

English Subtitling Across Time and Culture—A Case Study of *Hero*

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This paper adopts the “negative analytic” proposed by Antoine Berman to study the translation of subtitles in the film *Hero* by the famous Chinese director ZHANG Yi-mou. The story in the film took place in the Warring States Period (475 BC-221 BC), while the film is made in modern times and targets a modern audience. This paper takes a close look at how the film negotiates between the ancient and the modern with the unique features in its language (lexicon, grammar, and syntax) and cultural data and how these features are treated in the English subtitles. It is revealed that the domestication strategy in subtitle translation removes the temporal and cultural gap between the film and the original audience in the face of linguistic, cultural, and technical constraints.

Keywords: subtitle translation, negative analytic, linguistic, cultural and technical constraints

Introduction

With unconventional narrative structure, innovative use of colors, and the use of conversation to move the plot along, the Film *Hero* tells an old Kungfu story to a modern audience. It provides an interesting case for both film studies and translation studies. In this paper we focus on the style of language in *Hero* and special attention is paid to how the language features and cultural data thereof are treated in the English translation of the subtitles. This study firstly outlines the 12 deforming tendencies identified by Antoine Berman as the negative analytic. Then, this study introduces the film *Hero* and reveals the specific features of the film subtitles as a mixture of classic Chinese and modern Chinese with a large quantity of culture-specific terms. With special interest in the translation of the film subtitles, this study intends to find out what general strategies are adopted in the subtitle translation and how this specific case study can benefit general media translation in dealing with linguistic, cultural, and technical constraints.

Antoine Berman: The Negative Analytic

French theorist Antoine Berman saw translation as “trial” which is defined in two senses: “for the target culture in experiencing the strangeness of the foreign text and word” and “for the foreign text in being uprooted from its original language context” (Berman, 1985, p. 240). He believed that translation should present the foreign work to target readers in its utter foreignness by maintaining the linguistic and cultural specificities and peculiarities of the source text. The target language reader is thus exposed to the foreignness of the text. On the other hand while being translated, the foreign work is being uprooted from its original language ground and put

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in exile, and in this sense translation means a trial, i.e., a test whether alien forces can be accepted by the receiving soil.

Berman held that the ethical aim of the translating act should be “receiving the Foreign as Foreign” (Munday, 2016, p. 230), but in reality he has observed a naturalizing tendency to negate the foreign in translation. There is “a system of textual deformation” that prevents the foreign from coming through (Munday, 2016, p. 230). He examined in detail the deforming forces operating in the process of translation and used “negative analytic” to refer to “ethnocentric, annexationist translations and hypertextual translations (pastiche, imitation, adaptation, free rewriting) where the play of deforming forces is freely exercised” (Munday, 2016, p. 230). The negative analytic has identified 12 deforming tendencies, which are rationalization, clarification, expansion, ennoblement, qualitative impoverishment, quantitative impoverishment, the destruction of rhythms, the destruction of underlying networks of signification, the destruction of linguistic patternings, the destruction of vernacular networks or their eroticisation, the destruction of expressions and idioms, and the effacement of the superimposition of languages. Some of the deforming tendencies are highly relevant when it comes to the English subtitles of the film *Hero*.

Hero: The Story and the Language

Strictly speaking, *Hero* is not a story in a conventional sense. It is a story of stories, told not so much with a beginning, a middle, and an end, but with fighting under different colourations in four different versions of one story, that of killing the king of Qin, Qinshihuang. It is set during 300 BC, the time of Warring States in China’s history, a cinematic representation of one of the many stories about the king of Qin. It is narrated by Nameless (Jet Li), a citizen of the Kingdom of Zhao who attempts to assassinate the king of Qin. Disguised as a Qin official in charge of crime, he makes the king believe that he has removed the greatest threat to the king—Sky (Donnie Yen), Broken Arrow (Tony Leung Chiu-Wai), and Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung Man-Yuk)—three masters of swordsmanship who have been attempting to kill the king for the past 10 years. For this, he is summoned to meet and drink with the king in the palace, which is a privilege rewarded to whoever conquers any or all of the three. The film starts from here in the form of a conversation between Nameless and the king about how Nameless got rid of the three. Nameless makes up a story in which he fakes an affair between Sky and Flying Snow, who is the lover of Broken Arrow. He tells the king that he defeats Sky as the first step and then succeeds to vanquish Broken Arrow and Flying Snow by dividing them using Sky.

However, the King sees through the story as a lie since he believes Broken Arrow and Flying Snow should not be as small-minded as depicted by Nameless. The King witnessed how dignified they were in a fight with them three years before. Under such circumstances, Nameless has to tell the truth. In fact, Nameless is a Zhao citizen who had his family slaughtered by the Qin troops. To revenge his family, he acquired a unique skill called “Death within 10 paces”, hoping to take advantage of the King’s order that whoever removes the three assassins gets to drink with the King within 10 paces. Nameless is accurate and swift in using a sword. He persuades Sky to allow himself to be killed in the presence of Qin officials (Of course Sky is just wounded and soon recovers). With the same trick Nameless enlists the assistance of Flying Snow. Broken Arrow has a different opinion on this matter. He holds that only the King can bring peace and save “all under heaven” from chaotic wars, for which they cannot afford to kill the King. He tries, in vain, to dissuade Nameless and Flying Snow and with reluctance he contributes his sword just in order not to part from Flying Snow’s. The King has detected Nameless’ murderous intent but he is also deeply moved and contented to have understanding from

Broken Arrow. So he offers his sword to Nameless, who has to decide to kill or not. Nameless gives up his mission by stabbing at the King's back with the handle of the sword. In the end by the King's order, Nameless is executed for attempted assassination.

Generally speaking, the language in the film sounds archaic. It is decided by the time setting of the film. The characters lived at a time more than 2,300 years ago. During such a long period of time, the Chinese language has undergone various changes. The most dramatic example saw classical Chinese was replaced by *baihua*, i.e., modern Chinese, at the beginning of the 20th century. Among other differences, modern Chinese (*baihua*) closes the gap found in ancient Chinese between an oral language (ancient *baihua*) and a written form (*wenyan*). Another example of change is that starting from 1955 most Chinese characters have been simplified in writing. Evolution of the language means that the characters in the film cannot speak the same vernacular as the Chinese do today. The development of modern Chinese (*baihua*) is based on ancient *baihua* mentioned earlier, which did not appear until the mid-Tang Dynasty (CHEN, 2002, p. 2), over 1,000 years after the Warring States Period. In fact, it is not known for certain how people spoke as early as the Warring States Period. The closest guess can be made from *wenyan*, i.e., classical Chinese, which was based on but later departed from what was spoken then (YANG, 2001, p. 4). Classical Chinese can be traced back to its earliest model, *xiayan* (夏言). According to ZHOU (1997, p. 13), *xiayan* (夏言), literally, the Xia language, from the Xia Dynasty, is the first common language in China. It was passed down dynasty after dynasty and became *yayan* (雅言), that is, elegant language, which was in use until 1919. But again as ZHOU (1997, p. 13) pointed out, *yayan* is used for poems and prose, not for people to speak in their daily life. People then spoke different local dialects, which is nowhere to find due to the oral nature. The author ventures to suggest that the language adopted in the film is just an artificial reconstruction of ancient spoken Chinese based on classical Chinese texts left behind from that time. As far as the final product is concerned, it is a discourse mixing classical Chinese (*wenyan*) with modern Chinese. The act of reconstruction sees to it that the language befits the characters, but on the other hand it needs to make sure that it is accessible and appeals to a modern audience who may not be able to understand ancient Chinese with all the changes.

Lexicon and Grammar

Being a discourse between classical Chinese and modern Chinese, the film language is characterized with combinations of usages found in both variants in terms of lexicon, grammar, and syntax. With regard to lexicon, while ancient Chinese uses mostly single character words (WANG, 1981, p. 85), the film dialogue features mostly two-character words to express the same meaning. For example, instead of saying “师” (troops), “道” (idea), “闻” (hear), and “解” (know), the film says “军队” (troops), “道理” (idea), “听说” (hear), and “了解” (know). But meanwhile it keeps quite a number of single-character words frequently used in ancient Chinese, which contributes to the archaic flavour. Examples include “定” (一定, must), “非” (不是, not), “需” (需要, need), and “容” (允许, allow). The same pattern of hybridity is found in the category of function words. Such items as “之” (of), “乎” (auxiliary word used in a question), “矣” (the state of being finished), and “哉” (exclamation) are basically replaced by modern usages like “了” (the state of being finished), “吗” (auxiliary word used in a question), and “啊” (exclamation), but one also finds utterances using archaic function words. This kind of mixture of classical and modern usages helps to shorten the distance between the time of the film and its modern viewers. Although it is difficult to draw a clear-cut line between classical Chinese and its modern counterpart, some language use does sound ancient to modern ears while some forms are more modern than ancient. For the

former, the verb “伤” in “曾伤我大秦多少壮士” is rarely used alone in this transitive sense meaning “使...受伤” (to wound) in modern Chinese. For the latter, a perfect example is “我心里根本没有你” (You are not in my heart), in which the subject-verb-object syntactical structure is most familiar to contemporary filmgoers.

Syntax

Examples of assertive will be cited to illustrate the hybrid nature of the film discourse in syntax. As an equivalent of “be” in English, “是” is most commonly used in modern Chinese in assertive. With classical Chinese, things are more complicated. In some cases, “乃”, “既”, and “为” are used in the same way as the modern “是”. In other cases, structures like “...者, ...也” or “..., ...也” are employed (CHEN, 2002, pp. 217-220). In *Hero*, a greater proportion of the assertive practices the modern use. These are some of the examples: “你才是最危险的刺客” (You are the most dangerous assassin), “你到底是谁” (Who ARE you?), “只有一件事是真” (Only one thing is true). Into these modern sentences inserted these: “残剑、飞雪为—对情侣” (They are lovers) and “在下实为秦人” (I am actually from Qin), assertive of classical Chinese style. Classical style is the right word for the language in *Hero*. On the whole, the film discourse is not exactly classical Chinese, nor strictly modern Chinese. Juxtaposition of the two gives rise to ambivalence where past meets present, giving the film viewers living in the present access to the ancient past, or more exactly a flavour of it, linguistically.

Cultural Data

This flavour of the ancient is definitely strong culturally, with proper nouns, items, and images associated with the past embedded in the language. For today’s Chinese viewers, the time of kings, seigniors, palace, and court is long gone. So is the time of Jianghu and swordsmen, carefree masters of martial arts who fight or die to honour their commitments and conviction. Bamboo scrolls, a primitive form of books, have long been replaced by printed and bound books. Calligraphy is practiced by few now that people write with pens or type. Concepts like “气” (qi) and “悟” (understanding through meditation) evoke ancient Chinese philosophy which is becoming increasingly strange. Nonetheless, all these are undeniably Chinese. They are at the same time far and close to a Chinese audience. They are far in the sense of being remote temporarily, but close in its cultural affinity to the Chinese viewers.

Translating *Hero*: The Deforming Tendencies

If such linguistic hybridity and cultural affinity connect *Hero* more closely with modern Chinese viewers, it predictably poses tremendous challenges to translators. To translate the film dialogue into English is to grapple with three barriers, linguistic, cultural, as well as temporal. In other words, in addition to the above-mentioned linguistic and cultural constraints that confront every translation task, translation of the film dialogue needs to account for the time distance between the film and its English-speaking audience, because for these people, *Hero* comes from not only another culture, but also another time. The following paragraphs will examine how the English subtitles of *Hero* deal with the afore-said barriers. This research treats subtitling as one mode of translation, to which general translation theories apply, but in the meantime it does not ignore the medium-specific technical and textual characteristics. In a sense, subtitling calls for more, instead of less, attention and efforts in translation and translation criticism. Admitting inherent violence in translation and invoking Berman’s negative analytic as reference, we identify six major deforming tendencies in *Hero*’s English subtitling through a close textual analysis.

Qualitative Impoverishment

By qualitative impoverishment, Berman referred to the replacement of iconic “terms, expressions and figures in the original with terms, expressions and figures that lack their sonorous richness or, correspondingly, their signifying or ‘iconic’ richness” (Venuti, 2000, p. 291). An iconic term stimulates a perception of resemblance and creates an image of its referent. The image provoked at the sound of the term combined with the sound itself is essential to the process by which an iconic term produces meaning. For example, the Chinese word “铁骑” evokes visual association of soldiers in full armour riding on horses. Strictly speaking, iconicity is different from hieroglyph, where the writing of characters resembles the objective referents in its physical shape. Here the two characters “铁骑” do not necessarily resemble the physical appearance of armoured soldiers on horses, but somehow the sound and the image evoked by the sound produce a richness in meaning which such an English equivalent as “army” cannot sustain. The same impoverishment in quality happens when “铁甲” (iron armour) is rendered into “troops”. Certainly, the meaning of “铁骑” and “铁甲” are conveyed by “army” and “troops”, but the visual and sonorous richness is lost.

However, since film is mostly a visual medium, the loss of the visual aspect in the text is likely to be compensated for by images. For these two cases, if they are placed back into the film context, “troops” and “army” invoke many impressive scenes in which full-armoured Qin soldiers ride on horses or march in formation. Still the mutual complementarity between the verbal acoustic channel and the non-verbal visual channel does not help the other iconic terms in *Hero*. For example, “圈套” (literally a loop, metaphorically a trap), “剪除” (removing with scissors), and “串通” (literally a skewer, metaphorically collude) are reproduced in the English subtitles as “that” (referring to what’s just described), “exterminate”, and “form a pact” respectively, resulting in accumulated loss which erases a significant part of the signification process of the original and transforms its lexical texture.

The Destruction of Underlying Networks of Signification

According to Berman, there is a hidden dimension of a text, “where certain signifiers correspond and link up, forming all sorts of networks beneath the ‘surface’ of the text itself” (Venuti, 2000, p. 292). This subtext carries a word-obsession where related words may recur after intervals, long or short, and form a signifying network. A prominent example of such a network in *Hero* is related to the character “手” (hand). Phrases with “手” (hand) are scattered throughout the text and become an aspect of the rhythm of the text. If we agree with Berman, these words with “手” (hand) like “身手”¹, “高手”², “联手”³, “手腕”⁴, “动手”⁵, “援手”⁶, “失手”⁷, “住手”⁸, “对手”⁹, “手中寸草”, “手无寸铁”, “赤手”, “手腕”, and “亲手” produce meaning not only on their own, but also in their inter-connectedness. If we replace some of the words with their synonyms, it makes the hidden dimension of meaning production in the text easier to comprehend. Actually, it destroys the whole network if “身手”¹ is replaced with “功夫”, “援手”⁶ with “相助”, or “失手”⁷ with “失败”. It would not be wrong to suggest that in this example it is more than pure coincidence that the first set of phrases is adopted while the second is not. For this scenario, the afore-said intertextuality between different channels is at most relevant to individual cases and therefore unable to make up for the loss resulting from translation.

For example:

流水: 好身手¹

You are good

无名: 流水先生更是好身手¹

You are even better

The dialogue happens after Nameless and Springbrook fought side by side to fend off the Qin arrows for Highcliff, who is trying to finish the scroll inside the house. Both the Chinese and the English subtitles point viewers to the previous sequence in which the two interlocutors display their skilful as well as beautiful mastery of martial arts. Thus with information from the visual channel, the loss can be compensated for to a certain extent. The same is with the following:

For example:

秦王: 你与长空为行刺寡人, 暗自串通	To kill me, the two of you formed a pact
引我秦宫高手 ² 在一旁观看作证	using my <i>men</i> as witnesses

The situation described by the King of Qin already appears in the beginning of the film and this sentence refers viewers back to that scene in which the seven kungfu masters of the Qin palace watch Nameless fight Sky.

However, it is another story if these examples are viewed as two links in the network identified earlier.

For example:

三年前	Three years ago, Flying Snow
双箭联手 ³ 攻入宫中	stormed the palace <i>with</i> Broken Arrow

For example:

书法箭术	Both calligraphy and swordplay
都靠手腕 ⁴ 之力与胸中之气	rely on one's strength and spirit

For example:

好身手 ¹	You are <i>good</i>
流水先生更是好身手 ¹	You are even <i>better</i>

For example:

我不跟你动手 ⁵ , 走	I am not going to <i>fight</i> you. Go away!
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For example:

你与长空为行刺寡人, 暗自串通	To kill me, the two of you formed a pact
引我秦宫高手 ² 在一旁观看作证	using my <i>men</i> as witnesses

For example:

如下不能取胜	Should I be unable to defeat her
再有劳将军援手 ⁶ 相助	please <i>apprehend</i> her

For example:

何以失手 ⁷	What <i>went wrong?</i>
是我放弃了	I abandoned the plan

For example:

如月住手 ⁸	Moon, <i>don't</i>
你不是他对手 ⁹ , 住手 ⁸ 吧	You're no <i>match</i> for him. <i>Stop</i>

Again the meaning in each case is adequately conveyed in the English translation, but with some phrases totally omitted and some explicated and dissolved in the context, the network that these words form and the subtle rhythm that they link up to create are completely lost in the English translation.

The first two deforming tendencies, i.e., qualitative impoverishment and the destruction of underlying networks of signification, seem inevitable in translation because languages are different from one another and possess their own distinctive features. In Guardini's (1998) terms, the two deforming instances as part of the

negative analytic is a consequence of the category of intralinguistic constraints. There is both the cultural and the temporal gap between the film and its contemporary English audience. How does English subtitling in *Hero* translate the classic Chinese flavour of the original dialogue and how does it deal with possible cultural or extralinguistic constraints? Let us continue with the negative analytic.

The Effacement of the Superimposition of Languages

It has been established earlier that *Hero*'s dialogue is a combination of Classical Chinese and modern Chinese, which renders the film closer to its Chinese audience while at the same time maintains a distance from them. When we look at the English text, it reads natural and fluent without traces of translation. Attention has been paid to diction in order to distinguish a king's speech from a conversation between two lovers. For example, formal words are chosen for the king, like "surmise" instead of "guess" and "comprehend" rather than "understand". However, the archaisms and classical Chinese sentence structures in the original have basically disappeared. In terms of lexicon, the translation features predominantly words in frequent use in modern English, like *study*, *reward*, *exterminate*, *smash*, *receive*, *defeat*, *affair*, *fight*, *divide*, *uncover*, and many others. Woven together, these words are unable to produce a text that is supposed to come from a distant period. The loss of the original classical flavour also takes place on the syntactic level. If archaic use disrupts the reading experience by foregrounding its alien quality, the English sentences read by and large natural and smooth, which is evidenced by any of the examples given in this paper.

The effacement of the co-existence of two language styles, which results in easy and natural reading for English audience, leads up to a domesticating strategy. This strategy sets to make the text natural by minimizing any possible distraction or interruption from unfamiliar or strange elements. We believe it is a result of conscious choice and our evidence comes from this remark:

For example:

好快的剑

How swift thy sword!

It is the only case of archaic word (thy) and structure (how- exclamation) that can be found in the translation. The word "thy" meaning "your" comes from old English and is no longer in use now. Similarly, how-structure exclamation is seldom used in modern English. This remark points to two things. Firstly, it means the temporal gap between the film and its audience has been noted with this sentence as a conscious attempt to address that. Secondly, however the effort is made in vain since one case of archaism is not able to transform the texture of the whole text. In a sense the employment of one archaic word or structure looks more like a gimmick than a serious attempt to highlight the foreignness or temporal remoteness of the original. On the whole, it does not pose any threat to the overall fluency and naturalness of the text.

So from the way the translation handles the original mixture of Classical and modern Chinese, it can be said to be target-oriented. It moves the writer towards the reader and provides the reader with fluent English utterances. The fluency and naturalness of the text is further guaranteed by how it deals with Chinese expressions and idioms.

The Destruction of Expressions and Idioms

Each society has a wealth of expressions and idioms exclusive to its culture. In *Hero*, it employs a large number of four-character Chinese idioms, like "星夜兼程"¹⁰ (carry on even in starlit night), "高枕无忧"¹¹ (sleep on a high pillow, no worries), "一草一木"¹² (each grass and tree, everything), "安营扎寨"¹³ (pitching a camp, settle down), "纵横江湖"¹⁴ (travel across rivers and lakes, travel the world freely), and so on. These

idioms feature different internal structures but they have one thing in common, that is, they all rely on specific imageries to represent actions and ideas. Let us put these idioms back in the context and see how they are treated in translation.

For example:

臣奉我王之命	By order of His Majesty
接壮士星夜兼程 ¹⁰ 赶回, 拜见丞相	we have brought the mighty warrior

For example:

长空说	He said he had lived a life
他此生纵横江湖 ⁴ , 无牵无挂	without responsibilities or commitments
唯有一人长留心中	He cared for only one person

Obviously, in this example the imagery of “星夜” (starlit night) in the idiom is not there, nor is the sense of emergency and haste expressed by the phrase. The whole idiom is just omitted in the English translation. The same is true with the second example here, where the imageries of “江湖” (rivers and lakes), the concept of “江湖”, and the whole idea of drifting as a swordsman are just gone.

Most of the other idioms listed above are treated in a similar manner, which the author calls abstraction, that is, the imageries are stripped while the general meaning of the idioms is put across.

For example:

从此我王可以高枕 ¹¹ 无忧了	His Majesty can finally <i>sleep at night!</i>
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For example:

寡人自恃对秦国的一草一木 ¹² 了如指掌	I thought I know <i>everything</i> about my Kingdom
却不知狼孟县内	I didn't know that Leng Meng County
居然有你这样的人才	held a talent like yours

For example:

大王几十万大军	Several hundred thousand Qin troops
当晚在山下安营扎寨 ¹³ 准备攻赵	were <i>readying</i> for the next onslaught

We need to make allowance here for some of the examples given. It requires a lengthy explanation to put across the ideas and obviously the space does not now allow that to happen. But technical constraints do not justify every case of omission or abstraction. Let us try to keep the original imageries within the space available.

For example:

寡人自恃对秦国的一草一木 ¹² 了如指掌	I thought I know <i>every grass and tree</i> in Qin
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For example:

大王几十万大军	That night several hundred thousand Qin troops
当晚在山下安营扎寨 ¹³ 准备攻赵	were <i>making camps readying</i> for attacking Zhao

Of course, the versions provided are not necessarily better but they demonstrate that cases of omission or abstraction in the translation of idioms cannot simply be attributed to technical constraints. Even when there is enough space, a domesticating strategy has been adopted to minimize strange factors in the translation in order to achieve fluency and naturalness. The domesticating tendency in *Hero* is further confirmed by the way it deals with items exclusive to Chinese culture.

The Domestication of Culture-Specific Items

By culture-specific items, we mean objects, events, and ideas that can only be found in a certain culture. They are related to history, lifestyle, and worldview of a people. In *Hero*, such items include “农历” (the lunar calendar), “意念” (yinian), “书法” (calligraphy), “书简” (bamboo scrolls), “大侠” (swordsman), “朱砂” (cinnabar), and so on. Let us see how they are domesticated.

For example:

六月初五

On the fifth day of the sixth month

长空在一家棋馆内现身

Sky attended a chess house

Ancient China had its own calendar system, called the lunar calendar in order to distinguish from the solar calendar from the West. In this example, the time of the story dictates the lunar calendar is used, but this is totally ignored in the subtitle. A possible version is “On June the fifth of the lunar calendar” because it draws attention to China’s own tradition of calculating months and years rather than concealing it.

For example:

虽然谁也没动

Neither of us moved

但决斗已经在彼此的意念中继续展开

We fought the battle in our *minds*

If “意念” is rendered into “mind” in English, it simply means “imagination”. But in Chinese without invoking any philosophical association, it connotes a state between reality and fantasy, or fiction that is more real than reality. In *Hero*, the ambivalence between fantasy and reality is created through several means. Along with the voiceover that utters the above sentence, the camera zooms in slowly to the faces of the two fighters who close their eyes and seem to enter a spiritual state. Meanwhile, the picture turns from colour into black and white. With slow and gentle music on the soundtrack, black and white fighting scenes are intercutting with dripping rainwater and occasional coloured shots of two fighters standing still with obvious eyeball movement showing internal storm. Under these circumstances, translation is not necessary since the acoustic and visual channels work together to show what “意念” is like. It is enough to use just transliteration and say “yinian”.

An inspiration from the example is that the four channels available in subtitling should not be regarded only as constraints. They can be used to serve translation. For instance for cases hard to explain in another language, we can afford not to explain them if they are shown in images.

For example:

此处距书简几步

How far am I from the *bookshelves*?

大约十步

About 10 paces

The conversation takes place inside a round wall of bamboo scrolls. “书简” is the book form at that time, with characters written on bamboo pieces bound with ropes. Since the visual image of “书简” is clearly shown on the screen, “bamboo book scrolls” will do here for translation, but the subtitle chooses “bookshelves”, a word without any alien element to interrupt easy viewing. The same treatment is applied to “朱砂”. The more familiar “red ink” is preferred to the more accurate but stranger “cinnabar”.

It is evident now the translation is oriented to its target receptor and offers them a fluent, familiar discourse that effaces the heterogeneity in the original language styles, minimizes strange components when translating Chinese idioms, and uses familiar English words for items loaded with Chinese culture and thus subdues the Chinese flavour. The last category does the same, moving the writer towards the audience.

Clarification

Berman made it clear that clarification takes two senses. It is “the manifestation of something that is not apparent, but concealed or repressed, in the original” (Venuti, 2000, p. 289), but it also tries to “render ‘clear’ what does not wish to be clear in the original” (Venuti, 2000, p. 289). Let me add that in *Hero*’s case it aims to maximize clarity and minimize misunderstanding when it is not at all necessary.

For example:

你们记住	Please remember
秦国的箭再强	their arrows might destroy our town
可以破我们的城, 灭我们的国	and topple our Kingdom
可亡不了赵国的字	but they can never obliterate our <i>culture</i>
今日	Today
你们要学到赵国文字的精义	you will learn the essence of our <i>culture</i>

This is a speech to the students from the headmaster of the calligraphy school. Apparently, the italicised “字” and “文字” can mean “calligraphy” literally and “culture as manifested in calligraphy” symbolically. In this way, the two Chinese words become meaningful. Comparatively speaking, the symbolic sense is less explicit and calls for a little effort in perception. This may be the reason why the translation tears down the veil and explicates the hidden meaning. This move not only is superfluous, but also deprives the words of the double signification.

For example:

大王, 这一剑臣必须刺	Your Majesty, your visions have convinced me
刺了这一剑	that you are committed to the highest ideal
很多人都会死	of ultimate swordsmanship
而大王会活着	Therefore I cannot kill you
死去的人请大王记住	Remember those who gave their lives
那最高的境界	for <i>the highest ideal: peace</i> .

This section is the voiceover to a sequence in which Nameless thrusts over at the king of Qin. The camera first fixes on his body and then cuts to the king’s face of shock and agony without showing how the sword goes. This manoeuvre leads viewers to think that Nameless makes a decision to kill the king right until the end of the sequence. However if one reads the translation on the bottom of the screen, the suspension created by the original disappears because it makes it immediately clear that Nameless decides not to assassinate the king. It gives up the regular word-for-word translation and chooses to avoid the suspension by means of free translation instead. Another case in point is the italic part in the same section. In Chinese, “peace” comes before and becomes the explaining context for “the highest ideal”. It is not repeated in Chinese as it is in English to clarify again for the English audience what is “the highest ideal”.

It should have become evident by now that the deforming tendencies identified point to a domestication strategy in *Hero*’s English subtitling. It is developed so that the English translation reads smooth, fluent, and natural with the elements that make the foreign work foreign removed. It fails to reproduce the original feature of mixing Classic Chinese with modern Chinese, avoids the culture-specific items that might appear alien, and over-explicates what is supposed to be ambivalent. As a result, the tension created between the ancient and the modern and the temporal gap between the film and the original audience are removed completely. One might

attribute this to all the constraints that confront subtitle translation, linguistic, cultural, and technical, but the analysis has shown how visual and acoustic channels can be used to help subtitle translation. The dominant domestication strategy has to be understood in a bigger context considering the dynamics between the film industry in China and that of the rest of the world, which of course calls for a full paper.

Conclusion

It is clear that film subtitle translation, as a special mode of translation, faces the same kind of challenges that all modes of translation have to deal with: linguistic differences and cultural gaps. It also has to operate under specific technical parameters, such as width of the screen available for the display of subtitles, the synchronicity of visual and acoustic information, etc. An overall domesticating strategy is adopted in the English subtitles of *Hero*, but we have also shown in the case study that the technical considerations should not only be seen as constraints, but instead they can be used as a possible solution where visual images on the screen can make up for the loss of information that texts have to miss due to linguistic or cultural barriers.

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