

Reshaping History: Cultural and Temporal Transfer in the Subtitled Heritage Film *Oliver Twist* (2005)

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Abstract

The paper will focus on how history is reshaped in a case study: the film adaptation of *Oliver Twist* (2005). It is of significance as its Chinese authorised subtitles mediate nineteenth-century British history for a contemporary Chinese audience. But this adaptation creates various problems of translation as it negotiates the cultural and linguistic transfer between early Victorian England and twenty-first-century China. To illustrate the challenge that translators and audiences face, examples drawn from the subtitles are grouped under Eva Wai-Yee Hung's (1980) suggested aspects of Dickens's world: "religious beliefs, social conventions, biblical and literary allusions and the dress and hairstyle of the Victorian era". Moreover, Andrew Higson's "heritage" theory (1996a), William Morris's (Bassnett, 2013) views of historical translation and Nathalie Ramière's (2010) cultural references specific to Audiovisual Translation are adopted to read the Chinese subtitles. They are used to bring back the audiences to an impossible, inaccessible past. The historical features shown in this modern version of a British heritage film make it possible for the subtitles to interact with Chinese culture to transfer meaning via a complex combination of translation strategies. Therefore, in order to rejuvenate Chinese cultural heritage, the subtitles of the cultural and temporal specificities and complexities involved are reinterpreted and redirected to the receiving culture

Key words: subtitling history, *Oliver Twist*, heritage film, archaism.

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1. Introduction

There are many film adaptations of the world classic novel *Oliver Twist*, set in nineteenth-century England. *Oliver Twist* was serialised at the commencement of the Victorian era in 1837 (Grubb, 1941, p. 209; Kuhn, 1987, p. 111), and the novel thus reflect the beliefs and customs of the early Victorian era only, as the Victorian era spans from 1837 to 1901; the 2005 film adaptation also kept close to the original story, so the same beliefs and customs are depicted there. The film under study was first released in 2005 and then on 30th April 2006 (NetEase, 2006) in China, one year after its original release. As this 2005 Chinese sanctioned subtitled film mediates nineteenth-century British history for a contemporary Chinese audience, this film is thus worth analysing. Therefore, this paper has the dual aims of investigating why the film was chosen and how the film was subtitled. Furthermore, based on the textual effect of the subtitles, the paper explores whether the historical context of Victorian England is made accessible to the Chinese audiences.

2. Background

2.1. Chinese State-sanctioned Subtitling and its Relevance to *Oliver Twist* (2005)

Explaining Chinese subtitling necessary is pertinent for providing a contextual link between this case-study film and subtitling censorship in China. In an effort to expand the quota of foreign film importation, China increased the annual number of imported films from the strict quota of 34 to 39 in 2016 thanks to related “cultural exchange projects” (Brzeski, 2017). After importation, foreign films always undergo a stringent censoring process including four key 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 under the close scrutiny of several key official institutions (Liang, 2018, pp. 27-28). This process must conform to the sanctioned rules and regulations clearly standardised in 2014 to govern the editing and exhibition of imported films (Wang and Zhang, 2017, p. 304). Both the selection of films to be imported and the subtitles to be released are strictly censored by the Chinese authorities.

The above film censorship in China clearly applies in 2006 to *Oliver Twist* (2005). The actual images of *Oliver Twist* (2005) have not been altered and the length of the Chinese subtitled version of the film has not been tampered with, which is a common practice for the historical film genre that normally excludes sexual and taboo scenes. Though the level of archaism of the original in relation to language and culture may be mediated by the Chinese subtitles, the theme in relation to religious and temporal differences between early Victorian England and 21st century China are transferred to the Chinese audience. When it comes to producing Chinese subtitles, Charles Dickens’s dark depiction of Victorian England may pose challenges to translators as the Dickensian world depicts early Victorian cultural specificities. These challenges refer to linguistic, cultural, historical and

temporal differences and transference between Victorian England and modern China. Seen in this light, this paper highlights four historically-laden groups of examples from the early Victorian era of England to discuss problems caused by linguistic and cultural disparities, and to observe how the subtitles provide viable solutions to these problems.

2.2. Delay and Fansubbing

Due to the complex process of censoring in China, delay is inevitable in releasing foreign films shown on cinema, on television, in their DVD forms and other censored online resources. To accommodate the growing demand of foreign films in the Chinese market, the recent trend in subtitling practice is uncensored fansubbing. Its online bases are mainly found on fan-generated websites such as YDY Translation Extreme Team, YYETs and Fr1000 (Kang, 2007, p.85). An unofficial Chinese subtitled version of *Oliver Twist* (2005) is available on the popular film website (<http://www.btgang.com/>). It is difficult to trace the subtitler's real name and the exact date on which the translation was produced and uploaded. One specific unauthorised version <http://www.btgang.com/subject/9345.html> contains more than one fan-generated subtitled version. In this article, however, only the official, government-sanctioned subtitles will be analysed.

2.3. *Oliver Twist* in the British and the Chinese Contexts

The novel *Oliver Twist* contains three historical themes of nineteenth-century England. The novel depicts the suffering of the poor in the miserable poorhouse, the maltreatment of children, and a tremendous population shift as unemployed migrants move from villages to cities (Sertkan and Gülperi, 2007, pp. 34-37). These issues were influenced by the passing of the Poor Law¹ in 1834 and by rapid industrialisation (p. 34). Thus, *Oliver Twist* not only exposes the dreadful conditions of the workhouse, but the poverty, juvenile abuse, theft and prostitution, etc., that existed in early nineteenth-century England. The novel hence places the darker side of capitalist society in the foreground (p. 34).

In relation to Chinese audiences being exposed to earlier film adaptations based on *Oliver Twist*, an older one has already been imported to China: David Lean's 1948 adaptation was dubbed in Chinese in 1958 by the Shanghai Film Dubbing Studio. The 2005 film, a film directed by Roman Polanski, was China's second cinematic version of Dickens's novel. This film will be used as the case study in this paper because this paper considers the subtitled form instead of the dubbed medium.²

¹ Cody, Lisa Forman. (2000). The Politics of Illegitimacy in an Age of Reform: Women, Reproduction, and Political Economy in England's New Poor Law of 1834. *Journal of Women's History* 11(4), pp. 131-156.

² For further details of Lean's adaptation, see Paganoni (2010, pp. 3-5).

3. Research Questions

The paper undertakes a qualitative study to examine specifically why the film was selected, how the film was subtitled, as well as the technique of translation that enables subtitlers to translate a challenging historical past; in addition, the study examines how the subtitles both make use of archaisms and modern terms. To identify the challenges of translating the historical context in the subtitles, this paper will centre around three main questions regarding why and how history is translated:

- 1) Why did the Chinese authorities select this film to be released and subtitled?
- 2) What challenges does the subtitling of this British film dramatisation of a bygone era present when translated into a modern Chinese context?
- 3) What translation strategies exist for the Chinese subtitlers trying to make sense of this film adaptation through the means of the Chinese subtitles?

To be specific, the paper will discuss research Question 1 from a sociological perspective; and will answer research Questions 2 and 3 using a qualitative analysis of some representative examples of cultural references in the film. The next theoretical section will detail the method that structures the paper.

4. Theoretical Framework

Having listed the research questions, this section outlines the theoretical framework of this paper. In relation to archaism, this paper uses the cultural theory of Andrew Higson (1996a, p. 233) on how films promote national identity played out in a historical context. It also employs the translation theory of William Morris, who believes that the translator should immerse his/her reader in an archaic past (Bassnett, 2013, p. 76). This paper will draw upon research in audiovisual translation (AVT), specifically relating to Nathalie Ramière's (2006, p. 157) proposal that the foreignisation/domestication model does not work in tandem with the pragmatic realities of AVT. According to Lawrence Venuti (1995 pp. 20-21), translation practice applies either a foreignisation or a domestication method. For Venuti, foreignisation is the method whereby the translator allows elements of the foreign source culture to remain in the text. Domestication is the phenomenon whereby such foreign elements are mediated and recast in the target culture.

Higson's theory of heritage is key to this paper. That *Oliver Twist* is a heritage piece is clear. The film abounds with archaic expressions and dialects from early nineteenth-century England. Higson's work on heritage film underlines the thirst of audiences to go back to an impossible, inaccessible past for which they are nostalgic (Higson, 1996a, p. 233). According to his description of heritage film in Britain, it "projects a particular image of the national past" (Higson, 1996b, p. 235). Ultimately, these films "strive to recapture an image of national identity as pure, untainted, complete, and in place" (Higson, 1993, p. 123), which clearly reflects on Higson's (2002, p. 38) claim to reinforce ideologies

of national identity and nationhood when constructing national cinema in Britain. Higson's theory is particularly intriguing in relation to this paper which seeks to evaluate not how a British heritage is translated for a British audience, but how a British heritage is imported for a modern Chinese audience. *Oliver Twist* is a clear expression of an imagined British past which is at once nostalgic and problematic (Higson, 1997, p. 275). This paper will consider ways in which this very British past is received by a contemporary Chinese audience.

It is suggested in this paper that the Chinese authorities are using the heritage of another nation simultaneously to promote their own values via cultural and temporal transfer in the subtitling practice. Furthermore, this paper will marry Higson's vision of heritage with William Morris's view of historical translation. Morris believes that it was more important to plunge a reader into the sense of a historic era than to focus on linguistic accuracy (Morris 2012, p. xvi; Bassnett 2013, p. 76). Morris's translation³ of the Icelandic *Volsunga Saga* in 1876 uses an archaicising approach as "he very much wanted English readers to recognise the greatness of the saga, and softened it in some respects to achieve this" (Britain et al., 1982, p. 78). The theories of Higson and Morris are linked in their common discussion on how an archaic text is translated for audiences who aspire to a nostalgic past.

Apart from the aspiration of promoting a nostalgic past and national identity when interpreting heritage, Nathalie Ramière specifically links the challenges of translating heritage to a more widespread audience directly at international audiences in her work *Reaching a Foreign Audience: Cultural Transfer in Audiovisual Translation* (2006). In order to achieve a successful reception abroad – though she agrees with Venuti's (1998 p. 240) two methods of domestication and foreignisation with the macro level affecting the selection of foreign texts to be translated and the micro level marking the actual strategies used to translate them – she refutes any form of consistency as far as domestication or foreignisation is concerned. More pragmatic approaches should be considered given culturally specific references in AVT settings, and audiences' "intercultural skills and readiness to accept the Foreign" should be taken into sufficient account to make the cultural transfer (Ramière, 2006, p. 162). This paper will analyse whether the subtitles archaize or modernise, considering whether and how the subtitled film works to mediate and to speak to both Chinese and British cultures. Therefore, this paper will use Eva Wai-Yee Hung (1980)'s classifications to read the Chinese subtitles for analysis. In her thesis *A Critical Study of Chinese Translations of Oliver Twist and David Copperfield* (1980), she proposes four key features which she suggests are characteristics of Dickens's work and remain basically unfamiliar to Chinese readers: "religious beliefs, social conventions, biblical and literary allusions, and the dress and hairstyle of the Victorian era" (p. 122). Since Hung focuses on the translation of the novel *Oliver Twist* while this paper concentrates on the medium of subtitles, her last category on "the dress and hairstyle of the Victorian era" is rendered superfluous because Victorian costumes and hairstyle can be seen in the film. Therefore, this paper summarises Hung's last category into a broader category: other elements of the Victorian era in that it fits into the medium of the Chinese subtitles.

³ For further details on Morris's approach to translation, see Britain et al. (1982, pp. 103-105).

5. Qualitative Analysis

5.1. Religious Terminology

As an initial point, Hung's work makes specific reference to *Oliver Twist* in relation to one of her chosen categories, "religious beliefs". She analyses the religious faith of the Victorian Age and relates it to the Chinese language and culture with the following comment:

Dickens shared fully this Christian cultural tradition with his contemporaries, and his novels reflect naturally something of that tradition in its value and its language. In the absence of an exact counterpart in the Chinese tradition, the references to religious beliefs, observances and language pose problems in translation. ... Potential readers of the bai-hua⁴ translations would be more knowledgeable about Christian beliefs and observations since they were comparatively exposed to western culture (Hung, 1980, pp. 123-124).

As Hung suggests (1980, p. 123), although translating Christianity posed challenging problems in the Chinese translation, Chinese people were aware of the prevalence of Christianity as early as the sixteenth century. In contrast, the translations of the Turkish versions of *Oliver Twist*⁵ domesticates every aspect related to Christianity into Muslim beliefs in keeping with the prevalence of religious-conservative ideology in Turkey (Sertkan and Gülperi, 2007, p. 72). Unlike the Turkish translations which domesticate Christian doctrine, the Chinese subtitles maintain the biblical context by using dynamic strategies. This section demonstrates how the subtitling of nineteenth-century British history in *Oliver Twist* speaks to Chinese values and culture in the following two aspects: religious beliefs and religious terminology, as the below examples will underline.

(1) *Oliver Twist* (01:10:20 – 01:10:47)

Original dialogue:

JACK: What a pity he ain't a prig.

CHARLEY: He don't (sic) know what's good for him.

JACK: I suppose you don't know what a prig is.

OLIVER: Yes, I do. It's a...

It's a thief. You're one, aren't you?

JACK: Yes, I am. And so we all are. Down to the dog...

And he is the downest one of the lot.

⁴ “白话”, phonetically, “bai hua” is related to vernacular language, which is a simplified writing style, as opposed to classical Chinese. This style of language enables the expression of new ideas in daily approachable language (Hasergin, 2016, p. 6).

⁵ Given the records of the Turkish National Library, the novel *Oliver Twist* has been translated by sixteen different translators from 1949 to 2004 (Sertkan and Gülperi, 2007, p. 38). All those translated versions used domestication in relation to the transfer of Christianity into Muslim beliefs (p.72).

...

CHARLEY: He's an out-and-out Christian, he is.

Chinese subtitle:

可惜他不是我们圈里的

—谁让他不知好歹

—你还不知道什么是“三只手”吧？

—我知道，三只手就是……

就是指小偷

你就算一个，对吗？

—没错，我们都是，包括那只狗

它是最听话的一个

……

—它是最忠实的基督徒

Back Translation:

JACK: What a pity he is not one of us.

CHARLEY: He does not know what is good for him.

JACK: You didn't know what "three hands" are?

OLIVER: I know, three hands are...

It means thief.

You are one, aren't you?

JACK: Yes, we all are, including that dog.

It is the most obedient.

...

CHARLEY: It is the most faithful Ji du disciple.

In Example 1, the boys are persuading Oliver to continue stealing things while a dog is laughably described as a virtuous Christian because he always follows his owner's instructions. Hung's category "religious beliefs" is embodied in this example in relation to the religion of Christianity. The example makes a sarcastic use of the term *Christian* as it applies it to a dog. The humour in this scene is

generated as the text calls on, in English, the reader's biblical knowledge. Oliver is urged to commit an unchristian act. The boys urge him to break one of the commandments and steal. In contrast, an animal is hailed as a good Christian for following its owner's instructions. Fagin's boys use the vocabulary of Christianity to try to persuade Oliver to do unchristian things. The Chinese subtitles replicate this humour by using the accepted term for Christian in China “基督徒” (“Ji du disciple”) and applying it to a dog. “Ji du” is the phonetic equivalent in Chinese of “Jesus”. Transliteration has been used to show the phonetic equivalence from one language to another (Wan and Verspoor, 1998, p. 1352). However, this process tends to achieve only phonetic equivalence (p. 1353). Yi Chen (2010, p. 483) also notes that transliteration is the simplest translation method, and functions when no equivalence is found between the Chinese language and culture and the English language and culture. It is a widely received concept in Chinese though its origin is recognisably foreign. While this application of biblical language to a non-human may appear sacrilegious, it is worth remembering that the Bible underscores the interrelation between human and animals (Bible Society New 2015, Genesis 2:19; Job 12:7-10). Both the English source and the Chinese subtitles are innately embedded in Christian teaching and ideology.

(2) *Oliver Twist* (01:11:37– 01:11:40)

Original dialogue:

FAGIN: Take the Dodger's word for it.
He understands the catechism
of his trade.

Chinese subtitle:

听机灵鬼的话……
他可是相当懂行的

Back Translation:

FAGIN: Take clever ghost's words for it.
He indeed knows the business.

In this example, Fagin teaches Oliver how to steal. At this moment, he mentions Jack Dawkins who is really good at stealing. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* (1989), *catechism* is defined as “a summary of the principles of Christian religion in the form of questions and answers, used for religious instruction”. Fagin, in the film, uses the noun in an inappropriate context in order to describe the trade of theft. Christian religious doctrine prescribes that Christians do not steal. Fagin, however, uses the vocabulary of that Christian doctrine to commend one of his pupils in relation to theft. There is thus dark humour relating to religious belief in the original dialogue as Fagin is a thief and he is training others as thieves by using the religious word *Catechism*. The religious word applies in a non-religious context. However, the subtitles do not maintain either the metaphor or the humour of the religious origin but use an explication⁶ “他可是相当懂行的” / “he indeed knows the business” (*C-E Dictionary*). What is presented here is the descriptive equivalence for the receiving audience (Newmark and Hall, 1988, p. 103). Both metaphor and humour are lost in the Chinese subtitles. Religion actually advocates no stealing and ironically the religious word is being used to promote a non-religious act of theft. The subtitles eradicate the biblical and religious origin by means of explication to make a mere linguistic transfer in the target language.

To summarise, the above two examples illustrate that different translational and cultural strategies are used when conveying religious beliefs in the source film. The subtitling of *Christian* adopted a cumulative use of transliteration and explication which is also embedded in contemporary Chinese Christianity. The religious terminology of *catechism* fails to cross national boundaries and is replaced by a Chinese linguistic equivalence that allows audiences to comprehend meaning via explication, but without the accompanying source imagery.

5.2. Biblical Allusions

This section will focus on biblical references as religious terminology and biblical allusions are intimately related. According to Hung (1980, p. 133), “biblical and literary allusions” are an integral part of the English cultural heritage in *Oliver Twist*. There are frequent detailed biblical references in relation to key characters. These references are relevant for what they reveal about the subtitler’s approach towards such allusions.

(3) *Oliver Twist* (01:25:08 – 01:25:15)

Original dialogue:

BILL: What you done (sic) with that boy?
Where is he?

⁶ According to Bernard Bolzano, in translation, explication is the interpretative relation between linguistic and mental events; in other words, the relation between signs and intentions and the way in which we understand the word expressions (Kasabova, 2006, p. 21).

FAGIN: Safe and sound.
The Dodger's minding him.
They're as close as Cain and Abel.

Chinese subtitle:

你把那孩子怎样了？

他人呢？

—他很安全，机灵鬼在看着他

他们现在都形影不离了

Back Translation:

BILL: What have you done with that boy?
Where is he?

FAGIN: He is very safe, clever ghost is looking after him.
They are now after each other like shadows.

What Example 3 depicts is that because Oliver is badly injured, the Artful Dodger is looking after him. The original film dialogue takes a religious and cultural approach to this biblical allusion, *Cain and Abel*. The Biblical story in *Genesis* says that Cain and Abel are the children of Adam and Eve. They can only be understood in light of the religious and social conditions of the earliest traditions of the Hebrews (Hooke, 1939, pp. 58-59). This classic tale describes how Cain murders his brother Abel out of jealousy (p. 59). Interestingly, it is rendered in the Chinese subtitles with a clear domestic expression, “形影不离” / “to be after each other like shadows” (*C-E Dictionary*). While the original English dialogue implies the metaphor of brotherhood, as well as the ultimate self-annihilation between brothers in the religious story, the Chinese subtitles domesticate it with a four-character Chinese idiom, which clearly means “inseparable as form and shadow” in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (1970). A four-character idiom carries with it a concise but profound meaning and forms with set structure, which are not replaceable and often originates from traditional folklores (Guo and Lin, 2019, p.161). According to Feng, 97% of Chinese idioms consist of four characters. A domesticating and explanatory strategy has apparently been adopted. This domestic expression works fluently in the Chinese discourse. Another key feature is that *Oliver Twist* is like Abel and the Artful Dodger is like Cain, as Abel is pure while Cain is a murderer. There is an extra layer of irony attached to the original; Oliver (Abel) and the Artful Dodger (Cain) once were close “inseparable as form and shadow”. In the *Genesis* story, after murdering Abel, Cain claims to not know where his brother is. In the film, a physical separation between the Artful Dodger and Oliver occurs after the Artful Dodger betrays Oliver. The subtitles construct the same sense of closeness between the brothers in an ironic way as the film's dialogue does but there is key translation loss as

the Chinese subtitles eradicate the violence of the source image, a violence entirely appropriate to the setting of *Oliver Twist*.

The notion of domestication is relevant to J. M. Cohen's statement that readers receive the idiomatic translation to comprehend a classical work (Cohen, 1962, p. 33). By using the four-character Chinese epigram, the translation speaks to the domestic audiences ensuring "an irresistible stream of narrative" (Venuti, 1995, p. 30). But the biblical allusion is lost in the subtitles and replaced by a domestic four-character discourse in the Chinese context. The subtitles regarding biblical allusions indicate a domesticating strategy that the subtitlers employ when translating religion. When translating *Cain and Abel*, the subtitles make alterations, recasting the archaic origin into a more archaic Chinese equivalence via the use of a four-character idiom.

5.3. Social Conventions

According to Hung (1980, p. 152), social conventions are key to understanding Victorian society. However, the cultural, temporal and linguistic gap between Dickens's source and the Chinese contemporary audience make such social conventions hard to convey. Hung (p. 152-178) focuses more on the legal system, names (including personal names and territorial names), currency, food, drink and games. This section, however, will use Hung's term elastically to consider conventions in nineteenth-century England.

5.3.1. Legal System

(4) *Oliver Twist* (00:47:41 – 00:47:51)

Original dialogue:

MR. BROWNLOW: Before I am sworn...

...I must beg to say one word.

MR. FANG: Hold your tongue, sir.

MR. BROWNLOW: I will not, sir!

MR. FANG: Hold your tongue this instant.

You're an insolent, impertinent fellow.

How dare you bully a magistrate?

Chinese subtitle:

在我宣誓前……

请容我说句话……

——住嘴，先生

—我不，先生

—给我住嘴！

你这个鲁莽无礼的家伙

竟敢蔑视本法官

Back Translation:

MR. BROWNLOW: Before I take an oath...

 Please allow me to speak...

MR. FANG: No speaking, sir.

MR. BROWNLOW: I won't, sir!

MR. FANG: Stop talking!

 You are an impertinent and rude fellow.

 How dare you look down upon me, myself, the judge?

In this present example, the magistrate, Mr. Fang, stops the benevolent old man, Mr. Brownlow, who is trying to withdraw the charge of pilfering against Oliver Twist. According to the *OED* (1989), *magistrate* stands for a civil officer who administers the law, especially someone who conducts a court dealing with minor offences and holds preliminary hearings for more serious cases. The Chinese subtitles offer an explanation of the English term *magistrate* by translating the word as “法官” (“judge”). China has a variety of court structures in its legal system. The highest level of court is the Supreme People's Court (“最高人民法院”) in Beijing. There are also the local People's court (“地方人民法院”), the Court of First Instance, for criminal and civil cases (“初审法院”, 适用于“刑事法院”和“民事法院”). These courts incorporate the High People's Court (“高级人民法院”), the Intermediate People's Court (“中级人民法院”) and the Basic People's Court (“基层人民法院”).⁷ However, the Chinese word used to convey *magistrate* in the subtitles refers to none of these Chinese courts. Instead, the Chinese subtitles choose to use a general term “法官” (“judge”) for this officer of law. The subtitles avoid to specify of which court a specific judge presides in in the original text, offering in this place a general term and using the following amplification to amend for this loss in specificity as there was no relevant equivalent to be found in Chinese. If there is translation loss in this subtitle in relation to the legal function, there is also translation gain as the speech patterns of the Chinese subtitles offer character analysis. In English, the line of dialogue “How dare you bully a magistrate?” is, to a large extent, time and register neutral. In contrast, the Chinese subtitle chooses to insert “本” (“myself”), a translation addition which places the character's dialogue in a formal, archaic style which references for a Chinese audience his clear sense of self-importance and stature. In this instance, amplification occurs when the target text uses more signifiers to cover syntactic or

⁷ For further details on the judicial system in China, see *China's Judiciary* (China.org.cn).

lexical gaps (Molina and Amparo, 2002, p. 500) to smooth the reader's expectation in the target culture. In relation to key legal figures, the subtitles offer general non-specific equivalence for the word *magistrate*.

5.3.2. Games

If cultures and nations are often characterised by distinct products and culturally specific references, so too are they characterised by patterns of their games (Haraway, 1994, p. 3). One relevant example from Dickens's source text will be explored in this context.

(5) *Oliver Twist* (00:42:37 – 00:42:44)

Original dialogue:

NANCY: It's called Spec or Speculation.

Three cards each, and then the one he turns up...
is trumps.

Chinese subtitle:

这叫“偷鸡”

每人三张牌，谁拿到那张……

谁就是赢家

Back Translation:

NANCY: This is called “stealing hen”.

Each person has three cards, and whoever gets that one...
is the winner.

Nancy is teaching Oliver how to play the game of “Spec or Speculation” in Example 5. *Spec or Speculation*, a British card game, is mentioned in both Jane Austen's and Charles Dickens's novels (Parlett, 2014). The English word denoting the card game, *Speculation*, is comparatively neutral and merely refers to “A round game of cards, the chief feature of which is the buying and selling of trump cards, the player who possesses the highest trump in a round wins” (*OED*). However, it is rendered in the Chinese subtitles with the much more culturally equivalent Chinese character, “偷鸡”/ “stealing hen”. The Chinese here is derived from an idiom “偷鸡不成蚀把米”, meaning “to try to steal a chicken only to end up losing the rice used to lure it” (Hornby et al., 1970). The general English term *speculation*, as opposed to above reference for the card game explanation, refers to investment

in stocks or property in the hope of gain but with the risk of loss. The Chinese imagery works in a different direction from the English source. The English card name includes the possibility of gain. The Chinese subtitles, via the idiom, underline the inevitability of loss. The Chinese subtitles may domesticate the imagery of the original but, in their word choice, they offer a different moral reading of the game. To summarise, in relation to the subtitling of games in *Oliver Twist*, the subtitling of *Spec* or *Speculation* adopts a domesticating approach which implicitly carries an altered moral meaning.

5.4. Other Elements of the Victorian Era: Working Conditions

There are inevitable challenges associated with the subtitling of a film set in an earlier era. Lawrence Venuti (1995, pp. 20-21) writes about foreignisation and domestication in terms of geographical space and cultures. His theories of foreignisation and domestication are useful for discussing the temporal transfer in the subtitling process of *Oliver Twist*. The subtitlers of this film face a choice when translating these cultural and temporal gaps set in different geographical locations between early nineteenth-century Britain and modern China. According to Venuti (1995), it is advisable to either domesticate for modern comprehension or foreignise these temporal terms, leaving them archaic and “other”. Nathalie Ramière (2010) builds on Venuti’s advice, claiming that there remain twofold practical difficulties in the transference of cultural specificities. They are “referential problems”, relating to “the absence of a particular referent in the target culture” and “connotation problems”, which accounts for “different networks of images and associations in the two cultural contexts considered” (Ramière, 2010, p. 101). The following examples will illustrate Ramière’s two practical difficulties when translating working conditions, as more nuanced and implicit connotations and associations are required for a fluent and idiomatic interpretation of the film dialogue.

(6) *Oliver Twist* (00:19:42 – 00:19:56)

Original dialogue:

NOAH: But you must know, workhouse...
...your mother was
a regular right-down bad one.
...
...It’s a good thing she died
when she did...
...or she'd be hard labouring or transported.

Chinese subtitle:

但你要知道，救济娃……
你妈准不是什么好东西

.....

她死了也好.....

不然准会做苦役或被流放

Back Translation:

NOAH: But you have to know, baby from the rescue institution...

Your mum must be a bad thing

...

It's good for her to die...

Otherwise she must be doing hard servitude or be exiled.

What this example shows is that goaded by the taunts of Noah, Oliver is roused into action when Noah shouts cruel insults at his dead mother. Hard labour⁸ is defined as “heavy manual work as a punishment” (OED). Given that it is no longer a punishment meted out by the British Judicial System, the term is an archaic concept. Penal servitude was abolished for England and Wales in the Criminal Justice Act of 1948 (Killingray, 1994, p. 204). In contrast, the People’s Republic of China still uses “劳教” (“laojiao”), re-education through labour and “劳改” (“laogai”), reform through labour, as ways to punish prisoners. However, the subtitles do not use either of these contemporary Chinese words, choosing instead to use the word “苦役” (“kuyi”) / “hard servitude”. The subtitles thus explain the concept but choose a word which does not embed it in a contemporary Chinese context. The Chinese subtitles avoid using these available words perhaps for fear that the viewers might link contemporary Chinese practice to a backward era. An era back in 1967-1977 was China’s Cultural Revolution when intellectuals were punished through “劳教” (“laojiao”) and “劳改” (“laogai”). Attention must also be paid to the British word transported. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the government started to send prisoners to penal colonies, first in America and then in Australia (Moran et al., 2012, p. 449). The word transported therefore is a word which is particularly resonant in a nineteenth-century context. It is again an archaic concept now. The concept is not one which applies to the Chinese legal system in historical terms either. Therefore, the subtitles again have to explain the term as “流放” / “exile”. While the English dialogue is clearly historically situated in its vocabulary, the Chinese subtitles are more neutral in terms of time and geographic location. If hard labour and transportation are key features of the nineteenth-century British cultural landscape, so too is the institution in this next example: *workhouse*.

⁸ Oscar Wilde underwent a sentence of two years’ hard labour in 1897. He deemed the punishment more than a man could endure and expressed his hope that it would be abolished in the 1898 Prison Act (Bailey, 1997, p. 289). Hard labour was thus a key feature of the nineteenth-century crime and punishment.

(7) *Oliver Twist* (00:13:32 – 00:13:40)

Original dialogue:

MR. SOWERBERRY: ...this is the orphan
from the workhouse.

MRS. SOWERBERRY: Dear me, he's very small.

MR. BUMBLE: But he'll grow, Mrs. Sowerberry.

Chinese subtitle:

这个就是救济院的孤儿

一天哪，他可真瘦小

他会长大的，苏太太

Back Translation:

MR. BUMBLE: This is the orphan from the rescue institute.

MRS. SOWERBERRY: Oh, my, he is very thin and small.

MR. BUMBLE: He will grow, Mrs. Su.

What Example 7 describes is that Mr. Bumble takes Oliver to his new master, Mr. Sowerberry. According to the *OED* (1989), the *workhouse* is a historical British institution where the destitute of the parish received lodging in return for work. They were harsh places to inhabit. One poor woman once described her experience of staying in a workhouse: "I only wish those who like the law⁹ may suffer under it as I have done. I would sooner kill my children and hang myself than go in again to be treated as I have been".¹⁰ In the previous example, in Noah's contempt for Oliver by calling him "workhouse", the Chinese subtitles actively maintain this contempt as they render it as "救济娃"/ "baby from the rescue institution" as a specific term.

However, in this case, the Chinese subtitles render this term with an archaic and domestic equivalence, "救济院"/ "rescue institution". The "救济院"/ "rescue institution" is also known by people as "同善堂"/ "benevolent association". The attempt to make the historical transfer is evident in the subtitles. The "救济院"/ "rescue institution" in China was established early in 1888 for less fortunate people including homeless people, orphans, maltreated prostitutes, the disabled and those

⁹ For further details on the New Poor Law of 1834 and the experience of those who lived in the workhouse, see Ledger (2007, p. 83).

¹⁰ Quoted from *A Letter from a Southern Country Correspondent* to the author, Sally Ledger of the book *Dickens and The Popular Radical Imagination*, dated 2 October 1840.

who needed care in later life, an education, a weaving job, or just simple labour. This institution in China is regarded as a welfare house for relief (Li, 1956). The East and West are markedly different in relation to these two institutions. Employing the strategy of domestication, the subtitles encourage the reader to make a connection between the domestic culture of “救济院”/ “rescue institution” and that of Victorian England. Nida (1964) claims that one may use the concept of dynamic equivalence to “relate the receptor to modes of behaviour relevant within the context of his own culture” (p. 159). This subtitle enacts this theory. It should be noted that in this dialogue where a domestic equivalent is chosen for the *workhouse*. It is interesting to note that the name Sowerberry is also domesticated. The subtitles render Mrs Sowerberry as “苏太太”/ “Mrs Su”, a common Chinese surname.

To summarise, while there are common themes in the subtitles’ translation of these working conditions in early Victorian England in the context of the modern film version *Oliver Twist*, so too are there differences in relation to cultural approach. The subtitles maintain an archaic symmetry via the historical and domesticating transfer of the historic term *workhouse*, but they make other modern and neutral expressions and mark the profession of working in relation to *hard labouring*, in descriptive and approachable contemporary ways via the use of explication. With the intention of recreating the historical context, the Chinese subtitlers thus employ both archaic and modernised approaches in rendering working conditions in this section.

6. Results and Analysis

As the representative examples in this study have demonstrated, archaism, modernisation, amplification, explication, transliteration, foreignisation and domestication are used to capture the complexity of cultural and temporal transfers in this film. Three possible reasons that may justify the importation of this film by the Chinese authorities. These are related to three periods of time: the first decade of the Millennium where China experienced political and cultural changes; the year of 2006 in which the Chinese subtitled film was released, and the link between 19th century Britain and modern-day China shared social similarities.

First, both China and Britain share, despite their differences, common social problems. There is a cultural link between early Victorian London and 21st century China when *Oliver Twist* was originally written in Britain during the nineteenth century and when the Chinese subtitled film was released in modern-day China. In 2006, when *Oliver Twist* was released in China, China was facing increasingly serious social problems relating to the unrest caused by the divide between the rich and the poor, as a result of the government being busy preparing the infrastructural facilities for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Preparations for the Beijing Olympics caused a sharp imbalance in Chinese society (Shin and Li 2013, p. 560). This imbalance in Chinese society mainly relates to the urban fringes or former industrial sites in Beijing in which an estimation of 171 “villages-in-the-city” (also known as *chengzhongcun*) were demolished, which has led to the eviction of around 74,100 permanent village residents and about 296,400 migrants (p. 560). This massive demolition casts negative social impact

in modern China, specifically for Beijing migrants and rural citizens who experienced disruption to their lives and went through involuntary relocation (pp. 559-560).

This wealth imbalance in 21st century China is similar to the wealth imbalance in early Victorian London. This is because there are arguably associations between modern Chinese society and the issues related in *Oliver Twist* where the enforcement of the New Poor Law Act (1834), rapid industrialisation and mass migration have led to a social, cultural and political downturn in London. In the creation of *Oliver Twist*, the focus is on the stark contrast between the consuming upper class and the starving lower strata as indicated in the novel (Ledger, 2007, p. 79). While the vision in Dickens's novel is far starker and harsher than the situation in China in 2006 based on the above comparison, overlaps remain as China too had clear social differences and economic imbalance, not least in the decade in which *Oliver Twist* was released in China.

In addition to the social similarities between the social realities of Dickens's novel and China in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is also important to underline the literary similarities between *Oliver Twist* and key Chinese literary trends from the beginning of the twenty-first-century China. The ending in *Oliver Twist*, which emphasises the importance of being humanistic (Mei, 2018, p.63), is consistent with the traditional Chinese Confucian culture. This culture raises people's awareness of gratitude and forgiveness, which is also in line with Chinese cultural values. These values are used for establishing the harmonious society as put forward by President Hu Jintao. At the Sixth Central Committee Plenum¹¹ in late 2006, the ideal of constructing a "harmonious society" – a term used in reference to a socio-economic order in which all Chinese can coexist in peace and harmony – was explored and discussed (Lam, 2007, p. 6). The authorities proposed to act as coordinators to regulate the distribution of revenue among different classes and sectors, and adequately address contradictions in the social order. Therefore, the call to set up "scientific and effective mechanisms" to tackle existing social problems was highlighted as being of urgent importance (p. 6).

Oliver Twist has been revisited throughout history in different social contexts, always emphasising the dark side of Victorian London. Prior to the modern film adaptation of *Oliver Twist* in 2005, there were three other famous film adaptations: David Lean's *Oliver Twist* (1948), Carol Reed's musical *Oliver!* (1968) and the Disney cartoon *Oliver and Company* (1988). Apart from these, there are over twenty silent film versions and a continuing output of television, video and theatre productions in the UK (Paganoni, 2010, p. 307). However, this modern film version, is considered by contemporary British society to be more upbeat, as this 2005 incarnation also stresses that Fagin "has a heart and loves the urchins he trains" (Oakes, 2005). Polanski's adaptation emphasises "a humorous tale of good fighting evil" (Oakes, 2005), which resonates with Chinese cultural values. There are thus social similarities underway both in Dickens's novel, the modern film version and the Chinese society at whom the subtitled version is targeted.

¹¹ Central Committee Plenum is a political conference held annually by the top leaders of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

Thirdly, the wish that good overrides evil and that justice will prevail in even the most adverse circumstances (Dickens, 1868, pp. v-viii) corresponds to Chinese people's belief in benevolence (“仁”) and harmony (“礼”). The third reason relates to the ending of the film, which resonates with modern-day Chinese values and traditional Confucian culture. The latter is still very much alive today as relevant Chinese values and is not just a “traditional relic”. In other words, with great friendliness and politeness, the protagonist Oliver expresses his gratitude to the antagonist Fagin when Oliver visits the condemned man in his cell, thanking him for his philanthropy. Such an insistence on gratitude could possibly be reminiscent of Confucius's belief that lifelong learning cultivates moral and intellectual virtues such as humanism, forgiveness, honesty, courage and strength (Kim 2003, p. 79). The above gratefulness is compatible with one of the Chinese virtues, “仁” /phonetically “ren”, the all-compassing virtue in traditional Confucian culture (p. 86). “仁” (“benevolence”) and “礼” (“rite”) are two important beliefs in Confucius's sayings on critical learning. “礼” /phonetically “li” regulates human conduct, operating in various social contexts and in the political arena. It not only stresses the promotion of rituals and righteousness, but also places heavy emphasis on establishing cultural values (p. 78).

It is thus clear that when the Chinese authorities imported *Oliver Twist*, they did so at a time when there were social similarities between the film adaptation and the target culture. The theme of the film resonates with key elements of Confucius's thoughts that may contribute to the importation of this film. Furthermore, the ending of the film, resonates with contemporary political and social initiatives at the time of its release in China under President Hu Jintao. Despite the above possible key justifications to release and subtitle this film, when the China Film Corporation imported the film, its marketing sector, Beijing Nianen Changying Culture Communication Co., LTD made it clear that there are two major rationales for selecting this film (Wang, 2006): 1. The director Roman Polanski is well known to the Chinese audiences through his earlier successful film *The Pianist* (2002), which was released in China in early 2004; 2. China seldom imports this film genre based on renowned classic works, but *Oliver Twist* is one of the best representatives of this genre that has already gained popularity with the Chinese audiences (Wang, 2006). The crucial message that the Chinese government wants to convey to the people by releasing this film is that it symbolises the nature of humanity (Wang, 2015). In other words, the vision is that young people should remain benevolent and upright even in adverse circumstances. Apart from this, the film also serves as a moral sentiment of sympathy for the destitute (Douban, 2018).

7. Conclusion

Using Hung's (1980) key classifications of recurrent historical features in Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* which characterise the modern heritage film version, this paper has sought to analyse how the Chinese subtitles mediate British history for a Chinese audience. The major challenge for the subtitlers lies in the transfer of the early nineteenth-century Victorian history to modern China, taking the linguistic, cultural and historical barriers into consideration.

From the perspective of the film selection, the Chinese authorities most presumably used British heritage to develop their own Chinese heritage via the modern film version of *Oliver Twist* (2005). In the time when the film was subtitled and released in 2006, China was experiencing social chaos which resonated with that of Victorian Britain. The subject matter of the film resonates with traditional and modern Chinese values such as Confucius' critical thinking and benevolence, President Hu Jintao's aspiration of "Constructing a Harmonious Society", as well as the Chinese themes of reward and punishment. The subtitled film, in consequence, is used to promote Chinese cultural values for the Chinese audiences, despite being about nineteenth-century Britain.

The above representative examples of the Chinese subtitles demonstrated that domestication has been heavily used. This has been done through the frequent use of archaic expressions such as four-character idioms and idiomatic expressions. As William Morris asserts in his writing, the domestic reader expects illustrations of the source culture in a translation as well as a return to an earlier time. Therefore, Morris suggests that the peculiarities of the archaic languages be deliberately and consciously translated (Bassnett, 2013, p. 76). At times, the Chinese subtitlers for *Oliver Twist* follow his advice. However, in other instances, they explicate and update to enable the viewer to make for a smooth reading in modern China, which leads to another key strategy of the selected instances being explication. Moreover, a many subtitling approaches is found in *Oliver Twist* (2005). While norms with rich cultural and historical overtones often cannot be translated by the Chinese subtitles, it is interesting to note that the frequent adoption of dynamic strategies gain multiple meanings. China's own heritage can thus be said to be mediated via that of Britain. This subtitling process, shaped as it is by linguistic, cultural and historical constraints, at times creates subtitles which work on multiple levels. In other words, transliteration is not only faithful to the sounds of the English origin, but conveys the foreignness of the subject, complemented by approaches such as explication, amplification and domestication. Therefore, the historical features shown in this modern version of a British heritage film interact with Chinese culture to transfer meaning via either archaic historical or modernised expressions for Chinese audiences.

Having identified how the Chinese subtitles use a complex combination of translation strategies, this paper has attempted to shed new light upon the intertextual relationship between early Victorian England and twentieth-first-century China in the Chinese subtitles. The foreign and other auditory and visual cultural and historical specificities set in early Victorian England may impede modern Chinese audiences from thorough comprehension. However, a cumulative, fluid and dynamic use of translation strategies and contextually appropriate consideration mutually enable a creative and

modernised reading of a historical past to entertain the 21st century audiences in China. These cultural and temporal specificities and complexities are, therefore, reinterpreted and redirected to the receiving culture for the purpose of rejuvenating China's cultural heritage.

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