

On Subtitle Translation of Culture-Loaded Words in *Ne Zha* From the Perspective of Child-Oriented

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Abstract

With the fast pace of “Chinese Culture Going Out” and the vigorous development of the Chinese film and television industry, more and more Chinese animation films such as *Ne Zha* go global and keep enriching the spiritual world of children in the world. Rooted deeply in Chinese culture, culture-loaded words in films reflect the cultural heritage of China, whose translation is always a challenge for translators. In order to give a good Chinese narrative and better spread China’s message to children worldwide, subtitle translators should consider children audience as an indispensable group and devote more attention to their aesthetic ability. By proposing the perspective of children, this paper analyzes the translation of culture-loaded words in the English subtitle of film *Ne Zha* from the following three aspects: accuracy, readability, literariness for children. The paper investigates the loss of children-oriented perspective in the translation process and provide readers a new perspective of subtitle translation for future research, aiming to arouse more attention on subtitle translation study from the point of children.

Key words: Subtitle translation; Children-orientation theory; Culture-loaded words; *Ne Zha*

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INTRODUCTION

Ne Zha, a household name in China known as one hero of Chinese myths, has been a childhood idol for generations

of Chinese people. Directed and written by Chinese director Jiaozi, the film *Ne Zha* (2019) is adapted from this classical Chinese mythological image. Themed in breaking stereotypes and challenging the prejudice, the film tells the story of *Ne Zha* fighting against fate and growing himself to a fiery, brave and unyielding hero. The total box office of *Ne Zha* in mainland China has exceeded 5 billion yuan, becoming the second highest box office Chinese film ever and the highest box office domestic animation in China. However, when it entered global film market, distributed by Well Go USA Entertainment, *Ne Zha* didn’t receive too much warm responses as in its hometown. Many non-native Chinese speaker audiences thought it was difficult to understand the culture behind the screen. In view of the linguistic and cultural differences, subtitle translation should bridge the gap between China and the West. Based on Chinese mythology, the Chinese culture-loaded words in *Ne Zha* need to be translated in an ingenious way, especially when the target audiences are children. Visionary translators try to serve young audiences from the plot and language application in accordance with children’s psychological characteristics and cognitive ability during subtitle translation process. For films suitable for all ages such as *Ne Zha*, children-oriented perspective need more attention from translators to some extent.

1. CULTURE-LOADED WORDS AND *NE ZHA*

Culture-loaded terms are defined as words, phrases and idioms that mark the unique things in one culture (Liao, 2000, p.232). Various between different cultures, culture-loaded words could reflect activities of all kinds accumulated by a specific nation during a rather long time. Due to the influences of specific geographical conditions, customs, ideology, religion, social culture and other factors, such words with unique national characteristics

are created. Full of profound national culture details, those words are delicate carriers of rich and extensive cultural heritage that are concentrated from the essence of a nation's civilization treasures. When translating such culture-loaded words, translators need to take cultural elements into consideration so that the purpose of cultural exchange and promotion behind language can be achieved. Thus the translation of culture-loaded words with Chinese characteristics is of great significance to help enhancing western children's comprehensive and systematic understanding of China and eliminating misunderstandings and prejudices.

Film *Ne Zha* is adapted from one ancient Chinese legend, endowed with prominent Chinese cultural elements as well as loads of culture-loaded words, together with its turns and twists in plots, instinctive characters with strong personalities and grand fantasy scenes. *Ne Zha* spares no effort to cater to the tastes of young people by integrating modern humorous words with popular memes, all of which belong to the category of culture-loaded words (Ling, 2020, p.105). In addition, Chinese four-character set phrase, proverbs and allusions, dialects and limericks with Chinese characteristics should also be included in culture-loaded words in a broad sense (Zhao, 2020, p.65).

Contrast to its domestic success, *Ne Zha*'s poor performance in global box office data shows Chinese animation films still has a long way to go. Partly due to the language barriers in cross-cultural communication, some culture-loaded words and phenomenon cannot find relative expressions while imprecise translation fails to convey the correct meaning, leading to a result: audiences' understanding and appreciation of the film is affected in the bad way (Wei, 2020, pp.93-99).

From the perspective of social culture, American intellectual property "The Avengers" created by Marvel Comics, has gained huge popularities in children by creating a new culture called Marvel Comics Universe (MCU) with its own superhero icons such as spider man and iron man. Just as Hagfors Irma finds in 2003 (pp.115-127), children hold different expectations for the translation of culture-bound terms in literature works. Now there is a voice saying *Ne Zha*'s success might create an "MCU with Chinese characteristics" based on *Investiture of the Gods* or *Feng Shen Yan Yi* as it is known in Chinese, which proposes the translation of Chinese culture-loaded words should take more creative strategies in order to emphasize fantastical Oriental texture and the uniqueness of Chinese local heroes.

2. CHILDREN-ORIENTED TRANSLATION STUDIES

Children-oriented perspective of translation is a long-standing idea put forward by Chinese scholar and translator Zhou Zuoren. In literature academic field,

however, still not enough attention is attached to child readers and children are not treated equally as adults (Xu, 2017, p8). Though researchers of children-oriented translation studies hasn't offered a satisfactory and persuasive theory systematically, there is no doubt that children-oriented is the trend of translation studies with the development on translation practice.

Like putting one adult's feet into a child's shoes, thinking from the perspective of children is never easy, which means one adult should abandon his established thinking pattern and reshape his personal value system to make himself as closer to children as possible. Developed from the principles of children-oriented, Xu & Jiang (2014, pp.66-71+112) set up a children literature translation criteria called child standard translation with same effects in literature, aiming to realize the maximum equivalent between translated text and the original. It is a process in which the meaning of the original text is regenerated comprehensively in the translation on the basis of fully understanding and respect toward child readers and the inherent characteristics of children's literature. Under this framework, the following three parameters is stressed: accuracy, readability, literariness for children.

First of all, accuracy, the most basic principle for all kinds of translation, is the primary parameter of children-oriented translation criticism. From the perspective of children-oriented, accurate translation contributes a primary condition for children to obtain convincing and instructive information and provide a correct outlook of subjective and objective world.

Readability of translation has a major impact on educate children to meet the requirements of children's psychological development and reading abilities, whose significance is the consensus of readers and researchers. Different from that of adults', readability for children refers to the stylistic characteristics specifically in the fluent, concise and catchy style. Contributed to adapt to the stages of children's language cognitive development and vocal reading habits, readability generally includes choice of words, sentence pattern, phonology, rhythm and so on.

Literariness for children could be proved by analyzing how rhetorical devices with distinctive characteristics of children's literature are translated. Therefore, during translation, special attention should be paid to the processing effects of linguistic structure children's literature characteristics. Perfect reproduction of literariness for children could add the finishing touch in subtitle translation. Besides, considering that subtitle translation could be assisted with visual and auditory expression from film and television works, the supplementary information provided by pictures and sounds could give translators more freedom because harmonious integration makes a striking result (Li, 2001. pp38-41). Therefore, the translator must ensure the coherence of all kinds of information and keep children in the center to guarantee that the audience can obtain the clearest information with the least effort.

3. SUBTITLE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF CULTURE-LOADED WORDS IN *NE ZHA*

There have been widely differing opinions on how to translate culture-loaded words for years. Nowadays, more and more researchers hold that foreignization is better than domestication. Only by adopting the foreignization based translation strategy can the cultural characteristics be maximized, even if some translation could sacrifice comprehensibility and cause defamiliarization (Zheng, 2016, pp.53-56). Meanwhile, another Chinese scholar Wang Yinquan (2006, pp.74-76) believes most translators would agree the point that transliterate Chinese into Pinyin and add some interpretative translation if necessary is a feasible and practical method for the English translation of Chinese culture-loaded word.

In the subtitle translation of the film *Ne Zha*, a large number of culture-loaded words involve the characteristics of Chinese mythology in natural landscape, customs, as well as spiritual, material and socio-economic culture. For native English speaking children, those contents are strange and even difficult to understand. Subtitle translation should start from Children-orientation. After analyzing the translation of culture-loaded words in the C-E subtitles of *Ne Zha*, the following five translation methods are adopted as a mirror of translators' perspective on children.

3.1 Transliteration

Transliteration is to convert the original text to the target one based on the pronunciation of the original language so as to remain and highlight the phonetic function of the original text. As one effective method for spreading culture of the original language directly to target audiences, transliteration is an effortless way to keep exotic flavor of culture-loaded words.

Example 1:

哪吒、太乙真人、申公豹、敖丙

Ne Zha, Taiyi Zhenren, Shen Gong Bao, Ao Bing

All these four culture-loaded words in Example 1 are character names in Film *Ne Zha*. Being part of ancient Chinese mythologies, each name contains deep-seated cultural meaning. Take “哪吒” as an instance, two Chinese characters “哪” and “吒” have different meanings respectively. Pronounced as “Ne” in Chinese Pinyin, “哪” is an ancient Chinese compound noun, which represents one god responsible for expelling evil spirits. The second character “吒”, uttered as “Zha” in Pinyin, has two-folded meaning, one refers to a group of evil-killer with justice as their weapon, another emphasize on hot tempered, irritable man who hate injustice as poison. So the combination of “哪” and “吒” implies the ability of being a world dominator endowed with unstoppable and invincible power. More personalities of “Ne Zha” can be decoded from his name. Transliteration could not explain the culture implied deeply in those names. It is fact that

translators have to give up such heavy information which even native Chinese speakers have no ideal of. Taking the immediacy of film subtitles and children's limited understanding, transliteration is the best way to retain the cultural characteristics of character names from the source language. Besides, translators can combine transliteration with other methods when translating some culture-loaded words. Take “乾坤圈”, a Taoist magic weapon, as an example, its English translation “Qiankun hoop” adopts transliteration and literal translation together.

3.2 Literal Translation

Literal translation, also called word-for-word translation, is to translate according to the literal order or meaning, which can faithfully convey the idea of the original language. To some extent, literal translation reflects the linguistic style of the original language even the unity of form and spirit. It is particularly important for the translation of culture-loaded words, especially when it comes to simple sentences.

Example 2:

这混元珠被我炼化后分为灵珠和魔丸。

I have divided the Chaos Pearl into two parts, the Spirit Pearl and the Demon Pill.

“混元珠”means a pearl with divine and demonic life intertwined with each other. The translator use literal translation to show the chaotic state of the magic ball, and the film picture itself could create a concrete image of “混元珠”to children. “灵珠” and “魔丸” are globules with different properties born from the Chaos Pearl, “灵珠” the honorable and virtuous one and “魔丸” the demoniac and vicious one. “珠” and “丸” are smooth beads or orbs outwardly, however “珠” is elegant in a commendatory sense while “丸” is vulgar in a derogatory sense. The translator notices and deals with the subtle differences accurately by translating “珠” as “Pearl” and “丸” as “Pill” to evoke children's attitudinal meaning.

Set in Shang Dynasty (c.1675-1046 BC), *Ne Zha* builds up a mythological universe where the Celestial, demons, dragons and mortals coexist. Like “混元珠” in Example 2, a lot of concepts from myths including magic weapons, spell arts and various mysterious images derived from Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism appear frequently in *Ne Zha*. Through literal translation, the audience can understand and accept the meaning of the culture-loaded words immediately, by which the cultural characteristics of the source language are highlighted.

3.3 Interpretative Translation

In the process of translation, some culture-loaded words are too difficult to express clearly sometimes especially when the target language's culture has no connection with that of source language. Under this condition, adding necessary interpretation in time is called interpretative translation. Usually, some modifying adjectives are added to fulfill the description of target language, which is of great significance to readability and literariness

of children. For the components that need to be supplemented, notes shall be made later to further explain the ambiguous and obscure contents.

Example 3:

指点江山笔

A magical landscape brush

“指点江山” comes from a poetry *Spring in Pleasure Garden Changsha* written by Mao Zedong, which means pointing to the stream and hill in the first place. This four-character set phrase also refers to an ideal state featuring broad-minded, ambitious and independent heroes. In *Ne Zha*, the meaning of this idiom changes to a sense of freedom just like what Taiyi Zhenren said to Nezha: draw as you like. Considering that foreign audiences may be unfamiliar with the idiom, the translator chooses to delete the original background information and directly tells the audience the main function of the item and redefined it as a magical brush. By this way, the audience will not be disturbed by the original cultural information and the humorous and simple words are more suitable for the image of chubby and playful image of Taiyi Zhenren in the film.

3.4 Substitution

Regarded as a form of domestication, substitution is commonly used when there are equivalents in the target language. Substitution is a means of reproducing the given information in a new linguistic environment. However, sometimes, due to the translators lack of sufficient understanding of the target language culture, just partial equivalence is achieved and historical and cultural meaning is totally different.

Example 4:

魔丸元神坚不可摧，我施了天劫咒。

The Demon Pill is dangerous and nearly indestructible. I'm casting a heaven-made curse.

The phrase “天劫咒” is a curse casted by Buddha on tyrannical life. Originally, “天劫” is a Taoist term, referring to a doomed disaster. When a Taoist priest cultivates himself to be an immortal, he must encounter inexorable adversities including “天劫” as the severest. Only getting through all disasters can he smash the shackles of the human world and ascend the celestial being. The whole process is called “渡劫”. In the original sentence of example 4, “天劫咒” is translated into English word by word. “天” is substituted as heaven. However, the two words “天劫” is one integral entirety, which should not be split apart. Moreover, “heaven” in western culture is quite different from the concept of “天” in Taoism. The later means the creator of universe who is dominating the whole mortal world as well as gods, immortals and the heavens. For western audiences who know little about ancient Chinese mythology, the cultural connotation in culture-loaded words must be transferred from subtitle. Improper use of substitution would mislead children with inaccurate information. So, omission may be a better choice than imprecise translation.

3.5 Free Translation

Free translation is a method that does not stick to the form of the original text but try to retain the content meaning. Compared to other methods, free translation gives translators more flexibility to encourage more creative and diverse in expression. Due to the particularity of audiovisual translation, translated text in subtitle must be concise and clear. Annotating large and complicated paragraphs is deprecated. Free translation is an effective method to deal with culture-loaded words in subtitle translation without tedious and lengthy additional remarks.

By means of free translation, meeting the translation principles of simplicity, clarity, vividness and accuracy can be regarded as an effective interpretation of culture loaded words to children and teenagers.

Example 5:

日月同生，千灵重元

天地无量乾坤圈，急急如律令

With the power of sun and moon, of sea and sand,
Qiankun Hoop, obey my command!

The example 5 is a spell citing by Taiyi Zhenren in the style of classical Chinese. Concise and compact, the spell distinguishes itself from colloquial expression. In the translation of the first sentence, focusing on a conciseness, the translator omits the two verbs in the spell, “同生” meaning “share one life” and “重元” meaning “own one soul”. In the second sentence, “天地无量” which means heaven and earth is boundless and infinite, is a modifier of the magic instrument “乾坤圈” to show the enormous power of Qiankun Hoop vividly. But the translator choose to simplify it as “power”. “急急如律令” is a typical Taoist spell. when Mages or Taoists perform spells in worship activities, the spell is often ended with “急急如律令”. which is translated as “obey orders Presto” in *The Chinese-English Dictionary* (Lu, 2015, p.968). The rhetoric repetition of “急” (means being fast) adds more readability to make a flowing sound easy to memorize. In the translation of example 5, although the short structure and terse language are close to the original text, free translation can not reproduce the taste of the catchy spell.

It is hotly discussed that what is the best English translation of “急急如律令”. The following 8 versions are selected from Chinese netizens' translation on the spell published on China social platform Weibo.

- fast fast biu biu
- Hakula-matata
- Abracadabra
- Avada Kedavra
- mami mami hong (Om mani padme hum)
- All spirits listen to me. / All follows what I say.
- Speed is like Lv ling
- Ji ji ru lv ling

As the most popular version, V.1 creates a brand new short noun sentence composed of adjective “fast” and onomatopoeia “biu” in a joking tone. On the one hand,

repetition is reinforced and onomatopoeia “biu biu” is cute and funny in line with the basic style *Ne Zha*. On the other hand, Chinese traditional ancient culture is totally disappeared in V.1 and “biu biu” is a non-sense word in English context, so it is hard to elicit children’s reaction.

V.2, V.3 and V.4 find substitution of spells in English languages. V.2 “Hakuna-matata” is a well-accepted mantra in animated film *The Lion King*(1994), which is an original Swahili language phrase meaning “take it easy”. V.3 “Abracadabra” is a popular phrase adopted in South Korean pop songs and literary works, which comes from *Tales From the Thousand and One Nights*. Historically, it is a Hebrew incantation used as a magic word, calling for healing powers. And V.4 is magical killing curse word first used by Voldemort in film *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2004). Those creative translation can be seen as the corresponding substitutions of “急急如律令” in English language culture. In spite of their similarity and interoperability, such substitutions can’t convey the Chinese culture in the source language but lead to misunderstandings. “急急如律令” is a Taoist spell used to save people for justice rather a devil spell performed by black wizards who kill people like hemp like V.4 “Avada Kedavra”. None of the substitutions above shows the same meaning and functions.

V.5 is a parodic narration of six-syllabled Sanskrit mantra “Om mani padme hum”, particularly associated with the bodhisattva of compassion. “mami mami hong” is quite familiar for most Chinese because of film *A Chinese Ghost Story II: the Story Continue* (1990), but a less-known idiom for target audiences. More importantly, it’s a Buddhist mantra for practitioners to seek the inner peace rather to control demons.

Free translation is adopted in V.6 to stress the magical effect of the spell: dominate all mysterious forces. In this way, Taiyi Zhenren’s spiritual power in the universe could be illustrated vividly. In V.7, literal translation and transliteration are used. Originally, “急急如律令” means the speed of transmitting orders is as fast as “律令” in Taoism. “律令”, a ghost skilled in quick movement, can walk as fast as lightning. So, “律令” is transliterated as “Lv ling”. However, as V.7 cannot convey the core meaning of the spell, the transliteration of Chinese culture-loaded names is meaningless for target audiences.

Last but not least, V.8 is the most commented way of translation. Transliteration of the whole spell can better retain the catchy charm of culture-loaded words, giving the target audience a distinctive impression. “Ji ji ru lv ling” can be a “foreign phrase” for children of English-speaking countries just as “Avada Kedavra” for children in China.

CONCLUSION

As the embodiment of the culture of various nationalities, culture-loaded words always pose great difficulty to subtitle translation. When Chinese blockbuster *Ne Zha* “going out”, it boasts great opportunities to display richness and splendidence of Chinese mythic tales while a large number of culture-loaded words need to be translated carefully. From the perspective of children-orientation, the translation methods of transliteration, literal translation, interpretive translation, substitution and free translation could meet the criteria of children-oriented translation in varying degrees. Through reading, readers could give more attention to children as a specific group of film audiences and give children enough respect and trust. Under the guide of children-orientation, translators can accurately transfer the meaning of culture-loaded words to target audiences without bias by choosing the most appropriate translation strategy, think highly of the Chinese intellectual properties consciously, then convey the language and culture of the Chinese nation to children around the world effectively.

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