

An Exploration of Subtitle Translation Techniques in Film under Cultural Differences: A Case Study of Hi, Mom

Zhu Zhou

Foreign Languages College, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, 310000, China

Keywords: Subtitle translation, Cultural differences, Translation skills

Abstract: As globalization accelerates, cross-cultural communication is becoming increasingly frequent, especially in the realm of cinema. In recent years, Chinese films have gained significant traction on the global stage, providing an important platform for cultural exchange and interaction. This growing prominence highlights the need for effective translation practices in Chinese cinema, which must prioritize not only semantic equivalence but also the subtleties of linguistic style. Given the fundamental differences between Chinese and English, translators face unique challenges in bridging linguistic barriers. They must skillfully employ various translation theories and methods to navigate these complexities and fully comprehend the cultural nuances inherent in the films. This paper focuses on the Chinese film *Hi, Mom* as a case study, exploring how translators address the cultural disparities present in cinematic works while ensuring that the film resonates with a global audience. Through this analysis, we can gain insights into the intricacies of translation in the context of cross-cultural cinematic exchange.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, cross-cultural communication is increasingly frequent, with Chinese cinema serving as a crucial component of cultural export and its international influence expanding. Chinese comedy films, particularly *Hi, Mom*, have gained global appreciation for their unique humor and cultural characteristics. However, cultural differences between East and West pose challenges for the translation and dissemination of such films.

Hi, Mom presents a heartwarming narrative and distinctive humor that reflect the social landscape and familial sentiments of a specific era in China. Accurately conveying the cultural nuances and humor during translation—while preserving the essence of the original and ensuring accessibility for diverse audiences—poses significant challenges worth exploring.

This paper will analyze the cultural elements and humor techniques in *Hi, Mom* from the perspective of cultural differences, examining potential translation difficulties and proposing strategies to address them. Through this research, we aim to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for translators, enhancing the international presence of Chinese cinema and offering new insights for scholars in cross-cultural communication.

2. The Influence of Cultural Differences on Film Works

Cultural differences are prevalent in film works, and translators must maintain a respectful attitude towards these differences. In addressing phenomena related to cultural discrepancies, translators should discern the underlying causes rather than merely considering the differences themselves. Given that translation is inherently a cross-cultural communicative act, it is essential to facilitate the target audience’s understanding of the cultural background and nuances of the source language. [1] This paper analyzes cultural differences to help translators achieve translation equivalence.

2.1 The Impact of Differences in Thinking Styles

Table 1: This caption has one line so it is centered

Example column 1: zhè ge dà pàng yā zi
Example text 1: p àng” as “big

Thinking is a cognitive process or mental activity, representing the deeper structure of human cognition, which influences all conscious activities. A thorough exploration of culture inevitably raises issues concerning thinking styles. The discrepancies among different cultures stem from the variations in the cognitive styles of their social subjects. [2] The differences in thinking styles between Eastern and Western cultures, for instance, impact linguistic habits. In the film, the character Jia Xiaoling is referred to as Example column 1, which is not intended to be offensive but rather to describe her physique. However, translating “fat” into English can be problematic, as the term carries a derogatory connotation in Western thought. Consequently, the translator, mindful of the differing cognitive styles, rendered as example table 1.

2.2 Differences in Value Orientations

The differences in value orientations between China and the West encompass distinct aesthetic values and emotional tendencies, significantly influencing cinematic works. Chinese culture prioritizes collective consciousness, societal unity, and recognition of group values, whereas Western culture emphasizes human rights and individual existence, glorifying personal struggle as central. [3] Translators must account for humor’s cultural differences to ensure effective communication, preserving the original’s fidelity while enhancing acceptability for the target audience.

3. The analysis of *Hi Mom* from the cultural differences’ perspective

This paper will analyze select dialogue from the film *Hi, Mom*, focusing on three aspects: the characteristics of local dialects, the translation of culturally specific terms, and the transformation of cultural humor. It will examine the cultural differences that arise during the translation process and propose strategies for addressing these disparities. Case studies are as follows.

3.1 Regional Characteristics and Dialect Expressions

Regional dialects and expressions in film exemplify the diversity of Chinese culture. The use of Northeast dialects adds regional color to films; however, translating these into English necessitates consideration of how to preserve this regional character while ensuring that Western audiences can comprehend both the meaning and emotional nuances.

Analysis: Example column 2 is a dialectical expression from Northeast China that holds different meanings depending on the context. In the context of the film, it conveys the idea of leading by example. During the translation process, the translator skillfully reduced the complexity of the

original expression by removing its regional attributes and translating only its essential meaning. This simplification technique involved stripping away culturally specific elements that are difficult to explain, while preserving the fundamental essence of the subtitle. This approach takes into account the spatial and temporal constraints of film subtitle translation, significantly enhancing the viewing experience for foreign audiences.

Table 2: This caption has one line so it is centered

Example column 2: wǒ ya, qǐ ge xiǎo gāo diào.	Example column 3: nǎ yǒu nín fēng guāng.
Example text 2: I will set an example for you.	Example text 3: We can't steal the limelight from you.

In the original phrase, Example column 3 in Chinese signifies the idea of not overshadowing someone’s prominence. Within the context of the film, this statement encompasses the social dynamics and polite expressions between characters. However, employing a direct translation would fail to convey the same socio-cultural background and emotional nuance. Consequently, the translator rendered it as Example text 3. This translation not only accurately conveys the semantic content of the original phrase but also aligns with the expression of “limelight” in English, facilitating a better understanding of the interactions and context among the characters for the English-speaking audience.

Through the table 2, it is evident that in translating dialects and regionally specific expressions, the translator must not only accurately grasp the literal meaning of the original text but also delve into the underlying cultural significance and social context. During the translation process, the translator needs to strike a balance between fidelity to the original text and adaptation to the target culture, employing appropriate translation strategies such as paraphrasing, free translation, or expansion. This approach ensures that the translated text conveys the emotional and cultural nuances of the original while remaining natural and comprehensible to the target language audience. Such cross-cultural communication and transformation represent the most challenging and creatively enriching aspects of the translation process.

3.2 Translation of Culture-Specific Lexicon

The translation of culture-specific vocabulary presents significant challenges, particularly in the film *Hi, Mom*, which contains numerous elements of Chinese culture. For such terms, it is difficult for translators to convey the content of the film accurately and comprehensively. Additionally, due to the temporal and spatial constraints of subtitle translation, the translated dialogue must be fluent, coherent, and easily understandable. ^[4]

Table 3: This caption has one line so it is centered

Example column 4: dà gē bù zài chuán shàng, nǐ guǎn wǒ jiào shá, sān dì, wǒ shì shā sēng a wǒ?	Example column 5: jiē xià láí yǒu qǐng zhuàng yuán láng de mǔ qīn.
Example text 4: Boss is not on the boat. What did you call me? Third brother. What am I, a dwarf?	Example text 5: Please welcome the mother of the prodigy.

Analysis: The Example column 4 references the cultural background of the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*, presenting significant challenges in subtitle translation due to temporal and spatial constraints. When encountering such culture-specific terms, the translator employed a blocking translation technique. The inclusion of characters from *Journey to the West* in the dialogue aimed to create a comedic effect and convey a humorous context to the audience. However, the translator also needed to maintain this comedic effect in the translation. For instance, rather than transliterating Example column 4 as “shaseng,” the translator utilized “a dwarf” to preserve the humor

inherent in the original. This choice was made because foreign audiences may have limited familiarity with “*Journey to the West*,” and transliteration could lead to misunderstandings. By translating it as “a dwarf,” the translator prioritized the film’s narrative over the complexities of the original text. Generally, absolute cultural blocking does not exist in subtitle translation, as audiovisual information can still provide context for the audience, even when textual information is constrained.^[5]

The term in Example column 5 is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural significance, referring to the top scorer in the ancient imperial examination system. It specifically designates an individual who achieved first place in the palace examination, which was a means of selecting government officials. However, an equivalent term does not exist in the target language, necessitating an explanatory translation rather than a direct equivalence. In addressing such lexical challenges, the translator employs a strategy of foreignization, opting for a close term in English, “prodigy,” to convey the original text’s commendation of the female protagonist.

This approach in table 3 not only accurately communicates the meaning of the original text but also adeptly presents a unique Chinese cultural concept in a manner that is comprehensible to an English-speaking audience. The translation maintains respect for the mother and achievement, while highlighting Chinese values on education and success for cross-cultural understanding.

3.3 Transformation of Cultural Humor Elements

Humor is an essential lubricant of human life and constitutes a form of language that has undergone artistic refinement; it is a linguistic expression of art.^[6] Consequently, humor is an integral part of culture, with audiences from different cultural backgrounds interpreting and responding to it in varied ways. The humorous elements in “*Hi, Mom*” may stem from linguistic play, social customs, or specific cultural phenomena. During the translation process, it is imperative for the translator to identify humor styles that resonate with Western audiences, facilitating a comprehension of the film’s content for foreign viewers.

Table 4: This caption has one line so it is centered

Example column 6: dǎng sǐ sǐ de.	Example column 7: yù méi dōu gēn wǒ shuō le, zhè bù wǒ qīn zì lái zhǎo nǐ le ma. nà nǐ liǎ bù dōu yī yàng ma nǐ liǎ kě zhēn yǒu yì si, hái yī rén lái yī tàng.
Example text 6: He’s like a mountain.	Example text 7: Yumei told me. But... I came to you myself. What difference does that make? You guys are so funny. Taking turns to come.

Analysis: The phrase in column 5 in Chinese serves as an exaggerated expression to describe someone or something as exceedingly stable, akin to being firmly obstructed and unable to move or pass. While the phrase itself may not carry an inherent humorous connotation, its exaggerative quality provides fertile ground for humor. The translation “He’s like a mountain” effectively transforms this hyperbolic expression into a similarly vivid metaphor in English. The term “mountain” often symbolizes solidity, stability, and immovability in English, thereby conveying the firmness implied by the original phrase while enhancing the imagery and amusement through metaphor.

In terms of humor, this translation enhances the vivacity and visual impact of the language by allowing the audience to conceive an image of a figure as solid as a mountain, where the exaggeration itself conveys a sense of humor. Furthermore, by utilizing a culturally universal symbol: mountain, the translation effectively communicates the original’s hyperbolic meaning, enabling English-speaking audiences to swiftly grasp the underlying humor. Overall, this translation preserves the

original's exaggerative quality while augmenting the humorous effect through a culturally resonant metaphor, thereby facilitating the transmission of humor in cross-cultural communication.

The context of Example column 7 involves Li Huanying's desire to form a volleyball team, under the assumption that her friends would support her out of loyalty. However, the outcome deviates significantly from her expectations, prompting her to personally seek out her friends, leading to a dialogue. The conversation in the original text resembles a form of comedic dialogue, akin to traditional Chinese cross-talk. The translator employs the phrase "what difference does that make?" to respond to Li Huanying's arrival, indicating that her presence makes no substantial difference to Yumei. This expression parallels the punchline delivery in cross-talk, highlighting the stark contrast between Li Huanying's expectations and the actual outcome, thereby generating a humorous effect.

Moreover, the translator's use of "Taking turns to come" aptly describes the actions between the characters, skillfully conveying the friends' humorous perspective on this seemingly meaningless repetition. This phrase vividly illustrates the comedic scenario of Yumei and Li Huanying alternately visiting, effectively combining the setting with the dialogue to create a strong visual for foreign audiences.

Overall, this translation in table 4 successfully conveys the humor inherent in the original text through a cross-talk style of dialogue and the interactions between friends. It showcases the playful dynamics among the characters, allowing foreign audiences to comprehend and appreciate humor rooted in cultural norms and social etiquette, while also preserving the nuanced emotions and social implications conveyed in the original work.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes two key factors contributing to cultural differences and delves into the translation techniques applicable to subtitle translation within the context of these differences. As communication between China and foreign countries becomes increasingly frequent, the exchange of film and television culture has also gained prominence. The translation techniques discussed in this paper can assist translators in effectively rendering audiovisual works, thereby enhancing the quality of subtitle translation. Cultural differences, influenced by factors such as modes of thinking and value orientations, significantly impact the quality of translation. Therefore, it is essential for translators to possess a profound understanding of the cultural disparities between the East and West and to apply various translation techniques to achieve effective translational equivalence.

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