



Exploring the Translation Strategy of English Subtitles in the Popular Chinese Series *The Longest Day in Chang'an*

Demei Yang

School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University, China

Shilong Tao*

School of Foreign Languages, Hunan University, China

Abstract

The popular Chinese web series *The Longest Day in Chang'an*, released in 2019, has received considerable acclaim both domestically and internationally. Concurrently, the translation of its dialogue has sparked lively discussions among the audiences. This paper analyzes the examples of the translation of ancient Chinese poems, cultural terms, and episode titles in the TV series, revealing that due to the instantaneous and annotation-free nature of subtitle translation, the translators primarily employ a strategy of domestication, supplemented by foreignization, to ensure overseas audiences can quickly and effectively grasp the storyline. Additionally, the translators' method of closely adhering to the theme and identifying narrative threads as the main translation approach offers valuable insights for similar translation efforts.

Keywords: Translation Strategy, Domestication, Foreignization, Subtitle Translation, *The Longest Day in Chang'an*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Chinese television drama industry has experienced rapid development, with many outstanding domestic TV series seizing opportunities for international broadcast. The web series *The Longest Day in Chang'an* (《长安十二时辰》), which premiered on June 27, 2019, not only received critical acclaim in China but also garnered positive reviews in overseas markets. Adapted from the novel of the same name by author Ma Boyong (马伯庸), the series tells a story of anti-terrorism events occurring within a single day in Chang'an during the Shang Yuan Festival (also called Lantern Festival). After airing for just three days, the series achieved an audience rating score of 8.6 out of 10 on Douban, which is an online platform and website in China for readers and audiences to make comments on the books, movies, and TV series, etc. In early July 2019, it became available for paid viewing on major international platforms such as VIKI, Amazon, and YouTube in multiple languages.

* **Correspondence:** Shilong Tao, Email: taoshilong@hnu.edu.cn
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Upon its release, *The Longest Day in Chang'an* sparked a multidimensional debate among viewers. Scholars analyzed it from various perspectives such as narrative techniques, especially on its time narrative (Tang, 2019; Xu and Chen, 2019; Cao and Bian, 2020); space and power structures in the TV series (Zhang, 2020); cultural elements (You, 2020; Sun, 2020); and historical writings from the novel to the TV series (Yang, 2020; Wang, 2021), etc. More interestingly, some food enthusiasts focused on the traditional delicacies presented in the series, such as “fire crystal persimmons”, “water basin mutton”, and “Hu cakes”; others, intrigued by the frequent depiction of chewing mint leaves in the series, explored the philosophy of wellness based on the twelve hours, as exemplified by Yang Gang’s “The Health Secrets Hidden” in *The Longest Day in Chang'an* (2019).

The translation is an indispensable part of the series’ journey to international markets. Currently, there is a keen interest among netizens in the “retro” timing method and dialogue translations of the series. An unofficial translation of “Chang Ge Xing” (《长歌行》) has become known as a “divine translation” due to its accessibility and popularity among netizens. However, attention to the series’ translation has mainly been from an appreciation perspective, with rare scholars yet interpreting it from a translation theory viewpoint. Therefore, this study attempts to reinterpret the Chinese-to-English translation strategies of the subtitles in *The Longest Day in Chang'an* (Available at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcHRE_huWMAwn-5xeW8ol4EfZ5vMqyn6l) from the perspectives of domestication and foreignization.

DOMESTICATION AND FOREIGNIZATION

Domestication and foreignization are common translation methods and represent a pair of contrasting concepts. In 1813, the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, in *On the Different Methods of Translating*, noted two translation approaches: one bringing the reader closer to the author, and the other bringing the author closer to the reader (Schleiermacher, 2012). These author- and reader-centric translation methods proposed by Schleiermacher significantly influenced the field of translation. The renowned American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (1995), in his book *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, introduced the concepts of domestication and foreignization. Venuti views domestication as adopting an ethnocentric approach, aligning the foreign text with the cultural values of the target language, as well as bringing the original author into the culture of the target language. In contrast, foreignization involves the translator embracing the language and culture of the foreign text, as well as immersing the reader in a foreign context.

Generally, domestication is the strategy of localizing the source language by transforming the original content into a format easily understandable and acceptable to the target language audience, reducing the foreignness of the original text. Foreignization, on the other hand, involves the translator remaining faithful to the source language’s expression and retaining the original text’s foreignness. Historically, the debate between domestication and foreignization was polarized. However, with increasing demands for translation quality and deeper theoretical research, it is recognized that these approaches

are not entirely oppositional but rather essential and complementary. In the translation process, an organic combination of domestication and foreignization should be pursued, favoring foreignization when possible and opting for domestication when necessary, as they are dialectically interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Li, 2004). As for subtitle translation, various strategies such as deduction and domestication can be applied into translation due to the features of subtitling in time-space constraints, informative function, and cultural factors (Li, 2001). Yang (2011) believes that “domestication” is the most widely used strategy in film and television translation, as its focus is on the readers, the content in the screen can be more easily accepted by the audience and can effectively handle cultural factors from different countries.

SUBTITLE TRANSLATION OF THE LONGEST DAY IN CHANG’AN

The Translation of Ancient Chinese Poems

This analysis explores the translation of two poems within *The Longest Day in Chang’an*, starting with Li Bai’s “Qing Ping Yue · Jin Ting Chun Zhou” (《清平乐·禁庭春昼》).

《清平乐·禁庭春昼》

李白

禁庭春昼，莺羽披新绣。

百草巧求花下斗，只赌珠玑满斗。

日晚却理残妆，御前闲舞霓裳。

谁道腰肢窈窕，折旋笑得君王。

Qing Ping Yue·Jin Ting Chun Zhou

Li Bai

Here in forbidden palace, there is absorbing spring scene,

lovely tune nightingales with new feathers.

The hostess racks brain for flowers-gathering,

and then, play a grass game for whose is most robust,

which she playing high with some fearless.

She dresses up strikingly at night for pleasing the Emperor,

by singing and dancing joyously.

Graceful and remarkable dance,

revealing her figure’s gentleness and goodness,

has been appreciated by the Emperor,
who is overwhelmed by her beauty and dance, guffawing.

This poem, depicted from the perspective of the Emperor's beloved concubine Yang Yuhuan (杨玉环), illustrates a night she spends with the Emperor Xuanzong (唐玄宗), capturing the essence of spring within the imperial court. It speaks of orioles in new plumage, a game of betting with jewels under the flowers, and ends with Yang dancing before the Emperor, whose amusement turns to joy at her grace.

The English translation offers a scenic view of the forbidden palace in spring, emphasizing the high stakes of the games played and the elegance of the nightly entertainment that delights the Emperor. This adaptation shifts from the original first-person narrative, likely due to the anticipation that foreign audiences might not be familiar with Yang, hence the use of "she" to universalize the subject. This strategy of domestication simplifies cultural references such as "playing a grass game" to "flowers-gathering", making the poem's imagery more accessible.

Furthermore, popular unofficial translations heavily utilize domestication, translating phrases into easily digestible English while maintaining the essence of the original. For instance, "All night, she has to doll up herself" and "Her dance is graceful and beautiful. And the Emperor extremely pleased with it" illustrate a simplified, third-person perspective that caters to international audiences, though they might not fully capture the intricacies of Yang's emotional state or context.

Additionally, the poem "Chang Ge Xing" of Li Bi (李泌, 722-789) is examined, highlighting "天覆吾, 地载吾, 天地生吾有意无?" that have received acclaim for their simplicity and immediate understandability of English version online: "The sky is above me and the land is below me, why am I born in this world?" This translation, praised for its straightforwardness, demonstrating the effectiveness of domestication in bridging cultural and linguistic gaps, as well as in making profound philosophical inquiries accessible at a glance.

In a word, the use of "she" in the poem translation of Li Bai's "Qing Ping Yue · Jin Ting Chun Zhou" serves as a domestication strategy, making the poems more relatable to global audiences by attributing actions and emotions to a familiar subject. The simplification of cultural activities and expressions ("flowers-gathering" and the emotional portrayal of the imperial concubine Yang) showcases the role of domestication in making specific cultural references universally understandable. Unofficial translations further embody domestication, prioritizing accessibility and relativity over literal fidelity to the source text. This approach, while broadening audience engagement, may sacrifice the depth of cultural context and nuanced expression found in the original. The same translation strategy has been employed in the translation of Li Bi's "Chang Ge Xing" which exemplifies the power of domestication to convey deep philosophical questions in simple and relatable terms, illustrating its potential to foster cross-cultural understanding.

The Translation of Cultural Terms

The narrative setting of the series is situated during the Tang dynasty's Tianbao era (天宝年间). The "Fang-Shi" system (坊市制), a traditional Chinese urban planning and market management system, distinguished "Fang" (坊, residential areas) from "Shi" (市, commercial districts) (Feng and Huang, 2019). In contemporary terms, both concepts might be broadly interpreted as "streets" or "districts". Accordingly, various "Fang" mentioned in the series, such as "Huai Yuan Fang" (怀远坊) and "Yi Ning Fang" (义宁坊), are universally translated as "street" to ensure clarity for the audiences. "Jing'an Si" (靖安司), a fictional security agency within the series, is translated as "Peacekeeping Force" and "Bu Liang Shuai" (不良帅), denoting a specific role akin to a constable tasked with investigation and arrest, and it is creatively rendered using the domestication strategy as a combination of "sleuth" and "hound", vividly conveying the concept. "Lü Ben Jun" (旅贲军), another fictional entity depicted as part of the imperial guard under the direct management of the Crown Prince (太子), is translated as "Royal Escort" to facilitate comprehension among international viewers.

Table 1. Translation of Cultural Terms

Original terms	Meanings	English versions
Guang De Fang (光德坊)	A fictional location or district in Chang'an, the capital city during the Tang Dynasty. "Fang" refers to a neighborhood or district within ancient Chinese cities.	Guangde Street
Jing'an Si (靖安司)	A fictional government agency or bureau in the series, responsible for maintaining peace and security within the city. Its name suggests a role similar to that of a police or security department.	Peacekeeper Corps
Bu Liang Shuai (不良帅)	Literally translates to "Not Good Marshal" or "Bad Marshal", likely a fictional title for a character who may have a questionable reputation or unconventional methods.	Captain of Sleuth-hound
Lü Ben Jun (旅贲军)	A fictional military unit or guard, possibly under the direct command of the royal family or a high-ranking official. The name suggests a role akin to a special or elite force.	The Royal Escort
Li Bu (吏部)	The Ministry of Personnel in ancient China, responsible for the appointment, promotion, transfer, and demotion of civil officials. It	Ministry of Personnel

	played a crucial role in the imperial bureaucratic system	
Hu Bu (户部)	The Ministry of Revenue in ancient China, in charge of taxation, state revenue, and population census. It was one of the central government's six ministries.	National Treasury
Shang Yuan Jie (上元节)	Refers to the Lantern Festival, which falls on the 15th day of the first lunar month, marking the end of Chinese New Year celebrations. It is celebrated with lantern displays, lion dances, and eating tangyuan (sweet glutinous rice balls).	Lantern Festival

These original terms bear specific meanings and cultural significance within the context of the series and the historical period it represents. The translation of government departments such as the “Li Bu” (吏部) and “Hu Bu” (户部) requires a clear understanding of their functions in ancient China. “Li Bu”, responsible for the appointment and transfer of civil officials, akin to today’s Organization Department of the Chinese Communist Party, is translated as “Ministry of Personnel”. “Hu Bu”, overseeing household registration and financial management, comparable to today’s Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ministry of Finance, is translated as “National Treasury”. The “Shang Yuan Festival” is rendered as “Lantern Festival”, enabling overseas audiences to relate it to the modern-day Lantern Festival in China.

The translation of historical and cultural terms employs a domestication strategy, simplifying complex ancient systems and roles for easily understanding. “Fang” and “Shi” are effectively translated as “street”, providing a straightforward interpretation of the Tang dynasty’s urban structure. In a same way, the use of familiar terms such as “Peacekeeping Force” for “Jing’an Si” and “Royal Escort” for “Lü Bing Jun” bridges the gap between the fictional elements of the series and the contemporary understanding of similar roles and institutions. Likely, the translation of official departments like “Li Bu” and “Hu Bu” into “Ministry of Personnel” and “National Treasury”, respectively, reflects an effort to clarify their historical functions within a modern governmental framework. Besides, translating “Shang Yuan Festival” as “Lantern Festival” leverages an existing cultural reference point, enhancing international viewers’ connection to the narrative by linking it to a well-known Chinese festival.

These translations showcase the careful consideration of cultural specificity and the global audience’s interpretative ease, employing domestication to make the web series’ rich historical and cultural context accessible and engaging for viewers worldwide.

The Translation of Episode Titles

The series, consisting of 48 episodes, features Chinese titles that succinctly summarize the plot of each episode, maintaining a uniform word count across all episode titles. However, the English translations of these titles for the international version diverge significantly from their original counterparts.

Table 2. Translation of Episode Titles

Episodes	Chines Titles	English Versions
Episode 1	狼卫入城长安暗流涌动	Time of Great Waste
Episode 2	怀远坊生异张小敬追狼	The Sun at Its Highest
Episode 3	何监失老友林相诛人心	Yin and Yang Intertwined
Episode 4	靖安司移权何监别长安	High Noon
Episode 5	李必不惧问责拜会林相	Noon Time
Episode 6	张小敬为线索忍痛断指	Middle of the Day
Episode 7	李必相府博弈孤注一掷	Lost of Eyesight
Episode 8	张小敬独闯狼窝遭偷袭	Sun Begins to Fall
Episode 9	李必疑心徐宾出言试探	Dimming of the Sun
Episode 10	檀棋识破崔器谎报战况	Sun at the West
Episode 11	太子身处危局心系黎民	Reflection of the Sun
Episode 12	李必关押徐宾杀鸡儆猴	Sun Begins Setting
Episode 13	奸滑元载贪功一石二鸟	The Formation of Everything
Episode 14	张小敬顺藤摸瓜查墨料	The Darkness
Episode 15	徐宾造纸释拳拳赤子心	Supper
Episode 16	张小敬生死不明人心悬	Rascality
Episode 17	崔器异心张小敬陷囹圄	Ripe Time
Episode 18	勇檀棋女装入虎穴救人	The Sun has Rested
Episode 19	郭利仕相助张小敬脱险	Sun Sunk
Episode 20	张小敬檀棋义宁坊寻狼	Dimming of Everything

This discrepancy is apparent in the translation of the first 20 episodes, where the original titles, focused on the storyline, provide a concise abstraction of the episode's content, allowing audiences to grasp the main plots through the title alone—a common practice in TV series naming. In translating these titles, translators have opted to align with the series' overarching theme, *The Longest Day in Chang'an*, by following a temporal thread. This choice reflects the series' title “长安十二时辰”, translated as *The Longest Day in Chang'an*, indicating the story unfolds over 24 hours in Chang'an, with “the longest day” representing this full-day narrative.

The English titles primarily adopt a chronological naming scheme, yet the translators do not strictly convert the 24-hour period into specific times, such as “at seven O’clock” or “7 a.m”. Instead, they draw on the sun’s position, closely tying to the time announcements made by the astronomer Pang Ling (庞灵, a role in the series). For instance, the first episode, set during the time “Si Zheng” (巳正) and interpreted as “time of great waste”, is translated to reflect this phase, showcasing a strategy of foreignization that preserves the cultural mystique of the original. The second episode, occurring at “Wu Chu” (午初), signifies “the sun at its highest”, capturing the peak of Yang (阳) energy, while the third episode’s timing, “Wu Zheng” (午正), indicating the interplay of Yin (阴) and Yang, is translated as “Yin and Yang intertwined”, further employing a transliteration to maintain the cultural essence in translation.

In the original novel *The Longest Day in Chang’an* by Ma Boyong, the storyline unfolds around the concept of time. The narrative is structured around time, with 24 chapters each recounting the events of one hour, named after the twelve Earthly Branches with “Chu” (初), and “Zheng” (正) to denote the beginning and midpoint of each period. These twelve Earthly Branches correspond to different times and hold specific meanings, establishing a temporal framework for the story. The translation of episode titles from Chinese to English shows a deliberate shift from a plot-focused approach to one emphasizing the series’ temporal setting. The use of temporal cues rather than direct time references in English titles connects to traditional Chinese methods of timekeeping, preserving the historical and cultural context.

Besides, the titles “time of great waste”, “the sun at its highest”, and “yin and yang intertwined” reflect a foreignization approach, opting to keep the original cultural references intact for the international audiences. This strategy enriches the viewing experience by offering insights into Chinese cultural and philosophical concepts through the episode titles, enhancing the series’ authenticity and depth for global viewers. The translation of episode titles in *The Longest Day in Chang’an* illustrates a thoughtful balance between maintaining the cultural integrity of the original material and adapting it for international audiences, highlighting the translators’ role in bridging cultural divides.

Table 3. Twelve Traditional Chinese Shi Chen (Hours)

Shi Chen (Hours)	Time	Meanings
Zi Shi (子时)	11:00 PM to 1:00 AM	Midnight: The middle of the night, a time of deep silence and considered the transition point between days.
Chou Shi (丑时)	1:00 AM to 3:00 AM	Cockcrow: The early morning when roosters begin to crow, signaling the start of a new day
Yin Shi (寅时)	3:00 AM to 5:00 AM	Dawn: The time when the sun rises above the horizon, marking the beginning of daylight.

Mao Shi (卯时)	5:00 AM to 7:00 AM	Sunrise: The moment the sun appears, bringing light to the day.
Chen Shi (辰时)	7:00 AM to 9:00 AM	Breakfast Time: The ancient time for the first meal of the day.
Si Shi (巳时)	9:00 AM to 11:00 AM	Mid-Morning: Approaching midday, a period before the sun reaches its zenith.
Wu Shi (午时)	11:00 AM to 1:00 PM	Noon: When the sun is at its highest point in the sky.
Wei Shi (未时)	1:00 PM to 3:00 PM	Afternoon: The period when the sun begins to descend from its peak.
Shen Shi (申时)	3:00 PM to 5:00 PM	Dinner Time: The time in the evening designated for the last meal of the day.
You Shi (酉时)	5:00 PM to 7:00 PM	Sunset: When the sun sets below the horizon, marking the end of the day.
Xu Shi (戌时)	7:00 PM to 9:00 PM	Dusk: The time just after sunset when the sky turns a deep yellow, transitioning into night
Hai Shi (亥时)	9:00 PM to 11:00 PM	End of Day: The time when daily activities cease, and people settle for the night.

The twelve traditional Chinese hours, or “Shi Chen”, are part of an ancient system used for timekeeping in China. Each hour corresponds to a two-hour period in the modern 24-hour day. Here is how the twelve hours align with contemporary times. (See Table 3) These hours were not just time markers. They also hold astrological and cosmological significance, influencing daily activities, agricultural practices, and even governmental affairs in ancient China.

Tables 2 and Table 3 indicate that the translation of the series’ episode titles primarily follows the timeline of the twelve traditional Chinese hours, drawing reference from the original chapter titles of the novel. However, the series spanning a total of 48 episodes, and some episodes involve flashbacks or detailed elaboration, making the episodes do not completely correspond to the twelve Shi Chen. As shown in Table 3, although there is just one Shi Chen (two hours) between “Wei Shi” (the sun begins to descend from its peak) and “Shen Shi” (the time in the evening designated for the last meal of the day), the series dedicates a whole eight episodes to this interval, that is from “Sun begins to fall” to “Supper” (Episodes 8 to 15, see table 2). In the examples like those, translators employ synonyms to avoid repetitive expressions.

The temporal framework not only serves as a narrative device but also deeply intertwines with traditional Chinese concepts of time and cosmology. The Earthly Branches, integral to Chinese astrology and the lunisolar calendar, are used here to navigate the plot’s progression, enriching the story with a layer of cultural significance. Through this methodical organization, Ma Boyong invites readers to experience a day in the Tang

dynasty, encapsulating the essence of the era and its societal dynamics, while embedding the narrative within the broader tapestry of Chinese cultural and historical traditions.

CONCLUSION

Set in the Tang dynasty, *The Longest Day in Chang'an* naturally incorporates the classical Chinese in its dialogue, underscoring the crucial role of translation in its international dissemination. Balancing the preservation of the source's ancient charm and ensuring comprehensibility for overseas audiences requires translators to find a middle ground. Given the instantaneous and annotation-free nature of subtitle translations, there is a tendency towards domestication strategies to convey the meaning of original text succinctly and straightforwardly, without compromising the viewing experience. However, where direct domestication could strip away the original's nuances, a foreignization strategy is employed.

In the English translation of *The Longest Day in Chang'an*, especially in the translation of ancient Chinese poems, cultural terms, and episode titles, translators predominantly adopt a strategy of domestication supplemented by foreignization, allowing both to function in concert. This approach not only makes the series accessible to a global audience but also preserves its rich cultural essence, showcasing the translators' adeptness in navigating between the original context and the target language's norms. These translations illuminate the nuanced application of domestication and foreignization, highlighting the balance between fidelity to the source material and the need for cultural adaptability in reaching global audiences. Through this balanced use of domestication and foreignization, the translation work on *The Longest Day in Chang'an* serves as a bridge, enabling international viewers to experience and appreciate the depth and charm of Chinese historical and cultural heritage.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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