

A Typological Study of Subtitle Translation in Chinese Mythological Animation Films and Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies

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Abstract

Drawing on the theories of domestication and foreignization, high and low context culture, cultural discount, and Skopos, and adopting a qualitative method that combines textual analysis with comparative case study, this paper systematically examines the translation strategies applied to mythological terminology, philosophical concepts, and cultural symbols in the official English subtitles. The findings reveal three typological strategies. Cultural retention relies on transliteration or literal translation and is preferred for proper nouns and names of magical implements. Cultural adaptation relies on free translation or substitution and is preferred for philosophical concepts and moral implications. The hybrid strategy combines retention and adaptation and is preferred for core cultural symbols. The three strategies form a continuum extending from mythic authenticity to cross-cultural readability, coexist within the same film, and are governed by the type of culture-loaded word, the narrative function of the line, and the cognitive expectations of overseas audiences. The study proposes that successful subtitle translation must seek a dynamic balance between mythic authenticity and cross-cultural readability, and it offers a typological reference framework for the international dissemination of Chinese mythological animated films.

Keywords

Chinese Animated Film; Subtitle Translation; Cross-Cultural Communication; Domestication and Foreignization; High and Low Context Culture; Fengshen Cinematic Universe.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of the Chinese film industry and the continuous advancement of animation production technology have enabled Chinese animated films to enter the mainstream global media market and to function as an important carrier for exporting traditional Chinese culture. In 2019, *Ne Zha* generated over five billion yuan at the box office and opened a new stage for Chinese animated cinema. In 2020, *Jiang Ziya* carried forward the tradition of mythological narrative. In 2022, *New Gods: Yang Jian* further enriched the cinematic image of the Fengshen pantheon. In 2025, *Ne Zha 2* exceeded fifteen billion yuan in global box office revenue and became the first Asian film to enter the top five of all time global box office rankings. Together these four serialized works, anchored in the classical Chinese novel *Investiture of the Gods*, can be regarded as a Fengshen Cinematic Universe and have become a representative case for studying the international dissemination of Chinese mythological narratives.

In the context of the contemporary cultural policy that emphasizes effective international storytelling, mythological animated films carry the mission of transmitting the Chinese mythological system, philosophical thinking, and cultural values to overseas audiences. However, Chinese mythological narrative exhibits typical features of high context culture, whereas most overseas audiences belong to the cognitive mode of low context culture [1]. As Hall observed, communication in high context cultures derives most of its information from the physical context or from the internal world of the communicators, while communication in low context cultures encodes most of the information explicitly in language [2-6].

2. Literature Review

Díaz Cintas and Remael further argue that subtitling is a constrained translation practice that must continually balance source fidelity, target readability, and screen synchrony [7]. Within this constrained environment, the rendering of culturally specific elements has emerged as a central problem. Aixelá proposed an influential typology of culture-specific items and distinguished between conservation and substitution as two macro strategies for handling such items [8]. Pedersen extended this analytical framework to subtitling and developed a taxonomy of strategies for extralinguistic cultural references, ranging from retention, specification, and direct translation to generalization, substitution, and omission [9]. He further argued that subtitling norms are shaped by parameters such as transculturality, intersemiotic redundancy, and media specific constraints [10].

The application of these frameworks to Chinese animated films has accelerated over the past decade. Studies of *Ne Zha* have examined the subtitle translation of culture-loaded words through a child-orientation perspective, arguing that the cognitive expectations of younger overseas audiences shape the choice among transliteration, paraphrase, and substitution [11]. Subtitle translation analysis of *Ne Zha 2* has further mapped the interplay of literal translation, free translation, domestication, and foreignization in the rendering of mythological and culture-loaded items into English [12]. Comparable work on the *Ne Zha* series, read through the lens of cultural translation, has examined how Chinese cultural elements are negotiated between source and target conventions in the subtitles [13]. Broader studies that situate *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* alongside *New Gods: Yang Jian* have analyzed how religious and folk-cultural symbols embedded in these animated films are mediatized for contemporary audiences and contribute to youth identity formation, foregrounding the cultural significance of the symbols that subtitle translators must render [14].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design that combines textual analysis with comparative case study. The four films of the Fengshen Cinematic Universe form a single analytical unit, and within this unit each culture-loaded word is treated as a unit of analysis. The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the official English subtitles are aligned with the Chinese dialogue and culture-loaded words are identified and categorized. Second, the translation strategies applied to each item are coded according to a working typology that draws on the conservation and substitution dichotomy and the extralinguistic cultural reference taxonomy. Third, the patterns that emerge are interpreted through the four theoretical lenses outlined above.

3.2. Case Selection

Four films are selected on the basis of three criteria, namely thematic coherence, market significance, and international circulation. Thematically, all four films draw on the *Investiture*

of the Gods mythological system or on closely related mythological motifs, which ensures that their culture-loaded words share a common ontological substrate. *Ne Zha* and *Ne Zha 2* adapt the story of the boy hero Nezha, *Jiang Ziya* retells the journey of the eponymous sage, and *New Gods: Yang Jian* reworks the motif of splitting the mountain to rescue the mother. Commercially, all four films have produced substantial box office returns and have been recognized by major industry awards.

4. Discussion

The analysis reveals that subtitle translation strategy in the Fengshen Cinematic Universe is governed by three interacting variables: the type of culture-loaded word, the narrative function of the line in which it appears, and the cognitive expectations of overseas audiences. Proper nouns and magical implements favour retention because their phonetic identity anchors them to the source mythological system and functions as a recognisable brand marker, while philosophical concepts require adaptation to cross cognitive horizons, and cultural symbols call for hybrid renderings that accommodate both narrative and symbolic load. Within each category, narrative function further refines the choice: a philosophical concept embedded in a climactic emotional scene demands immediate comprehension and thus leans toward adaptation, whereas the same term in a peripheral line may survive in literal form. Audience prior knowledge introduces a temporal dimension unique to serialised cinema, as each successive film can presuppose a larger retained lexicon, making the Fengshen Cinematic Universe itself a pedagogical mechanism that progressively acculturates overseas viewers to Chinese mythological vocabulary. These three strategies therefore constitute not competing options but a continuum from mythic authenticity to cross-cultural readability, along which the translator moves in response to local conditions, operationalising the Skopos, Venuti, and Hall frameworks simultaneously and reframing cultural discount as a manageable variable rather than an inevitable loss.

5. Conclusion

This study has proposed a tripartite typology of cultural retention, cultural adaptation, and hybrid rendering through the analysis of English subtitles across four films of the Fengshen Cinematic Universe — *Ne Zha*, *Jiang Ziya*, *New Gods: Yang Jian*, and *Ne Zha 2* — and has demonstrated that this typology emerges naturally from the integrated application of domestication and foreignization theory, high- and low-context culture theory, cultural discount theory, and Skopos theory. The framework makes two contributions: theoretically, it reframes the source-orientation versus target-orientation dichotomy as a fluid continuum along which strategies coexist within a single text, and practically, it provides subtitle translators with a decision-oriented reference in which proper nouns and magical implements favour retention, philosophical concepts favour adaptation, and cultural symbols call for hybrid treatment, with all three modulated by narrative function and audience expectation. The study is limited by its reliance on official subtitle texts and the absence of large-scale reception data, and future work should extend the typology to dubbing, fan subtitling, and live-action mythological cinema, while empirically testing its predictions through audience reception studies. As Chinese animated film continues to expand its international presence, a principled typology of this kind offers a means of ensuring that the narratives of Chinese mythology are not merely transmitted across cultural borders but genuinely understood on the other side.

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