a cultural one. In 2014, in her *Translation Studies*, she proposed the concept of “cultural translation theory,” suggesting that scholars in the translation field should pay attention to the differences between distinct cultures and strive to convey cultural emotions as much as possible. This viewpoint challenged the traditional emphasis on the language in translation and caused quite a sensation at the time. Cultural translation theory comprises four parts. Firstly, the translation should take culture as its unit rather than remaining confined to previous discourse. Secondly, translation is not merely a straightforward process of decoding and reassembling but an act of communication. Thirdly, translation should not be limited to describing the original text but focus on achieving functional equivalence of that text within the target language culture. Fourthly, translation in different historical periods adheres to distinct principles and norms. However, these principles and norms serve to meet various needs. Translation serves the cultural needs and requirements of diverse groups within a culture. The cultural translation theory asserts that translation activities should be based on culture as the fundamental unit to facilitate cultural exchange rather than being limited solely to the linguistic aspects of words and sentences.

In *Collins English-Chinese Dictionary*, “subtitles are a printed translation of the words of a foreign film that are show at the bottom of the pictures.” Gottlieb (1994)

proposed that in any diagonal - and thus interlingual - subtitling, one must, on top of translating utterances from one language to another, transfer the dialog from one sub-code (the seemingly unruly spoken language) to another (the more rigid written language). In China, research on subtitling translation has traditionally been less prominent than those of on literary translation. The reasons include lower costs and longer production cycles associated with subtitling translation, inconsistencies in the skills of translators, and a lack of established translation standards. Furthermore, the scarcity of the written or printed script of English subtitle translation directly contributes to the neglect of subtitle translation among researchers. Additionally, subtitling translation itself presents difficulties and possesses its distinct characteristics. Ma Zhengqi (1997) suggested that subtitling translation should adhere to five basic principles: colloquialization, emotionalization, character portrayal, synchronization with lip movements, and popularization. Qian Shaochang (2000) identified five key features of language in audiovisual works: audibility, comprehensiveness, momentariness, populism, and lack of annotation. Li Yunxing (2001) pointed out two unique aspects of subtitles. Firstly, the language information provided by subtitles closely corresponds with visual and auditory information. Secondly, the language information in subtitles is progressive. Chai Meiping (2003) mentioned strategies for subtitling synchronization and translation in terms of “vocabulary,” “sentence,” and “discourse.” In summary, subtitling translation is subject to various constraints, including temporal and spatial factors, linguistic ambiguity, cultural differences, character development, and film style.

The film, “NEZHA,” is adapted from the Chinese mythological tale “Nezha Conquers the Sea.” It tells the story of “Ne Zha,” who is supposed to reincarnate in Li Jing’s family as a hero to help King Wu attack King Zhou but transforms into a despised demon child due to a twist of fate. Because of his fierce and ugly appearance, he suffered from misunderstanding and ostracism. However, under the guidance and education of his father (Li Jing), he perseveres against his fate and eventually earns his recognition. This film embodies traditional Chinese culture and values, and incorporates many popular elements, making it understandable for Chinese viewers. However, how to make

Western viewers gain the same aesthetic enjoyment and psychological effect as Chinese people do is based on understanding the content of the film?

The importance of subtitles is self-evident. The function of subtitle translation is to fully convey the original text's information within time and space limitations while also achieving cultural transformation between the source and target languages. By taking the advantage of “NEZHA,” the paper studies its subtitle translation from the perspective of Cultural Translation Theory, comparing both Chinese and English translations to explore ways to translate cultural information and bring enlightenment to the future development of China's film and television industry.

### English translation of “NEZHA”

Bassnett's cultural translation theory emphasized the culture in source text, prioritizing the cultural transplantation over adherence to the form. The theory plays a significant guiding role in the research and practice of film subtitle translation. Under the guidance of the cultural translation theory, the most widely used strategies in film subtitle translation are domestication and foreignization. Domestication refers to the translator's initiative-taking approach to bring the translation closer to the reader, catering to the preferences of the target language readers by using vocabulary, syntax, and other linguistic elements that are familiar to them, facilitating their understanding and acceptance. The foreignization strategy advocates for readers to approach the translator, emphasizing cultural aspects from the source country as much as possible to maintain authenticity. As for the relationship between domestication and foreignization, they are not mutually exclusive, instead, they offer flexible choices for translators in specific translation activities. Translators can select different translation methods flexibly to achieve the goal of cultural dissemination while preserving the uniqueness of their national culture. Therefore, under the guidance of the cultural translation theory, the paper combines domestication and foreignization, two different translation strategies, to analyze film subtitles in four parts: cultural transformation, cross-cultural communication, functional mapping, and historical norms.

## II. CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

例 1: 将来还有机会封神登天。And my child will become a god.

改译: And my child will become a Celestial Being?

例 2: 闭关编撰封神榜什么的 They are compiling the investiture of the gods.

改译: They are compiling the investiture of the Celestial Beings.

“天庭”<sup>1</sup> originates from the *Records of Grand Historian*, which is also known as“天廷”and refers to the celestial palace of the Heavenly Emperor, where the Jade Emperor rules over numerous deities and immortals. In ancient China, from where Taoism prevailed, “天庭”sometimes abbreviated as“天”, served as the supreme ruling center in Taoist mythology. As supernatural existence,“神”(immortal) possess magical powers, and are capable of aiding humans in curing illnesses, warding off disasters, and protecting humanity from the persecution of demons and monsters. Furthermore, different“神” possess different powers and shoulder diverse responsibilities. For example, “门神” (the immortal of door) are tasked with guarding homes, prohibiting monsters from entering, and so forth. In Western countries, Christianity predominates “God” as the sole deity who governs all things in the universe. There are significant differences in religious practices between Eastern and Western cultures. Followers in Western countries typically attend church weekly for prayers, while Chinese people believe that deities can influence fortune, so they often set up altars at home. Translating “神” as “God” is a literal interpretation, which disconnects the cultural information behind the words. “神” represents an abstract concept, not only referring to a particular deity but rather indicating reverence for mysterious forces. Translation of such culture-loaded words should take culture as its basic unit, taking into full account the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western religions, rather than simply staying at the linguistic expression of the original text. Therefore, it is more appropriate to translate “神”as “Celestial Being” referring to a deity in the heavens. Additionally, “celestial” inherently implies “of or relating to the heavens,” thus eliminating the need for the adverbial of place “in the

<sup>1</sup>[https://baike.baidu.com/reference/23458935/533aYdO6cr3\\_z3kATPXyKjNS3EP92q7baGBLVzzqIPmGapB4bkVJEnrtU-](https://baike.baidu.com/reference/23458935/533aYdO6cr3_z3kATPXyKjNS3EP92q7baGBLVzzqIPmGapB4bkVJEnrtU-)

9\_NyWgjEvd4adUc2fv1TR9I-4IVZJwxV8QriAP6RkGz3M-S7I1k3oAd\_9cWCfM

paradise.” Capitalizing the initial letter denotes a proper noun, making it easier for Western viewers to understand the essence of “神”.

In Example 2, “封神榜”<sup>2</sup> originating from the Chinese Ming Dynasty supernatural novel *The Legend of Deification*, is a treasure jointly formulated and discussed by the leaders of the three major religions: “禅教”(the religion of Chan), “截教”(the religion of Jie) and “人道”(the religion of Chan Ren). Jiang Ziya presides over the investiture. “榜” refers to publicly posted documents or lists. “上榜” implies being listed, signifying success. Translating “封神榜” as “the investiture of the Celestial Beings” can reduce cultural barriers and minimize cognitive difficulties for foreign viewers, thus facilitating cross-cultural communication and understanding. The phrase “The Investiture of the Celestial Beings” breaks through the literal translation at the discourse level, reducing cultural barriers and minimizing cognitive difficulties for foreign viewers. The revised translation accurately conveys the original meaning and carries similar effects and impacts in the target language.

### III. CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

例 3: 不...不成功, 便成仁。 I cannot ... cannot be defeat.

改译: No sacrifice, no victory.

The phrase “不成功便成仁” is derived from the *Analects of Confucius* and is used to describe those who are willing to make great sacrifices, even including their lives, for their ideals or beliefs. It was uttered by Shen Gongbao when he accepted the task of teaching Ao Bing entrusted to him by the Dragon King, representing his extreme determination. In the film, Shen Gongbao has a slight stutter, and his lines often have opposite meanings before and after. He also serves as the comic relief in the play. Therefore, the translation presents considerable difficulty. Translation is an act of communication, so it is necessary to make the translation meaningful in the communication process. While balancing the colloquial nature of subtitle translation and the humorous implications of Shen Gongbao’s lines while conveying the cultural connotations of the dialogue, translating “不...不成功, 便成仁” into “No sacrifice, no

victory” might be much better. It fits Shen Gongbao’s stuttering character by repeating the “no.” It is not merely about converting words and facilitating effective communication and transmission between different languages and cultures.

例 4: 急急如律令 Obey my command.

改译: “All immortals swiftly appear.”

The phrase “急急如律令” is a spell used in Taoist rituals, often accompanied by talismans. Taoist priests draw talismans, recite spells, and perform rituals to vanquish demons, punish evil, and promote goodness. These rituals serve the cultural function of maintaining psychological balance and life confidence in the face of uncontrollable external forces. “律令” originally refers to “laws and regulations,” but in Taoism, it stands for immortals adept at walking. The phrase summons these immortals to appear quickly and generate power to combat demons. It is typically used in urgent situations when confronting demons. This is why the sentence is short and easy to speak. The subtitled translation “Obey my command” lacks clarity regarding the recipient of the action, which may confuse Western viewers with the doubts like: Who needs to follow the command? English subtitle translation is never a simple translation from Chinese into English, but an effort to convey the cultural context, feelings, and scenes of the original language to the target language viewers as much as possible. It enables people to communicate across language barriers and makes communication meaningful. Therefore, translating it as “all immortals swiftly appear” is more appropriate. Because it retains the magical tone of the spell and facilitates Western viewers’ understanding of its true meaning. It preserves the cultural uniqueness while promoting the dissemination of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

### IV. FUNCTIONAL MAPPING

例 5: 就因为我是豹子精修炼成人 Because he knows I was born a lowly jaguar spirit.

改译: Because he knows I was born a lowly leopard bogey.

In the film, Shen Gongbao spoke this phrase to Ao Bing. “妖精”<sup>3</sup> originates from *The Scholars*,

<sup>2</sup>[https://baike.baidu.com/reference/14585510/533aYdO6cr3\\_z3kATPWMz6hYC\\_NYtql7byFUrZzzqIPmGapB5nyTcY15MA\\_n\\_fk](https://baike.baidu.com/reference/14585510/533aYdO6cr3_z3kATPWMz6hYC_NYtql7byFUrZzzqIPmGapB5nyTcY15MA_n_fk)

pFwTG\_59meMVakPuzQ1Q

<sup>3</sup><https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%84%92%E6%9E%97%E5%>

metaphorically referring to enchanting women with captivating looks or glamorous beings possessing magic or sorcery. It carries negative connotations in Chinese culture, and the choice of vocabulary should align with both the literal meaning and the cultural implications behind it. In other words, “妖精” refers to creatures, whether animals or plants, that have undergone cultivation and transformed into human-like forms. They typically possess magical powers, whose immortals are “妖术”. There is a distinction between the good and evil “妖精”, and those who are devoted to goodness can achieve enlightenment. “精” is a shortened form of “妖精” and is often used in combination with various objects to denote specific entities or categories, such as “蛇精” (bogeys cultivated from snakes) “蜘蛛精” (bogeys cultivated from spiders) “树精”(bogeys cultivated from trees) and so on. “Spirit” is a neutral term primarily referring to a person’s thoughts, feelings, and character, which can be translated as “精神” or “感觉” and so on, into Chinese. Given the negative connotation of “妖精”, an appropriate translation for “妖精” in this context could be “bogey.” Therefore, “豹子精” should be translated as “leopard bogey” to preserve both the literal meaning and the cultural connotations. Indeed, “spirit” can also denote a person’s soul, representing the ethereal essence separated from the body upon death. While “精神” and “妖精” are intangible concepts, they represent fundamentally different entities. Translating “精” as “spirit” may mislead Western viewers and lead to a misunderstanding of the character of Shen Gongbao. Furthermore, “jaguar” has two meanings, representing tiger or leopard in different contexts. Subtitle translation should focus on conveying the intended meaning of the original text, matching the translated message and its impact in the target language and culture with those of the original text. Translating “豹子精” as “leopard bogey” would accurately convey that Shen Gongbao is a “豹子精” rather than a “老虎精”(bogeys cultivated from tigers), achieving function equivalence in the target language.

例 6: And then instead of him, the relative will go boom. 天雷就会移到血亲身上

改译: The thunder will strike on the blood relative.

In ancient times, Chinese people have placed great emphasis on family ties, valuing collective interests and the rise and fall of the family. “血亲” refer to “people with

blood ties.” Western societies prioritize individual interests, with a weaker sense of familial bond. “Relative” means “亲戚” in Chinese, not necessarily blood-related. In the film, Ne Zha’s father, Li Jing, willingly endures heavenly punishment in place of his son, even at the cost of his life, to ensure Ne Zha’s safety throughout his life. Only those with the deepest familial love would make such a choice. Therefore, “血亲” should be translated as “blood relative.” English translation of subtitles should not be limited to merely describing the original text but to transcending the original text. With a thorough understanding of both language and culture, the translator should ensure that the translated text effectively conveys the meaning and emotions of the original text in the target language culture. The sentence “And then instead, the relative will go boom” takes a mechanical word-for-word approach and it tends to be verbose. Given the constraints of subtitles and the inherent ambiguity of language, the translating of this sentence as “The thunder will strike on the blood relative” is appropriate and the word “strike” makes the sentence more vivid. The enhanced translation conveys the original meaning vividly and the emphasis on blood relations in Chinese culture. It can also provide Western viewers with a visual and emotional impact.

## V. HISTORICAL NORMS

例 7: “哪吒”“太乙”“李靖” “Ne Zha,” “Tai Yi,” “Li Jing.”

In the film, many mythological characters are familiar to Chinese people and known for their images, magical abilities, and other traits. Since such imagery is not present in Western cultures, during the initial stages of introducing Chinese culture to Western viewers, it’s common to use transliteration accompanied by explanations. This approach facilitates a more detailed understanding of unfamiliar Chinese cultural elements like character backgrounds and relationships for Western viewers. Or it could be directly corresponding to Western names to be swiftly accepted. The principles and norms of translation vary across different historical periods, influenced by the social, cultural, and intellectual environments. In contemporary China, the comprehensive national strength continues to grow, and cultural confidence is also rising. “Tell the Chinese Story



and Make China's Voice Heard" is a significant initiative to promote cultural outreach, and it has made progress in the practical stage. With the increasing number of mythological stories spreading to Western nations, these mythological figures are becoming somewhat familiar to the foreign viewers. Given the limited duration of subtitles on-screen, it is impractical for translators to provide lengthy explanations on characters. Therefore, the film resorts to phonetic transliterations of their names rather than lengthy explanations. So it translates the characters, like "哪吒" "太乙" "李靖", as "Ne Zha," "Tai Yi," and "Li Jing" to preserve the phonetic characteristics and cultural connotations, making it easier for viewers to understand and appreciate the cultural sentiments and historical backgrounds embedded in the story. Additionally, phonetic transliterations facilitate Western viewers in accurately searching for related information, enabling them to gain a quicker and deeper understanding of Chinese culture. Overall, the phonetic transliterations for characters and place names in the film do not hinder Western viewers' comprehension of the film. Instead, it sparks their curiosity about Chinese culture, thereby achieving the goal of promoting traditional Chinese culture.

例 8: "我命由我不由天。" "I'm the master of my destiny."

改译: I'm the master of my destiny, not the heaven.

This line, widely circulated in China after its release, embodies the core ideology of the film. It perfectly portrays the protagonist as one who refuses to accept defeat rejects predetermined fate and goes against the heavens. "我命由我不由天" is a significant teaching in Taoism, emphasizing that through relentless personal effort, one can control his or her destiny rather than leaving it to divine intervention. While respecting the value of life, practicing benevolence, diligence, and continuous learning, one can coexist with the universe and never perish. It also indirectly reveals the protagonist's broad-mindedness, insight, and courage. The film translates this line as "I'm the master of my destiny," which resonates with the famous last two lines of the poem "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley, "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." It is a remarkable similarity in their essence. Henry, the author of "Invictus," struggled with illness throughout his life, yet he never gave up on himself. Despite the hardships, he composed

"Invictus," brimming with hope, inspiring those in tricky situations. Both experiences, though similarly harrowing, resulted in positive outcomes through the protagonist's unwavering perseverance. In this context, "天" refers to the concept of "way of heaven," signifying natural order or destiny. However, the film only translates the first part of the line, omitting the latter part, which results in a loss of the intended meaning. The principles and norms of translation are not fixed but evolve and adjust with changes in time and context. In contemporary society, cooperation and exchanges between countries continue to deepen, leading to increasing cultural collisions. Different religious cultures result in varying religious beliefs among people. To enable Western viewers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese religious culture and to help them grasp the plot more clearly and accurately, the author believes that translating "我命由我不由天" as "I'm the master of my destiny, not the heaven" better aligns with contemporary principles and norms of translation. It is fluent for Chinese viewers and accurately conveys the protagonist's emotions and inner world. Additionally, it easily triggers associations for Western viewers, aiding their understanding of the character's fearless struggle and unwavering character.

The animation film "NEZHA" is imbued with elements of Chinese culture. Subtitle translation faces challenges in conveying its cultural connotations and emotional expressions. From the above analysis, it is evident that whether adopting strategies of foreignization or domestication, the goal is to facilitate cultural exchange. They are not mutually exclusive, but compatible. In practical translation, translators choose appropriate strategies based on specific contexts, purposes, and viewers. Sometimes, foreignization and domestication methods may be employed to achieve the best translation results.

## VI. SUGGESTIONS

Film and television productions are a complex art form that transcends cultures, languages, and societies. The success or failure of translation research directly impacts the development of China's film and television industry. Translators must recognize the complexity of translating subtitles for film and television, paying close attention to the characteristics of both languages and the cultural

connotations behind words and phrases. And they should employ various translation strategies depending on different purposes and requirements. Guided by a cultural translation theory, this paper presents four recommendations for subtitle translation as:

Firstly, language and culture are closely intertwined. Subtitle translation should not only adhere strictly to the literal meaning of words but rather prioritize cultural exchange on a deeper level. Subtitles should be based on the film, striving to achieve maximum cultural equivalence.

Secondly, subtitle translation should align with the style of the film and the characters' personalities. The choice of words and sentences should vary depending on the roles' situation and specific personality traits.

Thirdly, it is essential to be mindful of the cultural differences between Chinese and English. And explain cultural connotations and metaphors appropriately, ensuring that target language viewers obtain the most accurate information with minimal effort, thus reducing cognitive barriers.

Fourthly, due to the instantaneous, mass-oriented, non-annotative, and comprehensive nature, translations should strive for simplicity and clarity while avoiding verbosity.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The cultural translation theory, combined with the subtitling translation of the film "NEZHA," points out that conveying the essence of the film requires a focus on preserving traditional elements within specific cultural contexts. It emphasizes the importance of considering various constraints on subtitle translation and making judicious choices of words to maintain a colloquial style and humorous effects. Additionally, the connotations of the original lines should closely relate to the story and the characterization of animated figures. By employing both domestication and foreignization strategies, the cultural connotations and emotional expressions within the film "Ne Zha" can be better conveyed, enabling viewers to understand and appreciate this film, which is brimming with the charm of Chinese culture. In conclusion, further opening of China is an inevitable trend, and the film and television translation industry must seize this opportunity to actively accelerate the pace of cultural outreach, allowing viewers worldwide to experience the unique charm of Chinese

culture. Through ongoing exploration and guided by a cultural translation theory, domestic films will continue to improve and make contributions to the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

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