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## **Going Global against the Tide: The Translation of Chinese Audiovisual Productions**

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### **Abstract**

With the rapid development of digitization and the emergence of social networks and streaming platforms, audiovisual translation (AVT) has become one of the most prolific expressions of global communication in today's society, able to overcome linguistic barriers when disseminating culture across the world. While audiovisual productions originally shot in English seem to be able to take full advantage of this situation, China's domestic programmes frequently encounter more challenges to make it overseas. Adopting a primarily translational approach, this paper borrows the concept of 'cultural discount', coined by Hoskins and Mirus (1988), to capture the notion that audiovisual productions are rooted in one culture and, therefore, may have diminished appeal among viewers from other communities. The study holds that the degree of cultural discount audiovisual productions may encounter when exported depends on numerous factors, which are explored through examples of recently localized films and TV series of Chinese origin.

### **Keywords**

Audiovisual translation; subtitling; dubbing; cultural discount; Chinese film industry

### **Résumé**

Grâce au développement rapide du numérique et à l'émergence des réseaux sociaux et des plateformes de diffusion en continu (streaming), la traduction audiovisuelle (TAV) s'est hissée à l'avant-plan de la communication internationale de notre société actuelle, puisqu'elle permet de surmonter les barrières linguistiques lors de la diffusion de la culture à travers le monde. Alors que les productions audiovisuelles tournées en anglais semblent tirer pleinement parti de cette situation, les programmes nationaux chinois rencontrent souvent plus de difficultés à s'imposer à l'étranger. En adoptant une approche essentiellement traductionnelle, cet article emprunte le concept de « réduction culturelle », de Hoskins et Mirus (1988), pour rendre compte de la notion selon laquelle les productions audiovisuelles sont ancrées dans une culture et peuvent donc présenter un intérêt moindre pour les téléspectateurs d'autres communautés. L'étude montre que le degré de réduction culturelle imposée aux productions audiovisuelles exportées dépend de nombreux facteurs, explorés à travers des exemples de films et de séries télévisées d'origine chinoise récemment localisés.

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## **Mots clés**

Traduction audiovisuelle; sous-titrage; doublage; réduction culturelle; industrie cinématographique chinoise

## **1. Introduction**

With the development of information and communications technology (ICT) as well as the emergence of social networks and streaming platforms, audiovisual productions have become the quintessential expression of communication in the digital ether. Their ease of dissemination has rendered them pervasive carriers of culture and language across the world, which in turn has catapulted audiovisual translation (AVT) to centre media stage, as one of the most prominent and influential translation practices of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Like literature and other creative arts, cinema has the power to draw different cultures closer (or apart), with the value added that it can reach larger audiences, arguably making it more culturally effective and impactful than other artistic practices (Kuo 2018). This is particularly true in the case of audiovisual productions originating from certain countries and in given languages, a point in case being those created in the USA in English (Varis 1984; Cieply 2014; Crane 2014), which has led to concerns among many about USA dominance in the field. Ostensibly, these concerns have been of a cultural rather than economic nature, though the communities that often express such uneasiness invariably stand to gain financially from policies postulated on cultural grounds.

Although the nature and extent of the influence of USA cinema on global viewers is open to dispute, the reality is that works produced originally in Chinese do not tend to travel well overseas and, as highlighted by Keane (2019: 4), “[a]side from the occasional ‘hit’ by a leading filmmaker in the art film and festival circuit, the numbers just don’t make great reading”. Indeed, according to a report conducted in 2011, more than a third of foreign audiences had never watched a Chinese movie and, at the time, Chinese productions had fallen far behind Indian and Korean films in the international market, with China failing “to register among the top thirty movie producers in the US market” (Su 2016: 159). This sorry situation is also echoed by Rosen (2020: 209), who claims that “China has not had any notable successes in this [USA] market after 2006”.

As cinema production, distribution and exhibition around the globe have traditionally gone hand in hand with financially robust industries, it could be seen as paradoxical that the increasing economic strength and political influence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on the international arena is not paying substantial cultural and/or financial dividends when it comes to cinema exports. To further explore this situation, we borrow the concept of “cultural discount” (Hoskins and Mirus 1988) from media economics and focus on the difficulties experienced by Chinese audiovisual productions to make it globally.

## **2. Eyeing the global market**

While China boasts the second largest economy in the world and its political and economic influence has increasingly solidified in the world stage, the international recognition of Chinese culture has not yet achieved a position commensurate with the country’s financial and political might. A potential risk in the medium to long term is that this perceived lack of cultural visibility and appreciation in the international sphere could affect, and even hinder, the further

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promotion of China's position and influence in world political and financial affairs, usually measured in terms of soft power. One of the most authoritative measuring tools of soft power, the annual survey conducted by Portland and the USC Centre for Public Diplomacy, shows that, year on year comparison since 2017 until 2019, the position of China has not improved, occupying a low 27<sup>th</sup> position (Rosen 2020).

To support China's ambitions of extending its international presence and influence within its positioning as an alternative power in the world, the government has been launching a series of initiatives since the turn of the millennium "as much focused on short-term economic concerns as they are on long-term political and cultural benefits for the country" (Yang 2017, 80). Often understood as instantiations of soft power (Nye 1990), these efforts include cultural exchanges and, notably, the expansion of Chinese media and entertainment internationally to counter its cultural trade deficit. Emerging in 1999, the Going Out or Going Global strategy, which encouraged companies to engage in world trade and to invest in global markets, was one of the early initiatives framing China's ambitions for global leadership, cooperation and the strengthening of external communication in pursuing deep transcultural understanding. A major geopolitical continuation to Going Global is the state-backed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multibillion-dollar, stimulus package of Chinese investment around the world. Launched in 2013, it is a vast collection of development and investment schemes that stretch from East Asia to Europe and whose main focus is on construction and infrastructure projects. The remit of the BRI has evolved over the years and, as discussed by Kuo and Kommenda (2018, online), "the initiative has morphed into a broad catchphrase to describe almost all aspects of Chinese engagement abroad", including the promotion of audiovisual productions originated in the PRC. This expansion of horizons to embrace the film industry has also been picked up by Zhou (2019, online), when claiming that: "Beijing's ambitions go beyond building railways, ports and new roads and making investments. The country is also looking to polish its image by enlisting its film industry to reflect Belt and Road partnerships and successes". One of the fruits of this drive is the founding in 2018 of the Belt and Road Film Festival Alliance, comprising of 31 film festival institution representatives from 29 countries, with the aim of taking films as a carrier to seek mutual learning and common development in exchanges and cooperation ([silkroadfilmfestival.com/belt-road](http://silkroadfilmfestival.com/belt-road)).

Indeed, cinema and other media entertainment manifestations are seen by the state as an essential part of cultural exchange, as important vehicles to achieve mutual understanding and respect between different cultures as well as to showcase Chinese culture, values and the achievements of the country to the rest of the world (Hao *et al.* 2018). To this aim, the PRC has been flexing the nation's soft power in their belief that film can be a most powerful tool to portray national cultural identity, which ultimately can persuade or attract others to support the country's interests. The nation's efforts in this respect have been enormous, as documented by Tang (2015): China became the world's largest TV drama producer in 2010; in 2014, it produced 429 dramas with 15,983 episodes; and the number of countries and regions importing Chinese TV series expanded from 10 in the early 1990s to more than 100 in 2014. Yet, despite investing heavily in its culture and entertainment sectors as part of this going out strategy, the results have not been as promising as expected, with only a small number of productions gaining global success, such as the films *Zhan Lang II* 战狼II (*Wolf Warrior 2*, Jing Wu, 2017), *Liulang Diqu* 流浪地球 (*The Wandering Earth*, Frant Guo, 2019) or *Babai* 八佰 (*The Eight*

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*Hundred*, Guan Hu, 2020). To a considerable extent, China's film industry has failed to enter foreign markets, with perhaps the exception of some African countries, and has not been able to produce a substantial return on investment, whether financial or cultural. The former, however, does not seem to have been a high priority for the government, who in their eagerness to disseminate Chinese culture have deployed a policy that, when considered appropriate, favours sending out cultural products for free rather than selling them.

As discussed by Hao *et al.* (2018), the reasons behind this state of affairs are multifarious and while some observers claim that it is necessary to find commonalities between Chinese and Western cultures and values, others insist on developing Chinese cultural products that appeal to Western audiences. As it stands, overseas distribution is more of an afterthought and the domestic popularity of the productions is one of the key parameters that guides the decision of which Chinese shows and films to export to foreign markets. The issue, of course, is that domestic programmes are not usually created with an international audience in mind and the topics and values that are arresting to the Chinese may not find an echo among foreign viewers. For Tang (2015, online), the "lack of ingenuity in the plot and incompatibility with foreign viewers' tastes prevent Chinese films and TV series from swaying the mainstream market abroad". Despite foreign markets calling for more stories that depict the real lives of young Chinese, of the "China-made TV dramas released in foreign markets in the past 20 years, historical period dramas accounted for over 80 percent" (Tang 2015, online).

Also important in this debate is the effect in media flows of cultural differences between countries and, particularly, the acute cultural distance that exists between Western and Eastern cultures, which inevitably leads to difficulties for audiences in understanding stories that take place in unfamiliar contexts. These problems relate as much to China's filmmaking conventions as they do to Western resistance, given the fact that audiences tend to gravitate toward media content that is consistent with their own culture (Straubhaar 1991, 2003; Sinclair 1999). Censorship in the PRC has also forced directors to stay away from more sensitive themes and to prioritize politically neutral topics and comedies, which may present less appeal to foreign audiences. Additionally, the lack of international stars together with an uncertain overseas marketing strategy also contribute to this rather bleak situation, which risks China "turning into another Bollywood – that is, an industry that is healthy on its home turf but with little impact abroad" (Hao *et al.* 2018, 252).

The fact that the domestic media market in China has greatly expanded in recent years but yet it is unable to travel abroad reveals that "the cultural gap is a very significant obstacle to the 'going out' strategy of Chinese film" (Hao *et al.* 2018, 252). In such challenging circumstances, it is not surprising that some Chinese entertainment companies, especially under BRI, have decided to explore markets other than the Western ones, in particular the African one, which may have the potential of yielding more positive results. In China's outward-bound mission, a prime example of this ambition and zeal for expanding its cultural influence are the activities of StarTimes (startimestv.com), a Chinese media company operating mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa and further discussed in section 4.1.

Given the apparent lack of effectiveness of the various state-led initiatives when it comes to the dissemination of Chinese audiovisual media, it is somewhat surprising that so little attention has been paid, in the available literature, to the part that translation may play in the internationalization of Chinese audiovisual productions, with the majority of debates focusing

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on wider issues such as the film and television industries at large (Keane 2013, 2015), the financial repercussions and box office successes of Chinese productions abroad, as well as the socio-cultural and political implications derived from such transnational exchanges (Su 2016, Keane 2019; Rosen 2020). This paper attempts to redress the balance by taking a closer look at the pivotal role of translation as an essential activity at the core of any internationalisation strategy.

### **3. Cultural discount**

As already discussed, cultural differences have been partially blamed by some researchers for the slow penetration and influence of Chinese values in other countries. In this respect, the notion of “cultural discount”, as theorized by Hoskins and Mirus (1988), comes in handy to recognize the influence of culture in the processes of trade in media production. Conceptually, it refers to the fact that a “particular programme rooted in one culture, and thus attractive in that environment, will have a diminished appeal elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the style, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioural patterns of the material in question” (Hoskins and Mirus 1988, 500). In other words, it refers to “the reduction in values from which media productions are supposed to suffer when traveling from one culture to another” (Volz *et al.* 2010, 132), which eventually leads to a decrease in the socio-cultural (and financial) impact of the production. A notion socially and historically contingent, it has been widely used by media scholars in explorations of the performance of media products in foreign markets (Oberhofer 1989; Waterman and Jakayar 2000; McFadyen *et al.* 2003; Lee 2008; Schlütz and Schneider 2014), in which the role of translation has been conspicuously absent.

Aside from economic models and factors influencing international media trade, the notion of cultural discount has been frequently used as a powerful explanation of the transnational flow of media productions (Fu and Lee 2008). According to it, a lower demand normally exists “for foreign products that are less familiar to consumers in terms of social values, historical perspective, national context and language, especially when the product exhibits well-defined cultural attributes” (Hao *et al.* 2018, 254). It then follows that closer cultural proximity promotes greater inter-country media trade and that the greater the cultural distance of a product from an import market, the greater the cultural discount (Fu and Lee 2008). Of course, cultural distance is not an unequivocal, reciprocal concept, which helps understand why Western productions, and particularly USA ones, fare better in the box office in China than Chinese films in the West. Indeed, Chinese audiences seem to be eager to find out about Western culture while Europeans and Americans have relatively low interest in knowing more about China, its culture and values and, hence, in watching Chinese audiovisual productions, which often suffer greater cultural discount in Western soils than the other way around. On the other hand, the same Chinese programmes may encounter much less cultural discount in countries such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and other Asian nations closer to China, both geographically and culturally. Another factor to consider when discussing cultural discount is the fact that audiences are not homogenous and disparities in appreciation of foreign programmes can be due not only to cultural environment or language but also to differences in educational background, gender, age, personal experience and the like, which need to be properly pondered when deciding on the translational macro-strategy to be adopted.

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Under this prism, the ultimate challenges for the Chinese film industry are to understand the factors that cause cultural discount in the overseas dissemination of audiovisual productions and to devise a range of potential strategies that could help alleviate, or even avoid, such negative impact. In order to tackle these issues from a cultural standpoint, we adopt an approach that works at the macro- and microlevels, focuses on the significance of translation vis-à-vis cultural discount and proposes some avoidance strategies to reduce and bridge the cultural distance.

### *3.1 Cultural discount and audiovisual translation*

For the audience, foreign audiovisual productions generally instil a sense of unfamiliarity, novelty and cultural oddity that can develop into some conscious, or unconscious, resistance towards the message being conveyed. Every audiovisual production is created to have an impact on the viewer and, depending on how culturally rooted and alien the depicted values and mores might be, this reaction can manifest itself in the strengthening of the viewers' engagement or in their dissuasion from watching, or continuing to watch, the said programme. To entice viewers to engage, complete and enjoy their watching experience, cultural discount needs to be minimized and kept to a level that guarantees overall comprehensibility and enjoyment of the intended message. When properly implemented, translation is a tool that contributes to this objective of facilitating communication, though it can also lead to the opposite result when not articulated in an expert and dexterous fashion.

Translation is an orchestrated activity that requires the involvement of many interested parties. The theory of translatorial action, put forward by Holz-Mänttari (1984), is one of the early ones to explore in detail the complex networks that get established in the act of translation, by formulating a functional oriented approach that encompasses both the theory and practice of translation and whose main purpose is to foster the flow of cooperative, functionally adequate communication across cultures and communities. Translation is thus regarded as an overall complex behaviour involving the participation of numerous professionals. In her paradigm, Holz-Mänttari (1984) also expands the traditional concept of translation to encompass other activities that entail a connection with foreign cultures, such as adaptation, compilation, editing and consulting. In her view, translatorial action is not simply the translation of words, sentences or texts but a wider notion that guides potential cooperation across languages, promotes functional communication and, ultimately, enables the bridging of cultural barriers. In this scenario, language is not the content and target of such an act, but a necessary tool to reach a set of given objectives.

As examples of social behaviour, all communication acts are based on the production, transmission and reception of information among the various participants in the process, and AVT is no exception. The reason why domestic audiovisual productions generate cultural discount in foreign countries is not only related to the quality of the translation output, but it is also influenced by other factors, such as the nature of the audiovisual programmes chosen for translation, the distribution channel and the marketing campaign, to name but a few. For instance, casting foreign actors, as in the case of *Jinling Shisan Chai* 金陵十三钗 (*The Flowers of War*), a 2011 historical drama war film directed by Yimou Zhang, can add appeal to the production and act as a diegetic decoy to include other languages (English in this case), which can help reduce cultural discount.

While the initiator normally plays a decisive role in the articulation of the global strategy, including picking the audiovisual products to be translated, the translator is usually accountable for the quality of the linguistic transfer, though the responsibility is ultimately shared by a number of participants, including quality controllers, project managers, dubbing actors and directors, and technicians. In what follows, we discuss cultural discount in AVT from a macro- and microlevel, making use of Toury's (2012) framework to explore the numerous decision-making processes behind any translatorial action, rather than the actual norms in operation. For this, we focus on the scholar's set of norms and the various stakeholders that take part in the translation process.

#### 4. Norms

Toury (2012, 79–85) considers translation to be a behavioural activity governed by norms, of which he distinguishes three types, as displayed in Figure 1:

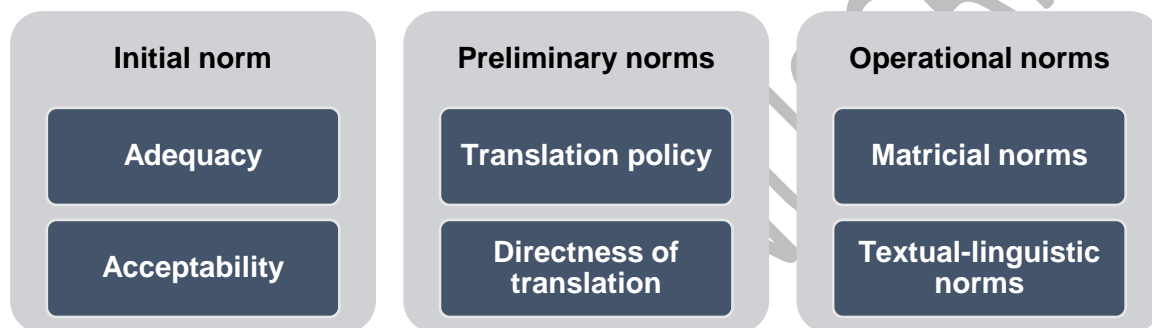


Figure 1. Toury's (2012) translational norms

The initial norm refers to the general choice made by initiators and/or translators as to whether the translation should give priority to the conventions of the source culture/language, in which case it will be “adequate”, or adhere to the prevailing target culture norms, in which case it will be “acceptable”.

Preliminary norms consider the existence of a general translation policy and the directness of translation. The former refers to the factors that govern the choice of texts to be imported into a particular community via translation at a given time, which will vary according to human agents, text types or genres and medium. Directness of translation explores whether the linguistic transfer occurs through an intermediate or pivot language and the impact that this may have on the outcome.

The third and last category, operational norms, direct the decisions made during the translation act itself and can be further classified into matricial and textual-linguistic norms. Matricial norms relate to the completeness of the target text as compared to the original one and the phenomena to be observed include omission of scenes, textual segmentation, and the potential addition of notes or glosses. Textual-linguistic norms “govern the selection of linguistic material for the formulation of the target text, or the replacement of the original material” (Toury 2012, 83), and focus on lexical items, phrases and stylistic features.

##### 4.1. Preliminary norms

As part of the translation policy, the initiator of AVT is responsible, among other decisions, of

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selecting the audiovisual productions and genres to be translated into other languages. Whereas USA productions find their way into new markets rather easily, the impetus for translating works originally produced in other countries comes frequently from government agencies and initiatives spearheaded in that very same country, as discussed in section 2.

At this macrolevel, cultural discount is triggered, in varying degrees, by the multimodal characteristics of the programme rather than the actual dialogue and its translation. Among the potential factors contributing to cultural discount are the density and complexity of the dialogue and the cultural information being disseminated, the otherness of the values embodied in some audiovisual productions that do not align with those of the target audience, as well as the narrative techniques favoured by the director that may look alien to the new audience. Therefore, it is crucial for the success of the translation that the initiator bears these factors in mind when shortlisting the audiovisual programmes to be translated into foreign languages.

In this respect, the work by Chaume (2004) is most relevant as he offers an in-depth analysis of the various signifying codes that come into play in the articulation of the audiovisual composite and operate simultaneously in the production of meaning. In addition to language, audiovisual texts are made up of a series of codified signs that are interwoven according to syntactic rules and complement dialogue exchanges and linguistic meaning. The author provides a taxonomy of ten different codes – linguistic, paralinguistic, musical and special effects, sound, iconographic, photographic, planning, mobility, graphic, syntactic – that affect translation operations and with which viewers and translators must be familiar if they are to fully grasp the intended meaning of the original. Audiovisual texts are an amalgam of communicative layers and signs, and translators must be able to fully gauge the incidence of the different signifying codes on the linguistic one, since the latter is the only code that is normally changed during the translation. A target text that does not take all the codes into account ends up being a partial translation with little chances of success.

Due to differences in literary tradition, cultural background and conceptualization, the narrative style of Chinese audiovisual products tends to contrast sharply when compared to Western works. Traditionally, Chinese films have a proclivity to depict magnificent and grand historical scenes, adopt a slow rhythm of narration, and rely on a plot that is linear and clearly signposted. Dramatic conflict and progression are built with a simple and single narrative style, which has the advantage of not presenting too many obstacles for the viewer's understanding but can easily lead to tedious and stereotyped plots, lacking novelty and profundity. Needless to say, all these aspects can also be triggers of cultural discount.

When deciding on the productions to be translated, the initiator should be aware of the role of these signifying codes present in the audiovisual texts, as the audience willingness to accept a foreign film hinges on their successful understanding of the numerous meaning-making networks that are usually weaved into the scaffolding of the storytelling. Some of these signifying codes may require little effort to appreciate, such as the depiction of natural and urban landscapes, which normally have little impact on the cultural discount. On other occasions, technical dimensions like editing, which usually are understood to travel easily across cultures, can lead to viewers' alienation and reduce the film's potential to attract large audiences. This is the case of *Wo bushi Pan Jinlian* 我不是潘金莲 (I Am not Pan Jinlian), a very popular Chinese comedy directed by Xiaogang Feng in 2016 and distributed internationally under the English title *I Am not Madame Bovary*. The cineaste makes an



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alternate use of square and round lenses; a culturally rooted, creative device that Chinese viewers can easily decode. In Chinese culture, “fang” [square] and “yuan” [circle] are two shapes that metaphorically encapsulate the philosophy of life, with the former implying integrity, uprightness and righteousness, while the latter represents flexibility and tolerance. Their value crystallizes in the maxim “outer round and inner square”, which foregrounds an attitude of easygoingness when dealing with the external world that is only limited by the individual’s inner goals and principles.

When it comes to the film’s montage, the alternation between square and round lenses ceases to bear meaning for foreign audiences, who are not familiar with the metaphorical significance of this device and for whom the unusual editing may interfere with their appreciation of the film. For Freer (2017, online), the good work “is undone by a lack of focus and a counter-productive technical gimmick” and the end result is “a mixed bag; a strong central performance and sharp touches undone by patience-testing storytelling and a distancing technical gimmick”. After accusing the flick of being “completely overawed by Feng’s ballsy decision to play with aspect ratio: most of the film is shot in a circular frame (imagine 98% of a movie down the barrel of the James Bond title sequence)”, the critic is somewhat aware that such decision “hints at traditional Chinese art but hurts as much it helps”, and concludes that: “It’s risky, interesting stuff but doesn’t pull off the gamble” (Freer 2017, online). At worst, the nature of the film is misconstrued and the comedy becomes “a Chinese drama that is shot mostly in a circular frame” (Maher 2017, online). At best, the rhetorical device is only appreciated on a superficial, aesthetic level that ignores its philosophical implications: “It’s frequently beautiful, with Feng constraining most scenes within a circular aspect ratio – a nod to the literati paintings of the Song dynasty – with the frame occasionally opening out to a neat square. The effect is distracting at first, but there’s pleasure to be found in his controlled, geometric framing” (Hans 2017, online). The same interpretation can be observed in the following review by Andrews (2017, online), in which the plot and script are outshone by the visuals: “Just feel the poetry in the literal picture-making. Most of the images are circularly framed, concentrating the action into luminous compositional gems. They look like paintings: dazzling ones”. Appreciations of this nature contribute to perpetuate the fact that numerous Chinese films that make it overseas end up in the limited art-house circuit, appealing to a minority public rather than the mainstream and therefore jeopardising the government’s interest to promote China’s culture and values to large audiences abroad.

Once the film or production has been selected to be translated into a foreign language, the decision needs to be taken as to which AVT mode to go for. The various ways in which audiovisual productions can be translated into other languages have been discussed by many authors over the years, of which the typologies presented by Chaume (2013) and Díaz-Cintas (2019) are perhaps some of the most recent and complete. The two main practices applied when dealing with films and TV series are dubbing and subtitling, whose pros and cons have been profusely discussed over the decades by scholars in the field, such as Vöge (1977), Kilborn (1989), Díaz-Cintas (1999), Wissmath *et al.* (2009) and Matamala *et al.* (2017), to name but a few. Multimodality means that the linguistic output is subjected to a series of time and space constraints that vary according to the translation mode activated: lip sync, isochrony and character synchrony are typical of dubbing (Chaume 2012), whereas subtitling is primarily conditioned by time synchrony between audio and subtitles as well the time available to read

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the subtitles (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2021). To guarantee that high quality is maintained, professionals working in this field must have a solid understanding of these idiosyncrasies so that they can opt for the most appropriate translation techniques, which should respect the original in meaning and style while at the same time keeping cultural discount to a minimum. The choice of one mode over the other rests not only on the country's tradition but also on the distribution channel. Indeed, while certain countries prefer to consume audiovisual productions with the help of subtitles, some others embrace dubbing. Film festivals all over the world require foreign films to be screened with subtitles, whereas cinema theaters, broadcasters, DVD/Blu-ray publishers and, more recently, streaming platforms are more flexible in their translational approach and, on numerous occasions, give the audience the choice to watch the same production dubbed and subtitled.

In this respect, the exhibition of Chinese films in traditionally dubbing countries like Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, as well as the UK and the USA, has been mainly done with the help of subtitles, which may have the immediate effect of reducing the potential reach of the works. Occasionally, as documented in the Spanish databank *El cine chino traducido en España* (*Chinese Films Translated in Spain*, [dtieao.uab.cat/txicc/cine](http://dtieao.uab.cat/txicc/cine)), some productions have been dubbed and subtitled, ostensibly with the intention of capitalising on a larger number of viewers. Hailed as a successful instance of Chinese soft power in Africa, StarTimes pioneered in the early 2000s the distribution of Chinese soap operas to African audiences, dubbing them into key languages such as English, French, Hausa, Luganda, Portuguese, Swahili, Yoruba and Zulu, among others (Olander 2019). The project has been highly effective and StarTimes is now one of Africa's largest pay television operators, and although subtitling is also part of their translational offer, dubbing seems to be by far the most appreciated AVT mode (Zhang 2017). A similar story of success is the TV comedy *Xifu de Meihao Shidai* 媳妇的美好时代 (*The Beautiful Daughter-in-Law Era* or *The Wonderful Era of a Daughter-in-Law*), directed by Jiang Liu in 2010, which was the first Chinese series to be dubbed in Swahili in 2011 (Tang 2015, online). Previously, Chinese film and television offerings in East Africa were subtitled in Swahili but, to tackle local issues such as low literacy rate, low rate of ownership of TV sets and a small average TV screen size in Africa, the export team within the then Chinese media regulator SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television) decided against the use of subtitles and, instead, made the pioneering and tactical decision to dub the series (Ho 2018). The title was changed into *Doudou and Her Mother-in-Law* and, to promote affect among the audience, two leading Kenyan actors lent their voices to the couple in the dubbed version.

Another factor to bear mind at this stage is the choice of the foreign language(s) into which to translate the films and the directness of the translation. Because of the nature of the industry, and the role of English as lingua franca, Chinese films and shows tend to be translated into English as a first, necessary step towards their internationalization and, more often than not, their screening at international film festivals. Chinese being what can be labelled as a 'minoritized' language in the international arena means that there is a dearth of professional translators with the right AVT skills, who can translate directly from Chinese into their mother tongue. A solution commonly activated in the industry in cases like this is the translation of the film or show via a pivot language, mostly English, which has its supporters and detractors (Nikolić 2015). Although the use of a pivot language in translation and interpreting is not unheard of, in an ideal situation films ought to be translated directly from the source language

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in order to avoid linguistic and cultural interferences from a third language, known in the industry as the “whispering effect”, and such decision should be carefully pondered by the initiator.

Special attention needs to be paid not only to the translation but also the linguistic competence of the professionals involved in the transfer. As Chinese is not an idiom commonly studied overseas (Eurostat 2021; Uniglo 2020), despite the increase in students observed in recent years, the number of foreign nationals with expert knowledge of the language tends to be rather limited. To overcome this drawback, translation into the foreign language is often carried out by Chinese native speakers with a varying command of the target language, which can easily lead to unsatisfactory results in terms of the naturalness of the ensuing dialogue. Notwithstanding the structural nature of this challenge, a bigger effort should be made to guarantee that translation is done by native speakers of the target language or, alternatively, it is done by Chinese translators in close collaboration with speakers of the source language.

It goes without saying that the initiators of the translatorial action should take heed of all these aspects when deciding not only on the audiovisual productions to be translated but also on the preferred overall translational strategy, or initial norm, as discussed below.

#### *4.2. Initial norm or global translation strategy*

In translation studies, concepts such as “strategy” and “technique” have been used to refer to the operations performed by translators during the transfer process from one language to another, albeit in a rather confusing and often overlapping manner (Gil Bardaji 2009; Xiong 2014). For the purposes of this article, they are understood as different notions: “strategy” is a more macroscopic and general concept that permeates the whole translation process and is governed by a set of overarching principles consistent with the client’s and/or translator’s objectives, whereas “techniques” are the mechanisms used by the translator to overcome concrete translation problems.

Overarching translation strategies have traditionally been divided into two main categories depending on whether the translation product leans more to the source or to the target culture. Adequacy and acceptability are the terms theorized by Toury (2012), but some other concepts also floated to reflect this dichotomy are literal / free, formal / dynamic (Nida and Taber 1969), semantic / communicative (Newmark 1977), overt / covert (House 1981) and foreignization / domestication (Venuti 1995). The latter two concepts are fruitful in this debate. Borrowed from Schleiermacher ([1813] 2006, 229), domestication means that the translator “tries not to disturb the target language readers, but to bring the original author to the target language readers”, while foreignization implies that the translator “tries not to disturb the original author, but to bring the reader to the original author”. Any translation inevitably involves the interweaving and blending of domestication and foreignization forces, and AVT is no exception. As part of their professional routine, translators will activate a gamut of techniques that can either promote foreignization (e.g. borrowing, calque, literal translation, transliteration) or domestication (e.g. explicitation, adaptation, expansion, transposition). Arguably, success when translating Chinese audiovisual productions hinges on the degree to which these strategies and techniques are activated. The domestication of the linguistic output normally enhances its acceptability but, if done to an excessive extent, it risks diluting the effectiveness of the cultural transmission. On the other side of the coin, foreignization enhances the

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preservation of the original cultural elements but the translated version can be difficult to understand and be accepted by foreign audiences due to the resulting high cultural discount. To be successful, a fine balance needs to be struck between these two poles of the cline.

When translating Chinese audiovisual shows, which, unlike USA productions, still lack a tradition of being exported to other territories, the main strategy should veer towards domestication, with foreignization being auxiliary. The main objective here would be to facilitate the audience's initial familiarization with Chinese culture and storytelling and, thus, boost the latter's penetration in other countries. The sporadic resort to foreignising solutions can still ensure the transmission of key cultural elements. Only after sustained exposure of the audience to Chinese productions can cultural discount be reduced or avoided. On the contrary, if the global strategy gives undue priority to foreignising techniques over domesticating ones, target audiences unfamiliar with the Chinese language and culture may find it challenging to enjoy the productions and empathize with the values being transmitted, which, after several experiences, may well put them off from consuming similar works in the future. Once a certain degree of penetration of Chinese productions has proven effective in a given territory and the foreign audiences have gained a better understanding of Chinese culture and values, may the relationship between domesticating and foreignising techniques be redressed. At this stage, both approaches can be activated in equal measure to guarantee that the lowering of cultural discount not only secures comprehensibility of the message but it can also be exploited to channel Chinese values.

In short, when designing a global translation strategy, domestication and foreignization forces should serve the concrete goal of reducing and avoiding cultural discount in a staggered fashion, so that the international dissemination of Chinese audiovisual productions can be fostered and facilitated.

#### 4.3. Matricial norms

According to Toury (2012, 82), matricial norms “govern the very existence of TL material intended as a replacement of corresponding SL material (and hence the degree of *fullness* of translation)”, that is, they relate to the completeness of the target text. From this perspective, the concept of “textual information” needs to be revisited in the case of audiovisual productions to embrace not only the integrity of the dialogue but also of the whole show. The technical and ideological manipulation of films has been a recurrent practice since the invention of cinema (Díaz-Cintas 2012), and the abridgment of audiovisual works, frequently dictated by censorial forces, has been, and continues to be, part and parcel of international exchanges. Yet, the structural alteration of whole works is a far less common occurrence, although extreme examples exist, like the heavy cuts made to the film *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese 2013), whose 180-minute running time was reduced by 45 minutes in its exhibition with Arabic subtitles in the United Arab Emirates (Beaumont-Thomas 2014).

A common strategy, applied by Western distributors when importing Chinese productions, has been to take films successful in China and parts of Asia and reconfigure them for Western audiences unfamiliar with Chinese history, culture and Chinese film aesthetics (Rosen 2020). Examples of this approach abound and include films such as *Shaolin zuqiu* 少林足球 (*Shaolin Soccer*, Stephen Chow, 2001), *Ying xiong* 英雄 (Hero, Zhang Yimou, 2002) and *Chibi* 赤壁 (*Red Cliff*, John Woo, 2008–2009), a 5-hour film on the Three Kingdoms period that in the

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USA was released separately in two parts, with a total running time of 148 minutes. Another intriguing case has been the international distribution of the TV series *Zhenhuan Zhuan* 后宫·甄嬛传 (*Empresses in the Palace* or *The Legend of Zhen Huan*), directed by Xiaolong Zheng (2011–2012). In 2015, the China’s royal harem series was added to Netflix as a subtitled six-episode version, each with a 90-minute duration, down from an original set of 76 episodes of 45 minutes each. As discussed by Rong (2015, online), the reduction in length is understood to be due to market rather than political forces, as USA audiences are not likely “to have the patience to follow a Chinese historical drama for 76 episodes, especially when they have to read the subtitles”. To enhance the appeal of the series, the adaptation introduces a new theme song, includes new scenes and was promoted by a slick trailer in a typically Hollywood fashion ([youtube.com/watch?v=b7CgbcQXDXA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7CgbcQXDXA)). Yet, such drastic alteration of the original has taken its toll on the end product and “[w]hile the audience may be happy to be able to finish the whole series in a day rather than weeks and even months, they may be left in confusion” (Rong 2015, online). The USA adaptation comes across as rather fractured and the quality of the translation, particularly when dealing with ancient Chinese culture, has been queried by scholars like Tang (2015) and Zhou *et al.* (2016). Along the same lines, Zhang and Perdikaki (2017) lament the lack of attention to detail in the subtitles and point to the fact that many of them appear too fast on screen and that some scenes and characters omitted in the miniseries are still mentioned in the translation, adding to diegetic confusion. In the end, the abridged version is the one that has made it to the DVD/Blu-ray circuit and to other OTT platforms, such as Amazon Prime Video, which, rather misleadingly, advertises the six-episode drama on their USA site as “The Complete Series”.

The miniseries has received mixed reactions, with seemingly as many acolytes as detractors, and although the pruning of the original footage may sound somewhat radical, the experiment can be heralded as pioneering in the OTT mediascape, as it was the first Chinese series to enter the VOD circuit in the Western world, propelled by Netflix. Though replicating the same abridging strategy with other productions may not be a forthright decision, the real significance of *Empresses in the Palace* could be in having signalled an inflexion point in forcing the mainstream dissemination of Chinese series in global streaming platforms and opened the virtual gates to other series that have proved popular in their unabridged version, such as *Story of Yanxi Palace*, directed by Hui Kai Dong and Wen De Guang in 2018, of which the 70 first episodes are now available on Amazon Prime Video.

## 5. Conclusion

One of the world leading powerhouses in the production of TV dramas, the PRC still lags behind when it comes to ripping the cultural and financial benefits of such a position. Although the intention to propel the country’s culture and values onto the world stage does not seem to be well matched with the limited experience of the Chinese entertainment industry operating effectively in a global context, the time seems to be ripe as the nation emerges as an influential player in the international arena, with an ever-growing entertainment offer, and other countries are curious to learn more about its recent developments. To succeed in this objective, translation becomes imperative; a key tool in the exercise of soft power and the spreading of cultural influence. Yet, despite its importance, little discussion has been entertained in

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academic circles on the role and intricacies of translation in the success of this outward-bound venture.

As discussed in these pages, the degree of cultural discount encountered by Chinese audiovisual productions exported overseas varies depending on numerous factors, including the nature of the original show and the translation policy adopted. As quintessential carriers of multi-layered communication, audiovisual productions are prime sites of cultural engineering, instrumental in fulfilling the government's repeated ambition of "letting China go to the world and letting the world know about China" and with the added potential to embody and display a particular national image that can contribute to the construction of China's global image. In this mission, audiovisual translation is not only a crucial accessory for Chinese culture to travel globally and reinforce the country's soft power, but also a tool to boost foreign trade in the creative industries and increase economic returns. Therefore, to reverse the current cultural trade deficit, it is necessary to pay attention to the factors that lead to cultural discount in the translation of cultural products and take appropriate avoidance strategies. Examples of the localization of recent Chinese productions for different markets in the world have been examined in these pages to illustrate some of the most iconic approaches adopted to reduce cultural distance and facilitate the export of Chinese works, such as the switch from subtitling to dubbing in certain territories and the radical editing down of footage.

To fulfil the PRC's global ambition of gaining a more prominent space in the international mediascape, one translation strategy for the whole world may not be the best way forward and decisions on whether to subtitle and/or to dub a film, into which languages, and how best to articulate strategies like domestication and foreignization must be duly pondered, bearing in mind the nature of the programme as well as the needs and expectations of the audience in different countries and regions. The degree of penetration of Chinese shows in any given part of the globe should also be a guiding factor since it is expected that cultural discount of Chinese productions will gradually decrease with exposure. A successful policy on this front will ultimately guarantee that translated Chinese films continue to enrich the concept of world cinema.

Our focus throughout this paper has been on traditional audiovisual genres, such as films and TV series. Yet, research conducted by film and television scholars points to the fact that, in this time and age, traditional industry boundaries are changing and more content is coming from online platforms, often produced by amateurs, with the most successful dissemination channel for China's media content outside of the country being YouTube. This has led to the realisation that "research needs to reassess the weighting placed on traditional film and television 'industry' metrics, and that the term industry be extended to take account of the widespread distribution and critique of content via social media platforms" (Keane 2019: 2). A finding of this nature does not only open up new research avenues but it also makes the need for translation more acute as, in the words of Keane (2019: 5): "The most popular platform for viewing is YouTube, which features a great deal of Chinese language content including music, film, talk shows and television series (not subtitled in English)". The time seems to be ripe for more in-depth studies that will allow us to ascertain the role that translation, or its absence, may have in this new viewing experience and on the international projection of China in its "going out" mission.

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