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**Subtitle Translation Strategies of Dish Name in the  
Chinese Documentary-A Bite of China 1**

Zhang Qi

*Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia*

Ang Lay Hoon

*Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia*

# Subtitle Translation Strategies of Dish Name in the Chinese Documentary-*A Bite of China 1*

Zhang Qi<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia*

Ang Lay Hoon<sup>b</sup>

<sup>b</sup>*Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia*

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## Abstract

With the implementation of “go globally” strategy of Chinese culture, a large number of Chinese films and TV programs have been produced to go abroad. As a medium and carrier of cultural communication, the quality of documentary subtitle translation determines whether Chinese culture can be appropriately disseminated or not. This paper aims to investigate the translation strategies of culture-specific items with special focus on name of dishes. The object of study in this paper is *A Bite of China 1* produced by CCTV in 2012, which is not only about Chinese foods but also geography, local customs and dietary habit. Firstly, by using comparative approach, the linguistic characteristics are discussed to identify the similarities and differences between source and translated dish names. Then the translation strategies for dish name are examined. Next, such factors affecting translation strategies as cultural ideology is analyzed. The objective of this paper is to study what translation strategies are possibly adopted when translating Chinese dish name into English in the documentary. The findings show that in the process of dish name translation of Chinese documentaries, domestication and foreignization are two frequently used strategies which is complementary to each other.

**Keywords:** Documentary, *A Bite of China 1*, culture-specific items, dish name, translation strategies, domestication, foreignization.

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## Introduction

In the era of globalization, there is an increasing demand for cross-cultural communication among countries in the world. Documentary, as a kind of film and television production, records real people’s real life and renders them with an artistic style, thus playing an important role in disseminating one culture to another. Compared with traditional literary translation which is centered on the transference from written source text to target text, documentary subtitle translation can be regarded as a new branch of translation for its unique features. According to a reputed scholar whose main research interest is audiovisual translation, Qian Shaochang (2000) summarized five characteristics of film and television language: conversational, comprehensive, instantaneous, popular, and non-note (Zhang Shuyue and Wang Feng, 2019). More specifically, due to the finite size of the TV screen, the length of subtitles usually with no more than two lines can meet the audience’s viewing needs, which can be concluded as the limitation of spacial factors. Besides, documentary subtitles are also subject to temporal restriction which implies that the time allowed for displaying a subtitle is limited and the reading

speed of average viewers is considered lower than the talking speed of the person to be subtitled (Yu-Jie Cheng, 2014). As a result, the documentary subtitle translation should be as concise as possible.

Except for the limitation of documentary subtitle, the cultural elements should also be attached importance to for the high frequency of culture-specific items existing in documentary. Concerning the definition of culture-specific items, Valló (2000) and Vermees (2004) pointed out culture-specific items are context dependent as any kind of text element can become a culture-specific item so far as it carries a connotative meaning in the source culture, while Gambier (2007) asserted that culture-specific items should connote different aspects of life such as education, history, art, institutions, legal systems, units of measurement, place names, foods and drinks, sports and national pastimes. Although different scholars define culture-specific words variously, there is something in common among them towards this concept: the words of a language which refer to beliefs, social customs, historic events, symbols, foods and drinks, geographical formations and art and culture of a specific country are considered as culture-specific items.

Leppihalme (2007) asserted that the texts occur in a given situation in a given culture in the world and each has a specific function and an audience of its own. Specifically speaking, people belonging to similar linguistic communities are more likely to have consensus towards specific items or concepts, for the reason that they possess shared traditions, habits, behavior, and common knowledge about their society and many other aspects (Seyed Mohammad Hosseini Maasoum, 2011). However, the members from different linguistic and cultural communities have more difficulties to understand certain items, especially for the translation of cultural words. On the one hand, some words exist in one culture but absolutely can not be found in another culture. However, although there is synonym in another culture, they are not completely equivalent and have nuance such as the difference between Chinese word “Bodhisattva” (菩萨) and English word “goddess.” In short, the absence and non-equivalence of some words makes the translation of culture-specific items problematic.

In the light of high occurrence of culture-specific items in this documentary which is hard for target audience to understand, and at the same time considering the special features of documentary subtitle translation constrained by the limited time and space on the screen (Yu-Jie Cheng, 2014), it is necessary to investigate what possible translation strategies are likely to be adopted when translating Chinese culture-specific items into English in a documentary.

## Literature Review

Looking back the previous studies on the documentary subtitle translation of *A Bite of China 1*, there is less research on it as the source language in this documentary is Chinese which is unfamiliar and difficult to understand for most of foreign scholars and researchers who don't know Chinese. Searching from Proquest, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and other databases with the key word of “A Bite of China,” it can only be found less than 8 articles, among them most researchers explored this documentary from the perspective of mass communication, like visual anthropology, the power of media, the construction of China image, Chinese ideology constructing of national identity, etc, while others analyzed it based on narrative mode and aesthetic perception. In conclusion, there is few article about subtitling of *A Bite of China 1* written by foreign scholars abroad.

Compared to western scholars, researchers at home paid more attention to subtitling of *A Bite of China 1*, because the source language of this documentary is their native language. Searching from CNKI with the key words of “documentary subtitle translation of A Bite of China 1,” we can find that there are about nineteen

papers available and they are related to relevance theory, functional equivalent theory or reception aesthetics to make analysis of specific translation strategies with specific cases.

As for main translation strategies, in the book of *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Venuti (1995) proposed "foreignization is an approach that the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him" (Venuti, 2004:19-20). On the contrary, domestication refer to a type of translation which aims to produce a transparent, and fluent translation centered on target language readers in order to minimize the otherness of the foreign text for target language receptors.

Seeing that culture is a broad concept covering various contents and aspects, Newmark (1988) narrowed the sense and classified culture-specific items into five main categories, namely ecology including flora, fauna, hills, winds, plains, etc.; material culture like food, clothes, houses, towns and transport; social culture such as work and leisure; social organizations as well as gestures and habitual behaviors.

## Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature, in particular, descriptive. It is mainly based on text analysis of the data collected.

The data is selected from Chinese documentary *A Bite of China 1* consisting of seven episodes. The source text is Chinese subtitle and target text is its corresponding English translation. Due to the fact that there is no existing textual subtitle available, the Chinese subtitle together with its English translation are transcribed by the researcher word by word, and a word format document with nearly 35000 English words and 49000 Chinese characters is created. After that, the transcript is scrutinized and checked back and forth in order to ensure the accuracy and correctness.

Then, with the purpose to collect various occurrences of cultural elements, the culture-specific items are searched and identified manually in the source text and its English version based on Newmark's (1988) classification of cultural words. Because different views towards the same culture-specific item by different researchers, there is possibility to classify the same words into different category. Therefore, discussing the work with peers, colleagues and academics to comment and give feedback is utilized so as to achieve credibility and internal validity. The divergence towards the same culture-specific word is discussed further to ensure that the classification is precise and agreeable.

Finally, each cultural-specific items and its English translation extracted are aligned manually to analyze the strategies applied in the translation process based on Venuti's domestication and foreignization.

## Discussion and Findings

After doing statistics, it is found that the number of material culture-specific items is the largest among five categories of culture-specific items accounting for 54% followed by ecological ones. The frequency of occurrence of social culture-specific items is a little higher than that of social organizations. Compared with other types of cultural items, the words about gestures and habitual behaviors occur the least frequently with only 5%. In view of the high occurrence of material culture-specific items, the words in this category especially dish name are selected as sample of this research for their typical representativeness.

After analyzing the specific cases, as for translation strategies used in *A Bite of China 1*, domestication and foreignization are both applied when translating Chinese culture-specific items into English. However, it needs

to be pointed out that apart from the words belonging to gestures and habitual behaviors, the frequency of foreignization strategy used is much higher than that of domestication strategy in other four cultural category.

In what follows, some specific examples are given to illustrate further.

#### Example 1

ST: 嘉兴人的一天，却是从一个个肉粽子开始的。

TT: Jiaxing natives start their day with a meat zongzi, a traditional Chinese food made of glutinous rice.

In example 1, Chinese traditional food “粽子” is translated into “zongzi” according to its transliteration plus with an explanation of its ingredients rather than “glutinous rice dumpling.” Although “glutinous rice dumpling” is easier to understand compared with “zongzi” when target text readers watch subtitle, it is unable to maintain source language style, thus failing to convey original flavor of Chinese traditional culture. In contrast, “zongzi” preserves the foreignness of source language and is beneficial to get knowledge of Chinese food for foreign readers.

#### Example 2

ST: 任何盛宴都无法取代饺子。

TT: Dainties of any kind cannot replace jiaozi.

In example 2, Chinese “饺子” is rendered into “jiaozi” instead of dumplings in this sentence. Even though the English word “dumpling” is more commonly used and familiar by target text readers, the original flavor of Chinese traditional food is absent which is not conducive to disseminating Chinese culture. By means of foreignization, not only the language style of the original text can be maintained, which help the target language audience better understand the uniqueness and appreciate the charm of Chinese food culture, but also Chinese cultural connotation is able to be conveyed to the world.

Despite of the frequent utilization of foreignization, domestication is also an effective strategy to convey cultural connotation. Following example elaborates this point clearly.

#### Example 3

ST: 炸藕夹通常是这样制作的。

TT: A fried lotus root sandwich is always cooked this way.

Taken Chinese dish “炸藕夹” as an instance in example 3, the cooking methods and ingredients are listed and rendered it as “deep-fried lotus root sandwich” by the translator. As it can be seen, target readers are strange to “藕夹” (double-layered lotus root) while have an intimate knowledge of their daily food “sandwich.” Because lotus root filled with meat is very similar to sandwich, foreign audiences can not only know its cooking methods and ingredients, but also know its image by virtue of domestication translation.

## Conclusion

The findings show that domestication and foreignization are two commonly used strategies in the process of translation of dish name in Chinese documentaries. However, in *A Bite of China 1*, the frequency of

foreignization strategy is much higher than domestication when translating Chinese dish name into English. Influenced by the cultural ideology of translator and dominant institution (Chinese official government) whose intention is to demonstrate the charm of Chinese cuisine and spread Chinese traditional culture to abroad, retaining original meaning and flavor of Chinese culture-specific words is primary consideration, which can be explained the reason why foreignization strategy is frequently used. On the whole, these two strategies are complementary to each other and supposed to be used alternately.

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