Translation and Transcultural Creativity: A Comparison of Chinese Authorized Subtitling and Fansubbing in the Case Study of *Notting Hill* (1999)

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the subtitling practice of the English film *Notting Hill* into Chinese through a comparison of the officially released Chinese subtitles and the fan-generated subtitles. The phenomenon of fansubbing is here taken into consideration as a case study of informal translation practice for a Chinese contemporary readership. Some fans expressed dislike toward what they have watched (formal, censored subtitles) as excessively standardized Chinese translation (Zhang, 2013, p. 33). As a result of the increasing dislike with the official subtitles, fansubbing develops rapidly in the modern Chinese era. This paper aims to underline the way in which the case study film is subtitled formally and informally for a Chinese film audience. Therefore, the article first explains the practice of authorized and unauthorized subtitling and the policies with regard to their censorship in mainland China. Key examples of the subtitles in question are then analyzed, with a focus on the translation in formal and informal subtitling. Finally, the article compares the less creative formal subtitles and the highly creative informal subtitles through an analysis of key examples. In this sense, informal subtitling practice in China as a fan-driven practice attempts to make more creative works available, in particular to the younger generation. Ultimately, the recent trend of fansubbing in China suggests that there is widespread acceptance of Chinese linguistic and cultural interference in translation when creativity takes place in the subtitling practice of English-language films for a contemporary Chinese audience.

**KEY WORDS**

subtitling, officially released subtitles, fansubbing, creativity

1. **Introduction**

With a particular focus on subtitling English language sources for a Chinese contemporary film audience, this paper briefly discusses the history of the practice of authorized subtitling and
fansubbing in China, and compares both subtitling practices in the context of censorship in China.

1.1. Authorized Subtitling

After China opened itself to the outside world in 1978\(^1\), screen translation flourished because the China Film Corporation lost control of the importation of foreign films. The subtitling market has prospered as a result of the increasing number of imported films. However, this growth is still insufficient to meet the needs of both domestic and global markets. Based on the 1999 US-China Bilateral World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement, China agreed to import just forty foreign films annually. This is because Chinese authorities intervene to determine the proportion of imported films so that China’s relation with the outside world is relatively balanced (Qian, 2004, p. 55). These films, Zhang argues (2013, p. 30), are “carefully selected, professionally dubbed and strictly reviewed by censors for cinemas.” These constraints are largely dependent on how the films are subtitled and mediated for the target audience.

Official audiovisual censorship in China involves the interplay of several key official institutions: the China Film Corporation (distribution, import and export of films), the Exhibition Bureau and its regional subsidiaries (regulation and admission prices), the Ministry of Culture (the import and distribution of home audiovisual products) and the Publicity Department (formerly commissioned by the State Administration of Radio and Television of the People’s Republic of China\(^2\) for editing and exhibition of films) (Wang & Zhang, 2017, p. 304). The Chinese government directly monitors the film industry and the complex regulatory

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\(^1\) In 1978, Deng Xiaoping launched the “Reform and Opening up Policy,” emphasizing that “science and technology are the first productive force,” and that it was crucial for China to stimulate the educated and the talented people. He also noted the urgent need to reform education and to strengthen literacy and civilization among citizens (Olivia, 2011).

\(^2\) The State Administration of Radio and Television (SART) of the People’s Republic of China was formerly known as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) of the People’s Republic of China and State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), etc. The name of this state-owned department was recently updated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, unveiled after the first session of the 13\(^{th}\) National People’s Congress (NPC) on 13 March 2018. This new establishment of the State Administration of Radio and Television (SART) is dissolved from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) of the People’s Republic of China. Press, publication and film will be under the direct management of the Publicity Department (Briel, 2018).
structures governing the media (Wang & Zhang, 2017, p. 304). To be specific, the China Film Corporation decides not only from which countries films can be imported but also which individual films can be imported. Two criteria are taken into account pertaining to the imported films. They must politically support China and Communism and culturally exclude religious propaganda, pornography, and violence (Zhang, 2004, p. 191). In 2014, State Administration of Radio and Television of the People’s Republic of China published strict regulations regarding (SAPPRFT, 2001) the editing and exhibition of films in a way which bans any content that:

- denies the basic principles determined by the constitution
- affects the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of China
- leaks classified information threatening domestic security
- encourages hatred and discrimination among ethnic groups
- violates ethical cultural norms and principles
- propagates cults and superstitions
- disturbs social order and threatens social stability
- depicts pornography, gambling, violence, or abets people to commit crimes
- humiliates or defames others, or damages the lawful interests of others
- compromises social morality or traditional cultures in China
- contains information which is prohibited by law. (Wang and Zhang, 2017, p. 304)

Based on these cultural and political constraints, the basic procedures for foreign films imported to China include four steps: selection, censorship, negotiation with the foreign film distributors, and the approval by the National Film Review Committee that is directly affiliated with State Administration of Radio and Television of the People’s Republic of China (SAPPRFT, 2001). The strict regulation shows the specific standard of censorship on film importation and the need for China to connect to the outside world.
1.2. Fansubbing

Due to the processes of censorship and the limited quota to import films, delays may occur when these films are released on the Chinese market (Zhao, 2004, p.183). Inevitably, inflexible limitations set on the import quota and the stringent censorship of content make it difficult for the authorized audiovisual products to fully meet the expectations of Chinese audiences, especially from the younger generation. Furthermore, because officially imported movies and TV dramas are all subtitled in a standardized style they allow for relatively little creativity and entertainment (Zhang, 2013, p. 33). In order to meet the demand of popularity in the Chinese market, the most recent trend of subtitling practice in China seems to prefer amateur translators who are able to produce subtitles more effectively than the authorized subtitles (Yao, 2014, p. 147). The most well-known subtitling groups\(^3\) include “伊甸园、人人影视和磐灵风软字幕组” / “YDY Translate Extreme Team, YYeTs, and Fr1000” (Kang, 2007, p. 85). This technology-facilitated activism in translation is driven by fansubbers, who are free to choose not only what to translate but also when to upload it online.

In light of this, fansubbing will be discussed in relation to its creativity as it represents a form of free translation by non-professionals, which has a profound cultural impact on the Chinese society (Zhang, 2013, p. 30-33). On the one hand, the spread of technology largely supports fansubbing in a much freer and more individual way by applying the rules of a gaming system to subtitling,\(^4\) where a sense of community and social identity tend to be forged in the person-based networks between fansubbing groups and their audiences that allow a wider engagement in their networked cultural practices (Wang & Zhang, 2017, p. 309-310); on the other hand, it simultaneously weakens state domination as its gamified nature challenges officially supervised subtitling (Lv & Li, 2015, p. 123).

\(^3\) Other assimilated groups that formed the Chinese fansubbing also include Shengcheng and i. Kamigami (Zhang, 2013, p. 306).

\(^4\) The recent development of fansubbing in China reflects on the tendency of introducing gamification into translation. This gamified process features “elements of game design in non-game contexts, products, and services to motivate desired behaviours” (Deterding, 2012, p. 14).
1.3. Comparison between Authorized Subtitling and Fansubbing in the Context of Censorship Regarding their Censorship

In contrast to authorized subtitling, which offers a stable body of work, no guidelines for fansubbing censorship are stipulated since it is “contextual, individualized, and continuously negotiable rather than absolute or binding” (Calkins, 1998, p. 243). However, due to its illegitimate nature (Díaz-Cintas & Muñoz Sánchez, 2006, p. 45), the act of fansubbing needs standardization to improve the quality of the translation (Yao, 2014, p. 147). Thereby, ever since fansubbing works have been published, fansubbing groups seek to improve the quality of their work based on the feedback from audiences from a variety of channels. Authorized subtitling practices seem to be more accurate and professional as once their works have been released to public, no corrections will be made. Given the “continuously negotiable” status of fansubbing, it is fortunate for the audiences to get involved in this “gamified” system that consists of the technological and sociable dynamic of the recent transformation from “the formerly prosperous business of product piracy to a voluntary social activity” that innovatively combines the translation, evaluation, distribution and consumption of foreign audiovisual products in China (Wang & Zhang, 2017, p. 312). Another key reason for the popularity of amateur subtitles lies in their spirit of “free content-sharing, community and voluntarism”5 that enables them to engage the target audience and, more importantly, to contest official state domination despite strict censorship (Wang & Zhang, 2017, p. 301; Zhang, 2013, p. 31; Zhang & Mao, 2013, p. 301). Fansubbers rely on the resources provided by oversea suppliers to produce creative work that can be downloaded for free and to translate autonomously (Duncombe, 2007).

1.4. Creativity in Translation

When considering creativity, fansubbing as an activity can be connected to the idea of “creative economy” (Howkins, 2002). “Creative economy” can be understood as creative activities with economic values. The recent development of fansubbing in China clearly resonates with the tendency to apply creativity to translation, which can be explained from

5 To be specific, fansubbing initially aims to uphold the principles of promoting volunteerism, building community and sharing experiences where the entertainment of media products can be freely consumed among enthusiasts.

the perspective of the intellectual property involved in the practice of fansubbing. John Howkins (2002, p. 3) argues, “creativity is not new and neither is economics, but what is new is the nature and extent of the relationship between them, and how they combine to create extraordinary value and wealth.” Creativity empowers the translation process to generate something new and entertaining for the target audiences in the fansubbing practice in China. This creative act can be broadly regarded as a creative product that is defined as “an economic good or service that results from creativity and has the economic value” (Howkins, 2002, p. 5). In this non-economic context, fansubbing facilitates its potential creative wealth and economic value, when collaborating with legitimate commercial enterprises such as Sohu (www.sohu.com) and Net Ease (www.163.com) to maintain itself in translating foreign-language entertainment and educational media (Wang, 2017, p. 306). Even though the main purpose of fansubbing is to share free content, learn, and make social progress, fansubbing groups have to compromise and join the commercial sector in order to secure sufficient financial resources to survive (Wang & Zhang, 2017, p. 306). Although the practice of fansubbing remains controversial, it does promote regular consumption of foreign media products among Chinese people. The online fandom, therefore, contributes significantly to the flourishing of popular media culture in modern China (Wang, 2014, p. 270). Such a high level of creativity involved in the subtitling practice may lead to a multitude of comprehensive and complex strategies being employed for humor translation, as demonstrated by the case study of Notting Hill (1999), which will be discussed in the following section.

1.5. Contextualization of Notting Hill (1999)

Notting Hill (1999), one of the most influential representatives of British romantic comedy (Mather, 2006, p. 118), has been chosen as the case study for this paper. With its two leading actors, Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant, Notting Hill (1999) is assessed very differently in gender terms in the Anglophone and the Chinese contexts. Eddie Dyja (2010, p. 266) describes the film as a successfully constructed male fantasy, in which failing Brits fall for the extraordinary, rich Americans. British reviews focus more on the ordinary man meeting the famous girl (Street, 2002, p. 213), while the Chinese market gives priority to the other side of the relationship, highlighting the role of an independent girl who finds success in her career and romance, despite obstacles (Cheng, 2013, p. 104).
The film is set in the early 1990s, when Britain was facing an industrial conflict and the collapse of old industries (Leonard, 1997, p. 70). Britain’s economic power and cultural influence were in recession. Consequently, the British government sought urgent social, political and economic revival in the 1990s in order to maintain national identity (Driver & Martell, 2006, p. 10). The film might thus be seen as an encouragement for people to regalvanize excitement around British core values as a democratic and free society in an interconnected world, linking pride in the past with self-confidence in the future (Leonard, 1997, p. 70). In contrast, Notting Hill particular appeals to female audiences in China. There are two reasons for that. Firstly, according to Yu Zhou (1999), Notting Hill largely caters to women’s ambition to achieve success in both their professional life and their love life. The female leading character, Anna Scott, has a strong personality as well as an unshakable faith in her dreams and the possibility of finding true love (Cheng, 2013, p. 104). She may motivate female audiences in China, who may see her as a role model. Secondly, Notting Hill (1999) underlines the fact that women may be the dominant partner in a romantic relationship (Cheng, 2013, p. 104). The film frequently offers a celebration of the power of the female protagonist (Cheng, 2013, p. 104). An additional reason for selecting this film is because of its hybrid, multi-layered humor and complex intertextuality.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to examine the complexities of humor in the subtitling process of the Chinese subtitles of Notting Hill (1999), Delia Chiaro and Piferi Roberta’s (2010) notion of “Verbally Expressed Humour” (VEH) will be considered as an initial point to locate humor. Chiaro and Roberta (2010, p. 285) define VEH as “any verbal form of attempt to amuse,” whose translation is in turn defined as a task that “will naturally involve matching the linguistic ambiguity in the source language (SL) with similar ambiguity in the target language (TL) as well as finding solutions to culture-specific references pertaining to the culture of origin which are frequently involved in humorous tropes” (Chiaro, 2010a, p. 1-2). As a result of the complex nature of humor, this study, moreover, considers verbal humor and the conflation of verbal and non-verbal humor as they appear in the vast majority of instances of humor in this study.
In order to tackle the difficulties of the above complexities in transferring humor across cultures, Chiaro (2004) proposes the translation of VEH that provides feasible solutions. She suggests translators tend to adopt the following two key strategies\(^6\) when encountering challenges deriving from technical and linguistic constraints between cultures: “(1) The substitution of VEH in the Source Language with an example of VEH in the Target Language; (2) The replacement of the Source Language VEH with an idiomatic expression in the Target Language” (2004, p. 42).

According to Elena Manca and Daesy Aprile (2014, p. 159), Chiaro’s first solution is used regularly in the translation of VEH to find corresponding words. Finding words that are ambiguous in two different languages and that can be used for an equal comic effect seems to be a difficult task. Although translators face challenges when no similarity in linguistic or sociocultural knowledge is found between the source and target culture (Chiaro, 2004, p. 37), the majority of translators opt for substitution with a semantically ambiguous text (Chiaro, 2004, p. 38). Furthermore, the notion of untranslatability\(^7\) refers more to the impossibility of formal and functional equivalence rather than the inaccessibility of substituting humor with a semantically similar text that works equally appropriately in the target culture (Chiaro, 2004, p. 37). However, the untranslatability inevitably leads to the creation of a new wordplay in a humorous expression, and the innovative change of word also easily causes consequences at the expense of jocular effect of the original (Manca & Aprile, 2014, p. 159). When moving from the spoken medium to the written one, the translation strategy of simplification is recurrently used to aid viewers’ reading comprehension (Caimi, 2009, p. 241). The transfer of humor is not only confined to the shift from verbal code to the written code, where information loss inevitably takes place (Chiaro, 2004, p. 41) but also to the cultural disparity in the perception of humor (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2014, p. 222).

The second solution of Chiaro’s VEH preserves the SL humorous instances with an idiomatic expression in the TL. A high level of creativity is required to locate idiomatic expressions in the

\(^6\) Chiaro (2004, p. 42) identifies three translational strategies that are more common for translators to adopt when translating VEH. This study merely selects the first two as they are closely relevant to the case in terms of strategies employed in subtitling humour. The last strategy proposed by Chiaro (2004, p.42) is: “The replacement of the Source Language VEH with an example of VEH in the Target Language elsewhere in the text.”

\(^7\) Some terms are frequently left untranslated in cultural transfer as the process of transfer is constantly subject to mistranslation and retranslation when translators have unsure knowledge (Apter, 2010, pp. 50-63).

TL in order to preserve the play on words and the humorous effect (Manca & Aprile, 2014, p. 159). According to Rosa Canós (1999, p. 462), in the transfer of humor, cultural adaptation can be used to detect domestic expressions with equivalents in the target culture. Furthermore, Juan Sierra (2006, p. 219-210) argues that the search for functional equivalence may lead to the adoption of domesticating solutions in humorous audiovisual texts to retain comical effect. By using idiomatic expressions in the target culture, translators thus provide readers with fluent rendering (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990, p. 88). Considering the above solutions to translate VEH, this paper aims to analyze the transfer of humor to Chinese culture by exploring the ways in which British culture is mediated via Chinese culture in the subtitling process. The following section considers the analysis of the most telling examples by comparing censored subtitles and amateur subtitles. Each instance starts with the identification of the humor classification as mentioned above and followed by the adopted strategies as suggested by Chiaro to make the humorous transfer in the context. This theoretical justification accommodates the challenges and complexities embedded in the case study and provides readers with an explicit justification of how this theoretical frame incorporates into the actual analysis of humor translation in Notting Hill (1999).


In this section, we will look at the translation of humor via officially censored subtitles and fan-made subtitles of the Anglophone film Notting Hill (1999). The aim of this section is to explore the complexities of the screen translation of humor from English into Chinese and to assess how authorized and amateur translators have responded to these complexities by examining the Chinese subtitles of the film Notting Hill (1999) with regard to their level of creativity and the translation strategies adopted in these two types of subtitled mediums. The perception of humor is a complex phenomenon, as numerous critics/theorists have emphasized. Apart from its verbal and non-verbal humorous effects, humor is indeed a social and psychological experience within which certain subject matters may or may not elicit amusement (Schröter, 2005, p. 75). Victor Raskin (1985, p. 16) argues that humor can be understood differently according to participants’ social background. The understanding of
some jokes and types of humor may possibly be restricted by target audiences’ individual personality traits which may link to their linguistic or encyclopedic knowledge or the level of familiarity with the subject matter. These traits may act as a barrier to the accessibility of the humorous effects (Manca & Aprile, 2014, p. 159). Delia Chiaro (2010b, p. 1), however, observes that geographic boundaries, linguistic variations, and cultural conventions supplement the comprehension of humor. Therefore, the humorous effect will be perceived differently from culture to culture. The structural, semantic and pragmatic differences between languages and cultures inevitably lead to complexities in the translation of humor (Bianchi, 2014, p. 477-478). Humorous effects based on both linguistic and cultural features prove to be instance of humor that are most challenging to translate (Chiaro, 2010b, p. 5). This paper will consider various types of humor at play in the film Notting Hill. It will also assess the barriers to specific types of humor in the subtitling of the film for the Chinese audience, evaluating the complexities of translating humor and wordplay.

### 3.1. Subtitling Humor

This section explores the contextual and linguistic forces that play a significant role in the comprehension of verbal and visual humor. It does so in relation to two key expressions in the film: “nymphomaniac” and “git.” Dingkun Wang argues (2014, p. 281) that domestication and neutralization are the most frequently used strategies when fansubbing humor for the contemporary Chinese audience as they adhere to the dominant trend of subtitling practice in modern China. Given the informal and popular colloquial expressions produced by fansubbers, more of the original humorous experience is retained for the target audience (Wang, 2014, p. 280). If a high level of creativity is required to enable the humorous effect in fansubbing, this example presents a sophisticated comparison between the authorized subtitles and fansubs when dealing with the humour translation of the key word “nymphomaniac.”

**Example 1: Nymphomaniac**

1. **Description of the Scene:** William’s friends set up some blind dates for him. A girl is introduced to him in an exaggerated and humorous way.

2. **Line:** MAX: Her name is Tessa.
She works in the Contracts Department.

The hair, I admit,

is unfashionably frizzy,

but she's bright as a button and kisses

like a nymphomaniac on death row.

(3) Translation: 她叫泰莎是合同部的

我知道她的发型是像

上过电椅一样

不过她开朗大方

她的吻热情似火

(4) Back Translation: MAX: She is Taisha from contracts department.

I know her hairstyle is like

having been electrified

but she is cheerful and carries herself with ease and confidence

Her kiss is like the fire of enthusiasm.

Humor is generated in this example from Max’s attempt to sell an unattractive female to William on the basis of her sexual enthusiasm and appetite. The official Chinese subtitles maintain the unattractiveness of the female in question, rendering “unfashionably frizzy” as “上过电椅一样” / “like having been electrified.” They neutralize some of the humor of the original by lessening the inappropriateness of the English simile. The English dialogue states that Tessa “kisses like a nymphomaniac on death row.” The authorized subtitles mediate this phrase. “Nymphomaniac” is defined as “a woman who has abnormally excessive and uncontrollable sexual desire” (OED). The word is widely used to discuss what is regarded as sexually abnormal behavior. In terms of form, the word is composed of two parts: “nympho” and “maniac,” and the latter part denotes “suffers from mental diseases” (OED). The humor in the English language use of “nymphomaniac” in relation to someone trying to set up a blind date speaks for the British context in an exaggerated manner of tempting William in a way which his potential date has a strong sexual desire. The official subtitles eradicate the use of “nymphomaniac,” substituting it with an image which suggests passion, but passion exerted within acceptable boundaries: “她的吻热情似火” / “Her kiss is like the fire of enthusiasm.”
The authorized subtitles offer a simile but it is one whose sexuality has been toned down. The English dialogue focuses entirely on the excess, generating humor precisely from that excess. Tessa is not only a “nymphomaniac,” she is, according to Max, “like a nymphomaniac on death row,” a “nymphomaniac” desperate to satisfy her urges one last time. “Death row” has no immediate purchase in the British context as the country no longer has the death penalty, yet the image works for the British audience because Britain used to have it. Although China does have the death penalty, the Chinese subtitles choose not to refer to such execution. There is also a contextual loss in the rendering of the phrase “bright as a button.” The English phrase refers to someone quick-witted and intelligent, yet the censored subtitles render this as “开朗大方”/ “to be cheerful and carry oneself with ease and confidence.” They offer a different vision of this female’s capacities. The dialogue remains contextually humorous but the official subtitles have moderated the humorous exaggeration of the source in order to comply with the social conventions of contemporary China.

Intriguingly, amateur Chinese subtitles adopt a different approach to this line. An unofficial Chinese subtitled version of Notting Hill (1999) is available on the popular film website (http://www.dytt8.net/). It is difficult to trace the subtitler’s real name and the exact date on which the translation was produced. One specific unauthorized version (http://www.ygdy8.com/html/gndy/jddy/20091109/22785.html) maintains more of the English excess. It renders the English source, “like a nymphomaniac on death row” as “像是死囚区的慕男狂”/ “like a man-admiring maniac on death row.” The simile is closer to the humorous exaggeration of the source but it is still of note that it still softens it slightly. Tessa is a maniac for men in this version and not explicitly for sex. Cultural mediation, therefore, is visible even in the unauthorized subtitles.

In summary, the above instance clearly shows that the authorized subtitles employ neutralization when subtitling the linguistic unit “nymphomaniac” and transferring its exaggerated sexual desire to the target recipient while the amateur subtitles adopt foreignization, sending the audiences to the original source in order to preserve the designated humor and excessive sexual fantasy. In dealing with the wordplay used in this instance, the fansubs successfully and innovatively replicate the English humor, by recreating
an equivalent that is similar to the original in terms of both form and meaning. The next example allures to an idiomatic expression where fansubbing takes place.

**Example 2: Git**

(1) Description of the Scene: William calls the Ritz Hotel for Anna. He explains to the hotel receptionist that his flatmate made a mistake and prevented Anna from reaching him.

(2) Line: WILLIAM: Um, I know she’s using another name.

   The problem is
   she left the message with my flatmate...
   which was a very serious mistake.
   Um, I don’t know.
   Imagine, if you will,
   the stupidest person
   you've ever met.
   Are you doing that?

   HOTEL RECEPTIONIST: Yes, sir, I have him in my mind.

   WILLIAM: And now double it.

   And that is the, um--what can I say--
   the git that I am living with.

(3) Translation: 我知道 她说她用了另一个名字
   问题是她把话留给了我的同屋
   这是个很严重的错误
   你能回想一下
   你见过的最愚蠢的人吗？
   -是的 先生 我已经想到了一个
   -那就再乘以二 得出结果就是...
   跟我住在一起的那个废物

(4) Back Translation: WILLIAM: I know she said she has used another name.

   The point is she left the message with my flatmate.

   This is a very serious mistake.
Can you recall a bit
the most foolish person you’ve ever met.

HOTEL RECEPTIONIST: Yes, sir. I think I have someone in mind
WILLIAM: I will multiple by two the result is...
The good-for-nothing who is living with me.

This instance is an example of contextual linguistic humor because of the use of sarcasm and specifically British slang. “Git” is an English slang word referring to “an unpleasant or contemptible person” (OED). The authorized subtitles do not translate the meaning of the source word, rather they translate the character of the flatmate from the film’s actions. The Chinese official subtitles render “git” as “废物”/ “the good-for-nothing.”; a phrase which underlines the flatmate’s uselessness but not his unpleasantry. The censored subtitles in this instance, therefore, translate the film into context rather than the word in question. Humor remains in the dialogue’s sarcasm. It is clear that the foolish person the hotel receptionist has in mind is William himself, but the insult to the flatmate is lessened and altered. So the register of the insult as the Chinese official translation is more formal than the English slang.

It is interesting to note that the amateur Chinese subtitles replace the source text’s Verbally Expressed Humor (VEH) with an idiomatic expression in the receiving culture to transfer humor. They opt for a domesticating expression to retain the humorous effect, rendering “git” as “饭桶”/ “rice bucket.” Originally, “rice bucket” means a person with a gigantic appetite. However, this term is more popularly associated with useless people who can do nothing but eat. “Rice bucket” works as an idiomatic replacement for the source text because it replicates its register and is domestically appropriate. Via its contextualization, the comic effect is transferrable to the target language and the attention paid to the culture (Bosinelli & Whitsitt, 2010, p. 166). The amateur subtitlers’ attempts to replace the original slang “git” with an idiomatic expression, “饭桶”/ “rice bucket,” suggest that contextual equivalence plays a crucial part in preserving humor. While the authorized subtitles deliver the contextual meaning, the amateur subtitles’ choice considers the situational appropriateness inherent both from the scene and the film’s dialogues that mutually produce contextual humor. Again, a high level of creativity takes place when subtitling “git” in the act of fandom translation by
using an idiomatic expression to transfer humorous effect. When it comes to wordplay and
the use of puns in particular, these linguistic devises typically pose a challenge for both non-
native speakers and translators (Wang, 2014, p. 276). The following example is a key case in
point while the close resemblance of spelling and sound dissimilates the literal meaning from
the source dialogue’s intention.

3.2. Subtitling Wordplay

The present example contains a wordplay to deliver humorous effect. According to Dirk
Delabastita (1993, p. 57), wordplay is:

[...] the general name indicating the various textual phenomena (i.e. on the level of performance or parole)
in which certain features inherent in the structure of the language used (level of competence or langue) are
exploited in such a way as to establish a communicatively significant, (near)-simultaneous confrontation of
at least two linguistic structures with more or less dissimilar meanings (signifieds) and more or less similar
forms (signifiers).

The mix match between signifieds and signifiers is of relevance to the following example,
when it comes to meaning and form equivalence in the humorous context.

Example 3: Box

(1) Description of the Scene: William is upset in his room while Spike is trying to comfort him
because Anna has just broken his heart.
(2) Line: WILLIAM: I've opened Pandora’s box

and there's trouble inside.

......

SPIKE: I knew a girl at school
called Pandora.

Never got to see her box...

(3) Translation: 我打开了潘多拉的盒子

里面充满麻烦

......

- 我在学校认识一个女孩
  也叫潘多拉
  不过我从没看过她的盒子

(4) Back Translation: WILLIAM: I opened Panduola’s box full of trouble inside.

......

SPIKE: I knew a girl at school also named Panduola.

But I've never seen her box.

The signifieds in the present example are two simultaneous confrontations of the word “box.” The first box relates to trouble; the second box is completely different, relating to female genitalia. “Pandora’s box” is a universally acknowledged reference meaning any potential harmfulness (Zamzami & Kroemer, 2001, p. 67). People’s awareness of this universally recognizable term is originally drawn on the audience’s familiarity with its metaphorical meaning from Greek mythology. There is a stark contrast between William’s heart-breaking agony and Spike’s absurd fantasy about his acquaintance with a girl called Pandora and her genitalia. The humor is thus generated from the contrast between William’s agony and despair and Spike’s naughtiness and absurdity. Humor is also generated by the fact that box is not a word conventionally used to describe female genitalia. The association between the box and female genitalia is only triggered by the context that Spike sets up.

However, the wordplay fails to translate into Chinese in the official subtitles. Replication is used to convey the conceptual meaning. “Pandora’s box” becomes “潘多拉的盒子”/ “Panduola’s box.” Thanks to its universally recognizable meaning in relation to potential trouble, Chinese audiences are aware of its referential meaning, though not perhaps of its mythical source. The Chinese authorized subtitles make less sense than the English source as there is no referential link between her box and the female genitalia. It is important to note that while the official subtitles delete the sexual overtones of the original, the amateur subtitles again are far freer and convey the sexuality of their British source in the translation “从没看到过她的私处”/ “to have never seen her private part,” which is more sexually explicit than the original metaphorical phrase “her box.” Instead of making the sexual
connotation explicit, the more common way to translate sexuality is to tone down the sexual implication because the acceptance of speaking about sexuality varies across cultures (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 144). Regarding sexuality, Lisa Rofel (2007, p. 144) argues that Chinese culture seems to be more repressed than liberated, therefore, it would be better to mitigate erotic issues to the target receptor. If awkward humor comes in via Spike’s wordplay “but I’ve never seen her box” to encourage William, the Chinese official subtitles “不过我从没看过她的盒子” / “But I’ve never seen her box” cast an irrelevant ambiguity, which is completely at odds with Spike’s clear attempt to use sexuality to comfort William, who is currently heartbroken. The Chinese audiences may be able to glean and sense humor from Spike’s playful and funny facial expression as his physical imagery complements to make a humorous effect. In this example, verbal and visual humor are integrated to interpret the overall comic effect. Though in the censored subtitles’ choice, they provide an irrelevant term “她的盒子” / “her box” to lessen the contextual humor of the original, humor is clearly generated when read in association with Spike’s awkward facial expression. According to Baldry and Thibault’s multimodality (2006, p. 49), external resources assist the understanding of contextual meaning.

In summary, the official Chinese translations relating to the careful wordplay “box” adopt literal translation strategy, making the core meaning of the original humor inaccessible for Chinese audiences. In so doing, they lose the humorous effect entirely. The linguistic innovation and humorous effect are not always able to transcend cultural and linguistic divides through mere literal translation of the English source into the receiving culture. The humorous effect is not readily possible via pure word-for-word translation without the consideration of contextual wordplay when translating the sexually related phrase “her box.” In contrast, once the intertextual relation is actively made, the amateur translation speaks to a receiving culture (Venuti, 2013, p. 181) so that the desirable humorous effect is creatively achieved.

4. Conclusion

In this discussion, we have analyzed the transfer of humor in the Chinese subtitles produced by Chinese authorities and by Chinese fandom in the case of Notting Hill (1999). By manipulating the texts (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990, p. 88), an authorized translation can

deliberately transfer culture, politics, and ideology to the receiving audience in a standardized way which is less desirable and entertaining to the target recipient. However, the fans’ practice establishes new and exciting rules and gives more freedom and creativity to the amateur translation where fansubbers choose to recontextualize the source text, replacing relations to the source text with a receiving intertext. In this way, the target language and culture largely influence the translation (Venuti, 2013, p. 181). By this means, humor can be largely transferred across different languages and cultures.

The official Chinese subtitles largely rely on neutralization and at times literal translation, while fan-generated subtitles actively provide idiomatic expressions in the target culture to transfer humor as well as to acknowledge creatively the humor by either closely imitating the humorous effect of the original or courageously bringing the encrypted phrasing (sexual desire in “box”) to the fore to keep the target recipient amused. Therefore, the translated humor drawn from the Chinese subtitles of Notting Hill (1999) works best when considering its equal humor, contextual appropriation and linguistic adaptation of the original. To respond to the translation strategies that were employed in this case, the replacement of the VEH in the source language with an idiomatic expression in the TT is more acceptable to the Chinese audience, in that a transparent and natural translation is essential to evoke a similar effect to that of the original receptors (Nida, 1964, p. 163). Domestication, foreignization, and explication lie at the heart of the employed translational strategies in the case of amateur translation. However, reproducing the cultural equivalent in the target language requires much creativity in the process of humor translation, for example when dealing with the frequent use of wordplay in the ST or when humor is an integral part of the cultural and historical context (Bianchi, 2014, p. 478). The overall transfer of humor in the Chinese subtitles of Notting Hill is not always possible unless creativity is employed to link the humorous demand of the target audience and the contextual meaning of the source in the Chinese subtitles. Overall, this paper shows that taking contextual factors into considerations is a crucial part of the process of translating humor. This paper calls for a rethinking of the significance of creativity as a tool for guaranteeing access to humor. This recent trend of adopting fansubbed TV series and films as a daily form of entertainment among Chinese people marks a great acceptance of linguistic and cultural interference when English-language films are subtitled informally for a contemporary Chinese audience.
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