

The under-translation and self-censorship in English-Chinese subtitling

Isabelle Chou

University of Electronic Science and Technology of China

When the strong and sensitive elements in the source text are toned down or downgraded, the translating effect of under-translation is achieved. In subtitling translation, any translating strategy leading to under-translation is considered as the more insensible and imperceptible form of linguistic manipulation. Based on textual analyses to English-Chinese subtitles of selected films, this study finds out that sensitive elements in the original dialogues being modified over under-translation are mostly related to sexual sensitive elements, profanes, and swearing words and most observed strategies employed are using Chinese idiomatic expressions, register moving, and euphemism. It is arguably possible that the motivation behind under-translation is translator's self-censorship, drawing on the paradox Chinese translators are facing: rigorous official censoring process, the absence of movie content classification systems, and Chinese audiences' growing awareness of possible (self)censorship. Comparing with other effects of translation, under-translation invisibly intervenes Chinese film viewers' watching experience and reinforces the power imbalance between them and institutional and individual censors.

Keywords: under-translation, self-censorship, power imbalance, film subtitling, linguistic manipulation

1. Introduction

Censorship is “the practice of examining books, films, etc. and removing anything considered to be offensive, morally harmful, or politically dangerous” (Cambridge

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International Dictionary of English). As a form of institutional act, governments, publishers or editorial boards often coercively block, manipulate and control cross-cultural interaction in various ways. But in some cases, individuals may also be self-censors and carry out censoring process even before the institutional act intervenes. In media translation, censorship remains a current and widespread phenomenon and operates in many ways with disguises, and translation continues to be one of the most powerful means for shaping the interaction between cultures (Billiani 2007: 22). Owing that media is one of the most important channels for intercultural communication among different cultures and languages in terms of the vast number of audiences it reaches, (self)censorship may create unfair, undesired, and imbalanced cultural and aesthetic reception. In the case of audio-visual translation (AVT), translation is more of a multisemiotic transfer and often in the form of subtitling, dubbing and voiceover made for theatres, TV programmes and movies. (Self)censorship in AVT has been mainly represented in all imaginable forms of linguistic manipulation such as downgrading, distortion, deletion and adjustment to transfer any “inconvenient” source dialogues like eroticism and vulgarity.

All these forms of linguistic manipulation out of censorship in subtitling translation is more imperceptible, insensible, and deceitful in AVT than other translational activities because of the nature of inter-semiotic transferring. When reading translated literary works, readers are still possible to have access to the source texts with the assistance of dictionary or Internet if they'd like to. But the spatial, temporal and visual constraints persist when audiences are watching foreign films with AVT if the subtitle or dubbing is the only channel for them to understand the original programme. And as a matter of fact, “these technical limitations and diamniotic differences can often be misconstrued and taken advantage of quite openly, as has been the case in censorial regimes, both in the past and nowadays, by using them as a shield to justify certain unpalatable solutions” (Díaz Cintas 2012: 284-285). Among all forms of linguistic manipulation, it is argued in this paper that under-translation is considered as the most insensible linguistic manipulation, reinforcing the power imbalance between the target audiences and

(self)censors. And the motivation behind under-translation in English-Chinese subtitling may not be the unawareness of translators to sensitive and taboo elements in original dialogues (OD) as suggested by Lung (1998) and Scandura (2004), but rather deliberate decisions made by translators being self-censors.

2. Under-translation as the linguistic manipulation in English-Chinese subtitling

Both institutional and individual censorship need to be achieved over certain linguistic and/or technical solutions. During the process of (self)censorial manipulation, the intervention to the OD is embodied into different translating strategies, like omission, addition or adaptation of content (De Marco 2012: 66). Studies on what elements in the OD were modified and how they might represent (self)censorship in AVT indicate its multifaceted character as well as the various roles and agencies involved in the process. And under-translation as one kind of linguistic manipulation with its insensible and imperceptive nature may reveal the power relation between various agents and the target audience and would definitely reinforce and revisit the role of different agents in the AVT process in a wider Chinese socio-political landscape.

Most unfair and unnecessary interferences driven by (self)censorship are often realised through linguistic manipulation where types of adaptation and modification are incorporated in AVT to eliminate or tone down sensitive elements in the OD. Some translating strategies like omission and addition have been widely discussed in translating culturally, politically and ideologically information in audio-visual programmes and they are often associated with topics like intercultural communication, motivation and realisation of censorship, as well as sociocultural agenda of film industry (Taylor 2003; Scandura 2004; Von Flotow 2009; Jian 2012). However, it is worth noticing that some translating strategies would create under-translation with the most invisible and insensible effect in AVT, when

elements like sexual connotations, political references, profanities and taboo languages are downgraded or toned down, losing part of their artistic integrity and the empathy with characters in the programme, and these sensitive elements toned down would by no means reach the target audience. These strategies are under the umbrella term of adaptation where various kinds of changes to wording like substitution, paraphrasing, transposition and reformulation, as proposed by Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 202-207). Some other specific translating strategies like substitution and downgrading are also analysed (Ávila-Cabrera 2015, 2016; Kenevisi 2016). But by achieving the under-translation, it is observed that there are three most frequently used strategies in English-Chinese subtitling to conceal sexually sensitive or vulgar elements, namely, using idiomatic Chinese expressions, register moving, and euphemism. And the first two are source-target language sensitive.

By using idiomatic Chinese expressions, some sensitive elements in the OD is downgraded into an unvarnished and common expression in Chinese. For example, in the film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), Denise told Mildred “You go, girl. You *go fuck those cops up*.” It was translated into “干得好，给那帮警察点颜色瞧瞧” [Well done, girl, you need to show what your true colour to those cops] in the officially distributed Chinese subtitles. The expletives “go fuck those cops up” in the OD was eliminated and replaced with a toned-down idiomatic expression in the target language. Comparatively, a fan subbing group translated text to the same line as “好样的，姑娘，搞死那帮警察” [Good girl, go and kill those cops], the strong tone was reserved even though no swearing words appear. By register moving, a lower registered word or phrase in the OD is replaced by a higher register one. When talking about register, it refers to “a particular choice of diction or vocabulary regarded as appropriate for a certain topic or social situation” (Hughes 2006: 386). In AVT, most sensitive elements like expletives and swearwords are lower registered and in their spoken forms which are often embodiment of the stronger emotion of the speaker. When translating dialogues with such elements into written texts, some strong words are probably unacceptable than in their spoken forms and because written words appear to be more concrete and harder to deny than oral utterances (Ivarsson and Carol 1998: 83). Therefore,

moving these lower registered words and phrases into a higher register would avoid the possible failure of passing institutional censoring. As for the third means of linguistic manipulation achieving under-translation, euphemism is defined by Allan and Burridge (2006: 68) as the “linguistic deodorizer” in translation activities. Using euphemistic terms to substitute any sensitive or politically and/or ideologically inappropriate terms make something sound nicer or less offensive. Sugar coating words or phrases are employed to replace anything against the “common good” of the target audience.

Comparing with omitting the culturally or morally unacceptable words and phrases in the OD, downgrading them into a softer and even idiomatic expression in the target language would be definitely more imperceptible and insensible for two reasons. First, unlike simply omitting “unacceptable” elements in the OD, under-translation does not break the synchronisation between the original program and the translated subtitles which the target viewers are exposed to at the same time. Second, subtitling forces them to distribute a third cognitive effort in reading other than two basic efforts, watching and listening. Strategies creating under-translation like euphemism are linguistically and contextually much subtler than other strategies like direct translation, omission, substitution, and paraphrasing. Under the circumstance of consuming more cognitive effort, under-translation is less detectable and shares a higher degree of insensibility. As for the motivation behind under-translation, we claim that it is driven by translator’s awareness of being a self-censor, in particular under Chinese context.

3. Self-censorship and under-translation under the Chinese context

Scandura (2004: 126-127) lists four reasons for censorship in AVT, namely, politics, political correctness, religion, and self-censorship through discussions of subtitle translations in countries like the United States and India. When referring to self-censorship, she believes that translators tend to choose to protect the audience. But in Lung (1998), the reason behind mistranslation and under-translation may be

translator's ignorance of the foreign culture. Under the Chinese context, the two suggestions may be applicable to some cases, but for under-translation, we believe that it is mainly driven by self-censorship to accommodate any political or ideological possibilities preventing films passing the institutional censoring, rather than protecting the audience nor translators' ignorance. Under-translation as a form of self-censoring linguistic manipulation is largely determined by the walls of a paradox that Chinese translators are trapped: the rigorous institutional censorship and the absence of movie content rating system, as well as the growing awareness of the audience about the "disappeared" dialogues and depictions in foreign films.

3.1. The walls of a paradox for Chinese translators

The actual working conditions and semiotic complexity of the audio-visual medium should not be ignored when studying on translation strategies in AVT. In many cases, many "bad" solutions are deliberate choices of the translator and should not be criticised (Gambier 2004: 18). The working conditions of Chinese translators is that any foreign audio-visual programmes imported to China has to go through rigorous institutional censoring process. The guideline for film censorship issued by Chinese Ministry of Culture as early as in 1990 confirms that the censorial manipulations are influenced by political, ideological, and cultural factors. It spells out eight prohibitions in particular, which are far more like "violating the Constitution and the law; harming national interest, social order, national dignity and ethnic unity; deviating from major national policy; injurious to socialist ethical norms; contradicting the principle of modern sciences and promoting superstition; graphic depiction of sex, nudity, violence, and methods of committing crimes; stories or portrayals liable for causing emotional and psychological trauma to children; and finally, other inappropriate plots, images and themes to be decided by the censors" (quoted from Xiao 2013: 124). Once the above guidelines are violated, either any involving agents (Film Bureau, distribution companies, imported agencies alike) or individual translator (either voluntarily or involuntarily) can intervene and modify the film for the sake of "political correctness" or "common good" to the target

audience.

And furthermore, according to the Film Administrative Provisions and the Chinese-foreign Film Production Regulations in China (2013), the foreign film producer and/or importer should engage in self-censorship before its application for release license in China, which needs to be centred on any linguistic or graphic depiction of nudity and violence, sex suggestive elements, and any inappropriate political and religious elements. And if the self-censored version of film fails to pass the institutional censorship of the film Bureau, the producer will receive some “revision suggestions”. The release license will be issued only if the film passes the final vetting. When film importers, distributors, and translators are subject to institutional censorial pressures, they also have to face the fact that there is no movie content rating system to classify films with regard to suitability for audiences in terms of issues like sex, impudence, violence, profanity or other types of mature content. And the age recommendations in an advisory or restrictive capacity to any Chinese film audiences is also absent, which means only films “suitable for all ages” can be released on Chinese cinemas. Therefore, when films are imported to Chinese market, the institutional censoring not only covers sensitive issues related to sex, morality, politics, race and religion in a broad sense, but also like in some target cultures, the use of profanities, ghost and gay lover stories, suicide or alcoholism are prohibited or carefully avoided (Bucaria 2009; Díaz Cintas 2012; Greenail 2012; Scandura 2004; Thawabteh 2017; Zanotti 2012)¹⁾. However, nowadays, Chinese film viewers and Netizens are getting more and more sensitive on what elements are eliminated from the original film. And cutting of any sensitive depictions or omitting them in the OD may no longer be the best solution. Out of these reasons, Chinese translators tend to exercise self-censorship in the form of under-translation, when direct translation or deletion to the OD are not available.

1) Only five of out of nine Oscar nominated films in 2018 are permitted to release in China. The rest four nominated films are rejected for either political or ideological reasons (e.g., *Call Me by Your name*, gay lovers’ story; *The Post*, freedom of speech).

3.2. Self-censorship and under-translation

As Bou and Pennock (1992) suggest that the action of self-censoring very often depends on historical and political circumstances, but which is also an area of personal struggle, of ethical/moral dissent, of religious/ideological controversies, of systematic self-censorship. It is believed that given the working conditions of Chinese translators, the systematic self-censoring is unavoidable and it also would be the potential motivation behind particular linguistic manipulations like under-translation where toning down sensitive elements in the OD is often the deliberate choice of the translator. Even though under-translation is still an undesired and unfair option to the target viewers, it is out of translator's personal struggle between rigorous institutional censoring, the absence of movie content rating system, and the raising awareness of Chinese film viewers to the undesired manipulation to the OD.

For most politically, religiously or morally offensive cases in the OD, direct translation or literal translation may not be feasible under Chinese context, for the generic differences between English and Chinese, and the inter-semiotic nature between speaking and written transfer in subtitling translation (Chen 2004: 138). Even if under-translation is more insensible and undesirable to the target audience, it is still a compromised solution between patronage and the target receiver. It is thus argued that under-translation is the more invisible and imperceptible forms of linguistic manipulation and constitutes a subtle and less aggressive translation to sensitive original elements. And the downgraded translations in front of the vulnerable Chinese audience are more misleading and less observable than other forms of manipulation and power imbalance between translator/self-censor and target audience achieves its paramount point.

4. Analysis and discussion

As aforementioned, most of under-translations are almost impossible being noticed by target audiences who are exposed to the translated subtitles together with the original programme. Under-translation can be achieved in several ways. As suggested by Gambier (1994: 278), in subtitling, it is important to study what is transformed and why. Thus, two 2018 Oscar nominated films imported to Mainland China are discussed in this section to see what kind of original elements are downgraded and how under-translation is achieved²⁾. Some of the most representative cases of under-translation in officially released subtitles are analysed, together with their fan subbing versions. Those under-translated terms are shown underlined and in bold type and their back-translations into Chinese are provided. It is observed that in the officially released English-Chinese film subtitling, there are three most frequently observed strategies, i.e., embedding idiomatic expressions into the translated dialogue, moving lower registered languages to a higher register, and using euphemisms.

4.1. Under-translation in the form of idiomatic Chinese expression

In both films, some sexually suggestive elements in the source dialogue are replaced in idiomatic expressions in Chinese, or four-character Chinese words in a rather implicit way. From *The Shape of Water* (2018), in example 1, Elisa and her sage colleague Zelda are talking after Elisa had sex with Amphibian Man.

(1)

Zelda: Why you smiling, hon? Stop looking like that.

Zelda (Cont'd): What happened? Beat.

Zelda (Cont'd): Why? How??

Zelda (Cont'd): Does he? Have a-?

Elisa makes a gesture indicating the peculiar anatomy details.

2) Only half of Oscar nominees in 2017 and 2018 are imported to Mainland China and some of them may not have much space for linguistic manipulation, like *Dunkirk* (2018).

Zelda (Cont'd): Lord! Never trust a man. Even if **he looks flat down there...**

Official subtitle (OS): 永远不要以为男人很单纯/即使他那里光秃秃空荡荡平淡无奇

Back translation (BT): Never believe that men are simple, even if down there s **bare, empty and in banality.**

Fan-subbing (FS): 亲 你笑什么//别这样//出什么事了?//为什么?//怎么做到的?//他有... 那个吗?//天哪, 别相信男人//即便他看起来没有丁丁

BT: Never trust a man, even if he looks like **not having a dick.**

When Zelda said, “he looks flat down there”, she was referring to the fact that even if Amphibian Man does not have the sex organ, he is definitely male. Apparently, the translator toned down the original meaning in the dialogue by rendering “flat” into three idiomatic Chinese expressions (two adjectives are in the form of ABB reduplication and the third one is in a four-character idiom). Three of them are all translating “flat” into Chinese repetitively and only subtly implied the fact Zelda referred. Comparatively, the fan-subbing version to the same line obviously retains the original meaning in a very direct way. “He looks flat down there” in the OD was rendered into an informal, popular yet humorous Chinese term for the body part. If target audiences with limited English listening capacity are exposed to the OS, under the temporal restriction, they may hardly realise what the three Chinese phrases really meant. But the FS appears to be more explicit that the audience can easily follow.

Another Oscar nominee Three Billboards outside Ebbing Missouri (2018) was also imported in China and subtitled into Chinese by both fan subbing groups and official translation agencies. There are a lot of sensitive elements in the OD and they are carefully delivered into Chinese when it was on the big screen. Some of these elements are much more abusive and taboo languages, most of which are downgraded into neutral languages or eliminated the abusiveness and vulgarity. In the following dialogue, like in example 1, under-translation is achieved by using idiomatic Chinese expressions to conceal the sex suggestive elements in the OD. The context of the dialogue is that Anne and Willoughby just had sex and Anne is lying on the couch. Willoughby sits in beside her and kisses her.

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(2)

Anne: That was a real nice day. And that was a real nice fuck. You got a real nice cock, Mr. Willoughby.

Willoughby: Is that from a play, “You got a real nice cock, Mr. Willoughby?”
I think I heard it in a Shakespeare one time.

Anne: You dummy. It’s Oscar Wilde.

(OS):

Anne: 今天真开心//感觉爽到了极点//你还是~~雄风不减~~ 威洛比先生

Willoughby: 这是什么戏剧里的台词吗//“你还是~~雄风不减~~ 威洛比先生”// 我好像
在莎士比亚的戏剧里听到过

Anne: 你个笨蛋//是奥斯卡·王尔德

BT:

Anne: That was a real nice day. And I feel awesome. You are still so vigorous in mind and body. Willoughby: Is that from a play, “You are still so vigorous in mind and body, Mr. Willoughby?” I think I heard it in a Shakespeare one time.

Anne: You fool. It’s Oscar Wilde.

FS:

Anne: 今天过得很开心//还有很爽的一炮//你的老二真不错 威洛比先生

Willoughby: 是不是戏剧里的台词//“你的老二真不错 威洛比先生”//我记得我在
莎士比亚的某个戏剧里听到过

Anne: 你这个傻瓜//是奥斯卡·王尔德

BT:

Anne: That was a real nice day. And that was a nice fuck. Your cock isn’t bad at all, Mr. Willoughby.

Willoughby: Is that from a play, “Your cock isn’t bad at all, Mr. Willoughby?” I think I heard it in a Shakespeare one time.

Anne: You dummy. It’s Oscar Wilde.

It is more than clear that every sensitive element in the dialogue was preserved in the fan subbing version since there were no institutional or individual censoring interventions. However, the translator of the official translation made a number of reformulations to the original dialogue. He/she completely re-translated the expression “that was a real nice fuck” by covering its sexual reference in a euphemistic way that no such reference was retained. Euphemism as another strategy

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in under-translation is further discussed in 4.3. As for the rendering of “a real nice cock”, the original meaning was also fully wiped out. It was replaced by the four-character “雄风不减”, literally it means “the wind of masculinity doesn’t abate”, and sometimes this term is used in a literary and formal way to illustrate someone is old but still vigorous in mind and body, or something restores its force. By rendering the body part reference into a four-character phrase, the sexual reference of the original phrase was completely concealed and toned down, together with the character’s vulgarity and attitude to sex. However, the vulgarity and sexual reference in the OD were fully transferred into Chinese in the fan subbing version. And in particular “一炮” and “老二” are very vulgar and obscene expressions in spoken Chinese, referring to exactly the same meaning in the OD.

Comparing to other forms of linguistic manipulation, downgrading is more imperceptible and insensible. Omission may lead to unsynchronised subtitles between English and Chinese. And it is more possible that the target audience detects the temporal or visual differences caused by omission. But under-translation is both technically more acceptable and deceitfully masked by technical constraints and the containment of any sensitive information in the original is purposely withholding from the public.

4.2. Under-translation in the form of register moving

As suggested in section 2, most sensitive elements like expletives and swearwords are lower registered and in their spoken forms. Therefore, if they are replaced by a higher registered equivalence, the strength of such term diminishes which is definitely a more politically or ideologically correct way to do for the translator practicing self-censorship. Example 3 is again from *The Shape of Water*, the original sensitive element also has a sexual reference as in Example 1. Elisa’s neighbour Giles and she were watching TV in the early morning when Giles saw the dancer Betty in a programme.

(3)

Giles: Oh! God, to be young and beautiful. If I could go back

[Elisa nods]

Giles: to when I was 18 - I didn't know anything about anything - I'd give myself a bit of advice.

Elisa: [in sign language] What would you say?

Giles: I would say: Take better care of your teeth and **fuck**, a lot more.

[Elisa smiles and gently nudges him]

Giles: Oh no, no, that's very good advice.

(OS):

Giles: 如果我能回到从前//回到18岁//懵懂的年纪//我会给自己一些建议

Elisa: 你会说什么?

Giles: 照顾好你的牙齿和**性生活**//一定要**顾好**//这是真理

BT: Take good care of your teeth and **sex life**.

FS:

Giles: 如果时光可以倒流//回到我十八岁的时候//我什么也不知道//我会给自己一点建议

Elisa: 你会说什么?

Giles: 比如 保护好牙齿 **多做点爱**

BT: Protect your teeth and **make love more frequently**.

The sexual reference is taken as a taboo for Chinese in day-to-day communication unless in a private or intimate situation. Therefore, toning down the f-word with explicit connotation to sexual reference is possibly driven by cultural difference between the source and target society. And it may also attribute to the semiotic difference between speaking and written languages. The lower registered term in original language was moved up to a high register in Chinese subtitle translated for the big screen. And in Chinese, “sex life” is a very formal and even neutral word and often appears in written context. The fan subbing version restored the sensitive part in Chinese by a more directing way of translation since translators in the fan subbing groups do not need to practice any self-censoring process.

Similarly, also from Three Billboards outside Ebbing Missouri, Mildred was in the gift shop reading a magazine when Crop-haired man entered. They had a conversation about Mildred's daughter and example 4 is an extraction.

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(4)

Cropped-haired man: Or, y'know... maybe I was a friend of your daughter's or something. How about that?

Mildred: (pause) Were you?

Cropped-haired man: Or, uh, y'know, maybe I was the guy **who fucked her while she was dying**? How about that?

OS: Cropped-haired man: 也许是你女儿的朋友//那又怎样

Mildred: 是你吗?

Cropped-haired man: 又或者... //也许我就是**奸杀她**的那个人//你想怎么样

BT: maybe I was the guy **who raped and killed** her? How about that?

FS:

Cropped-haired man: 也许我是你女儿的一个朋友//这个解释又怎么样

Mildred: 是吗?

Cropped-haired man: 或者... 也许我就是那个**在她奄奄一息的时候还在操她的人**//又怎么样

BT: maybe I was the guy **who fucked her while she was at her last gasp**?
How about that?

It is a conversation full of hatred. When the Cropped-haired man deliberately suggested that he might be the killer and rapper to Mildred's daughter. "I was the guy who fucked her while she was dying" is an extremely strong line from a man face to face with Mildred, the mother of the victim. In the official Chinese subtitle, both the f-word and the phrase in the past continuous tense, both of which are very colloquial and lower registered, were substituted by two verbs, "kill" and "rape". They are much connotationally neutral and even can be used across different register. Or most of the time, they may more often be found in a formal context than an informal one. In the FS, on the other hand, the hatred emotion to the Cropped-haired man was preserved in the target language by a straight forward translation to the OD. Comparatively, in the OS, Mildred's empathy may not reach the target audience, so does her rage and heart-breaking. Such under-translation is an abide by the censoring rules and regulations, but a compromise to artistic integrity and a cheating to the target audience. But in the FS, the Chinese audience have a more direct access to the character's interaction and emotion as no

under-translation were found.

4.3. Under-translation in the form of euphemism

As shown in the following three examples, all official translated subtitles in the two Oscar nominees are toned down by euphemism while their fan-subbing versions are keeping the original meaning in the lines. Example 5 is from *The Shape of Water*. In a classy advertisement agency, Elisa's next-door neighbour Giles was handing the finished drawing to the manager Bernard.

(5)

Bernie (Cont'd): And they want them happier- the family.

Giles: Happier? The Father looks like he just discovered the missionary position. Well, what are they supposed to be happy about?

OS:

Bernie (Cont'd): 还有 他们想要这个家庭看起来更快乐

Giles: 更快乐? 这父亲像是发现了新的运动姿势 “他们还能怎么快乐呢?”

BT: Happier? The Father looks like he just discovered **new exercise position**.
How can they be happy?

FS:

Bernie (Cont'd): 对了 他们还想要这家人看起来更开心

Giles: 更开心 还要更开心吗 - 嗯哼//这画上的父亲看起来就像是刚解锁了传教士体位(男上女下)//好吧 那他们究竟要为什么而高兴呢

BT: Happier? The Father in the picture looks like he just unlocked the missionary position (man up woman down). What are they supposed to be happy about?

The fan subbing version even further explained what the position is like but the official one put it as an “exercise”. In modern Chinese spoken system, the term “exercise” may sometimes refer to the intercourse in a very euphemistic way. Therefore, only very few audience may understand what it implies by only reading the translated subtitles. It is a minor linguistic manipulative craft when direct translation as the fan subbing did may be a violation to the censoring regulations.

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Similarly, euphemism is also found in Chinese subtitles of *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. In the scene that Father Montgomery and Robbie were in Mildred's house when she was a bit drunk and talking to Robbie and Father Montgomery.

(6)

Mildred: Hey Robbie? I think that midget wants to get in my pants...

OS: 嘿 罗比 我觉得那个小矮子对我有意思

BT: Hey, Robbie, I think the dwarf gets a thing for me/has a crush on me.

FS: 洛比 我觉得侏儒想和我上床

BT: Robbie, I think the dwarf wants to get me into bed.

What Mildred was referring to is quite clear that James wanted to have sex with her in a slangy way. As suggested before, talking about sex in everyday life has been always inherently unsuitable to Chinese people. And the reason involves here may also inter-semiotic. Even if under the circumstance that Mildred was drunk, seeing what she really meant on the screen may not a choice for the target audience, just as the fan-subbing translation in the example, from the perspective of the translator who chose to use euphemism to eliminate the sexual connotation in the original dialogue. Just like fan subbing in previous examples, translators in the fan subbing group chose to reserve the sexual connotation in the OD with a direct translation. Example 7 is the dialogue right after example 6. After Mildred talked to Robbie, she turned to Father Montgomery.

(7)

Mildred: ... And if you're upstairs smoking a pipe and reading a bible while one of your fellow gang members is downstairs fucking an altar boy then, Father, just like the Crips, and just like the Bloods, you're culpable. Cos you joined the gang, man. And I don't care if you never did shit or never saw shit or never heard shit. You joined the gang. You're culpable. And when a person is culpable to altar-boy-fucking, or anykinda-boy-fucking, I know you guys didn't really narrow it down.

OS: 如果你在楼上抽着烟 读着圣经... 而你的一个帮派兄弟就在楼下和祭台助

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手乱搞//那么我不在乎你是不是清白的//你是不是什么都没看见 什么都没听见//但你加入帮派了//你就有罪//当有人和祭坛助手乱搞 或者搞其他助手 我知道你们大小通吃//

BT: And if you're upstairs smoking and reading a bible while one of your fellow gang members is downstairs screwing around altar assistants, Father, I don't care if you're innocent, but you're culpable. And whether if you never saw anything or never heard anything. You joined the gang. You're culpable. And when a person is culpable to screwing around altar assistants, or screwing any other assistants, I know you guys one-size-fits-all.

FS: 你在楼上抽着烟 读着圣经的时候//你们帮派里的神父正在楼下强奸一个辅祭男童//神父, 就如跛子帮和血帮一样//你也应当受到制裁//因为你们是一个帮派的//我才不在乎你是否从没干过 从没见过或是从没听过这样的事//你们是一个帮派的 所以你也应该受到制裁//一个人受到了制裁 原因是强奸了一个辅祭男童或者随便哪一个男童//这方面你们可没有什么忌口的

BT: And if you're upstairs smoking and reading a bible while one of your fellow gang members is downstairs raping an altar boy, Father, just like the Crips, and just like the Bloods, you're culpable. And whether if you never did anything or never saw anything or never heard anything. You joined the gang. You're culpable. And when a person is culpable to raping an altar boy, or any other boys, I know you guys never avoid anyone.

Mildred went into a long monologue about the death of her daughter and asking Father Montgomery not to stop her renting the billboard by accusing the church as a gang and Father himself is guilty for any priests' crime of sexual abuse to children. In the five highlighted phrases in example 7, some are sexual references and other languages are dirty, rude and strong which have somehow been concealed by the use of euphemistic formulas functioning as disguise mechanisms. The very explicit reference to sexual abuse to children in the church, as Mildred mentioned three times when she was talking to Father Montgomery, the Chinese subtitles diminished the strength of such terms out of ideological concern (religious and cultural). Such linguistic manipulation must be carried out under the motivation of self-censorship, or if not, these lines may be considered as a social indiscretion.

And take “never did/saw/heard shit” for example, both fan-subbing and official translated subtitles are both delivering the strong term in a euphemistic way or tried to tone it down as “thing” to avoid the term “shit”. And the last term “narrow it down” was again rendered into a four-character Chinese idiom in the official version.

As demonstrated in the above examples, there are indeed significant differences between official Chinese subtitles and their fan subbing counterparts, where under-translation has much often observed in subtitles for cinema audiences. In China, most imported English films are subtitled or dubbed by four state-owned translation and dubbing houses. Translators working for these houses must be very aware of rules and regulations of censorship of the country and preserving any sensitive elements in the original dialogue may lead to the failure of the official censorship. Other than officially released foreign films, more foreign films are translated by fan subbing groups and translations are published online. As to the reception of two kinds of translated subtitles, even though it is convenient to download fan subbing translations of foreign films online, most Chinese audiences still chose to watch newly released foreign films in the cinema, given the fact that in Mainland China, the revenue the film industry generates in the first half year of 2018 reached 32 billion RMB and 40% of which are attributable to imported films. In that case, most Chinese audiences are under the influence of (self)censorship.

And the notion of censorship links to key issues of political economy, policy, and industry-public relations, and more obviously, questions of the representation of power, ideology, religion, gender and class. And such representations of controversial matters like sex, crime and ethnicity on movie screen were real struggles fought among sometimes bewilderingly fluid and multiple coalitions that employed a variety of political devices to gain advantage (Couvares 1992: 514). AVT reaches a vast number of audiences and it also exposes itself to the power struggle between the different social agents participating in the translation process during which questions relating to power, ideology, dominance, intervention, ethics, identity, and manipulation can be discussed and investigated (Díaz Cintas 2012: 291). And in inter-semiotic transfer, translation also serves as a tool of empowerment (Baker and

Pérez-González 2011: 39-40). The role Chinese translators and subtitlers act as agents has been reinforced by their exercise of self-censorship which is primarily motivated by the wall of paradox they are facing: rigorous institutional censoring process with regard to ideological and cultural issues, and no classification system to rate the suitability of a film for audiences of different age groups who have been extremely sensitive when comes to major reformulation to the original film, either technically or linguistically. But to the Chinese film viewers, under-translation reveals power imbalance between them and other agents owing that the insensibility and impalpability of under-translation further enhanced their powerlessness during the intercultural communication.

5. Concluding remarks

By examining the linguistic phenomenon of under-translation with reference to two 2018 Oscar nominated films imported in Mainland China, it is found that these screened out sensitive elements in the original film are mostly related to offensive and taboo languages, political references, and ideological conflict between the source and target society, which is in line with findings in studies to English-Chinese subtitling as well as censorship in literary filed in China (Chang 2008; Chen 2004; Lung 1998; Tan 2015). And under-translation is achieved by three major strategies, i.e., using idiomatic Chinese expressions, register moving, and euphemism, mainly to fit culturally and morally sensitive elements like eroticism and vulgarity into the “common good” and expectations of authorities.

When audiences watching films or TV programs with AVT, they are persistently constrained spatially, temporally, and visually if the translated subtitle or dubbing is the only channel for them to understand the original program. They have been already in an inferior position comparing with institutional and individual agents in the translation process. It is argued in this paper that AVT censorship in China is much often in a form of self-censorship and any sensitive elements in the dialogues of imported film is linguistically manipulated, unlike some European and Arab

countries where official censorship prevails (Castro 2016; Santaemilia 2008; Thawabteh 2017). Among all forms of linguistic manipulation, under-translation functions as disguise mechanisms where any offensive and taboo languages or ideologically incorrect are concealed by idiomatic Chinese expressions, euphemistic formulas as well as formal utterances and literary languages in higher registers. And it is mainly carried out during translator's self-censoring process, as a deliberate effort and ethical decision made by translators. What's more, under-translation as translator's self-censored manipulation further plays an oppressive role which together with institutional censorship eventually produces sanitised films for Chinese audiences, whose film-watching experiences are compromised and a kind of cheating and the power imbalance being created during the process of translation. Systematic comparison between official translated subtitles and fan subbing ones are needed to observe under-translation in a wider selection of imported films, to further elaborate the relationship between self-censorship and under-translation, and to discuss the rationale and reception of institutional censoring as well as the dynamism between different agents in AVT process.

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Author's email address

isabellecchou@link.cuhk.edu.hk

About the author

Isabelle Chou is Associate Professor at the Department of Translation, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China. Her research interests center on empirical and experimental translation process/product interface studies and Audio-visual Translation studies. Dr. Chou obtained her PhD at Chinese University of Hong Kong where she has also received an MA and an MPhil. She is also an experienced simultaneous interpreter.

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