Empresses adapted to impress: Examining adaptation and translation in the TV Series *Empresses in the Palace*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the interrelation between adaptation and translation and the impact of this interrelation on the communication of cultural content in audiovisual products. The paper focuses on the case of the American adaptation *Empresses in the Palace*, which is based on the Chinese TV series *The Legend of Zhen Huan*. *Empresses in the Palace* was subtitled from Chinese into English and it was broadcast on US Netflix. The study discusses the adaptation changes that occur between the Chinese and the American version and the subtitling strategies used to render culture-specific references (CSRs). The American adaptation is a considerably edited version of the Chinese series; yet it is overloaded with cultural information which may be inaccessible to an English-speaking audience. The analysis shows that the condensation involved in the American adaptation affects the translation of CSRs and has potential implications for the circulation of cultural products in a digital era.

KEYWORDS: adaptation, audiovisual translation, culture-specific references, subtitling

1. Introduction

Audiovisual products play a crucial part in the distribution of cultural products due to the fact that their potential can be more fully realized with the assistance of media which have a wider coverage than traditional literary translation (Pérez-González 2014). When the need for translation arises, the norm is for flows in cultural production to move from dominant cultures to comparatively minor ones. This perhaps explains the trend in Translation Studies to be overly focused on the West (Hermans 2006; Jacquemond and Selim 2015). As a result, current knowledge about translation is still largely based on western works (Tymoczko 2003). As a counterforce to this norm, translating the "other" cultural product into English has the potential to promote the foreign culture to the English-speaking world. This activity can also help enrich the originally Eurocentric purview of Translation Studies and create a counter-

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flow of culture-specific information from minor cultures to dominant ones. Contributing to this counter-flow, countries which sit in the "other" circle proactively invest in translation projects with the aim of cultural exportation.

In the context of Audiovisual Translation (AVT), the usual way of distributing content in media follows a linear, top-down stream, and this is often an elite or power-controlled flow of media content (McNair 2006). Nowadays audience-oriented translation modes like fansubbing also intervene with media content. As Jenkins (2008) puts it, there is now an era of convergence where cultures meet through the circulation of media, and a highly visible trend is that of active audience participation. This bottom-up approach to cultural consumption deconstructs the power-controlled distribution flow (Li 2009) and at the same time enriches the media market. However, this is not to say that bottom-up convergence is equally fast or more consequential than traditional media distribution. Traditional media still are "able to exercise a certain degree of political and ideological control over their audience" (Pérez-González 2014:77). Under these circumstances, the power-controlled media distribution could pave the way for exporting products from a minor culture. To this end, attention needs to be paid to actions of cultural translation as well, so that information surrounding the exported culture can be accurately conveyed to the target culture. As will be argued later in more detail, this was a rather overlooked aspect in adapting the Chinese TV series for an American audience.

The discussion will now elaborate on complex settings in the mediation of cultural products in the context of China. In terms of the top-down power control, there has been a "Culture Going Out national policy" ("文化走出去"战略"), which encourages the promotion of Chinese cultural products to foreign markets to expand the impact of Chinese culture. Such policies improve the competitiveness of cultural industries on a global scale and shape the image of China as a major "cultural power" (Yang 2009:103). One of the important investment areas is the Chinese audiovisual market. Audiovisual products which celebrate Chinese culture reinforce its competitiveness in the global cultural market. The significance of marketing is emphasised in that there should be "a deeper understanding of our own culture resources and the demand from target foreign audience of content that they can take an interest in, focus on

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and empathize with"[1] (the 6th Plenum of 17th CPC Central Committee 2011; our translation). That is to say, attention is drawn to a proactive market-oriented industrial system and to an understanding of two different cultural and ideological settings and varied audience expectations. It is notable that this "going out" movement simultaneously aims at capitalizing on and reinforcing existing interest in the cultural image of China.

The TV series examined in this paper is an example of this cultural move. *The Legend of Zhen Huan* (2011) is a TV adaptation of the online Chinese fictional novel of the same name by Liu Lianzi (dramanice n.d.). *The Legend of Zhen Huan* was broadcast on Chinese provincial satellite TV channels and consisted of 76 episodes, each 45 minutes long. The Chinese TV series soon gained sweeping popularity and was broadcast in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Asian countries such as Japan and Korea, as well as in the USA and Canada. *The Legend of Zhen Huan* was adapted and subtitled in English under the name *Empresses in the Palace* (2015). The American adaptation consists of 6 episodes, each 90 minutes long. *Empresses in the Palace* was broadcast on US Netflix and marked the collaboration between the online streaming provider and LeTV, one of China's main online platforms for films and TV series (Jaafar 2015).

It can be argued that this Chinese-American collaboration may have changed the cultural status of the Chinese TV series. In other words, although the TV series previously enjoyed a cultural status among mainly Chinese viewers, its status has admittedly taken on a more global dimension since the American adaptation reached a more international audience through Netflix. To use Wayne's categorization of audiovisual products based on their intended market (2002:41), *The Legend of Zhen Huan* could be characterized as an *embedded* audiovisual product, as it was primarily pitched for the national market, i.e. the Chinese-speaking market. Nevertheless, the American adaptation, i.e. *Empresses in the Palace*, was targeted at a much broader audience through its translation and broadcast on Netflix. The cultural material of the series could be particularly appealing to English-speaking audiences interested in Asian cultures. Moreover, the marketing and financial resources invested in

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[1] "深入挖掘民族文化资源，认真研究国外受众消费需求的关注点、兴趣点、共鸣点，结合不同地区的人文特点，因地制宜地开发适销对路的文化产品，提供易于接受的文化服务。" （2011 年十一届六中全会《关于深化文化体制改革推动社会主义文化大发展大繁荣若干重大问题的决定》节选）

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Empresses in the Palace supported such an international outreach (see sub-section 2.2.). The adaptation process therefore seems to have shifted the cultural orientation of the series. *Empresses in the Palace* can thus be considered as tending towards Wayne's *disembedded* audiovisual products (Wayne 2002:42): the TV series had the cultural potential and the budgets to gain access to the American audiovisual market.

As a result, the case of *Empresses in the Palace* is particularly interesting because of its sociocultural context of creation and transmission. It is worth noting that the English translation of the Chinese TV series has been the topic of two (to our knowledge) journal articles in Chinese (Liu and Zhang 2017; Xianghua 2017). Although they both mention briefly that the series presented various challenges in respect of translating the cultural content, they do not offer any systematic analysis of the above-mentioned challenges, while one of them attempts to categorize the translating strategies into domesticating and foreignizing approaches (Liu and Zhang 2017). Nevertheless, the implications arising from the interplay between the adaptation of the series and the Chinese-to-English translation seem to have escaped the relevant literature so far.

These implications are worthy of examination as they give an insight into the ways in which the cultural content was treated in both the intrasemiotic condensation of the narration and the interlingual subtitling of the adaptation. Section 2 discusses the affinities between translation and adaptation as processes and as products. Section 3 moves on to examine the extensive degree of condensation in the American adaptation. As already mentioned, *Empresses in the Palace* underwent a severe distillation of episodes, i.e. from 76 episodes of 45 minutes each into 6 episodes of 90 minutes each. This drastic condensing of the adaptation had certain consequences for the translation of the series as well. Section 4 examines these consequences in relation to the translation of culture-specific references (CSRs) from Chinese into English. As previously noted, Chinese audiovisual products serve a promotional function in respect to the local culture. This can be linguistically manifested through the deployment of CSRs within the audiovisual text. Examining the adaptation of the series in conjunction with the translation of CSRs in the subtitled version of *Empresses in the Palace* can shed light on the ways in which these two processes impact on the communication of culture-specific content. Section 5 concludes the discussion by summarizing the findings of the study and by putting forward suggestions for further research in the area of cultural representation in AVT.

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The following section begins with an overview of the main theoretical trends in Adaptation Studies. This will help highlight the similarities between translation and adaptation and will also set the scene for the discussion of these two aspects in *Empresses in the Palace*. In this way, the data analysis later in the paper will illustrate how the two processes converge (or not) to communicate the cultural content.

2. Adaptation and translation: bridging the gap

According to theorists in Translation Studies and Adaptation Studies (Aragay 2005; Cattrysse 1992; Stam 2005; Venuti 2007), adaptation and translation have much in common, since both entail an act of communication between languages, media and audiences. Adaptation-related theories have placed emphasis on the elements that need to be maintained in an adaptation (Chatman 1978; McFarlane 1996). As adaptation theories evolve, there has been a shift onto a sociological and hermeneutic perspective of adaptation. Hutcheon (2013:10) remarks that, although the plot has traditionally been assumed to be the transferrable core, this transfer involves changes across media, genres and frames, which actually implies that the transferred story is no longer the same as in the source material. In other words, as soon as the medium or the frame of reference changes, the final product changes as well and invites a different engagement mode on the audience's part. An element of creative transposition is at the centre of Hutcheon's (2013) definition of adaptation, as she suggests that adaptations affirm their value through reinterpreting the source material and assigning new messages to it.

In a similar vein, Venuti (2007) argues that adaptations enrich the source material by providing a new spectrum of re-readings and reinterpretations. Leitch (2008) underlines the importance of the contemporary context in which adaptations are situated. Adaptations introduce new reading strategies through which views of social reality may be reinterpreted and re-stabilized. Leitch (2008:117) stresses that the reinterpretation incited by adaptations largely depends on "the institutional contexts within which a given adaptation, and adaptations in general, are made available to [the audience] and identified as such" (Leitch 2008:117). Adaptations are similar to retranslations in this respect, given that both reflect the changing sociocultural values of the receiving context (Gambier 1994; Venuti 2004).

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Moreover, Leitch (2008) remarks that an adaptation encourages audiences to reflect on the messages conveyed by the adapted material and test their assumptions against those communicated by the adaptation. The audience's role in adaptations is similarly active as in translations. According to Carroll (2009), audiences appropriate the meaning communicated by the adaptation through what she calls *retrospectatorship*, i.e. "a cultural practice of subversive consumption whereby a seemingly passive spectatorship actively transforms what it consumes" (Carroll 2009:44). Such transformation can be traced in audiences' reception of the adaptation, often evident in social networking fora discussing the source material and its remediations. In this environment of convergence culture (Jenkins 2008), the reception of adaptations is thus established as an interactive exchange (Corrigan 2014). As argued in section 1, a similar engagement with cultural content can been traced in AVT (Pérez-González 2014; Remael, Orero and Carroll 2011).

It can be seen then that adaptation theories have now developed to encompass processes which involve a creative and sociocultural orientation. These processes may not involve a transition between semiotic systems, as is the case in the TV series examined in this paper. Adaptation is a broad concept which covers several aspects of the translational process. Vandal-Sirois and Bastin (2012) argue that adaptation can be posited as functional translation in that it addresses a communication situation and caters for the needs of the target audience and culture. The process of adaptation also involves an element of creativity whereby the message of a source material is projected and reinterpreted onto a different medium and platform (Perdikaki forthcoming). In the case of *Empresses in the Palace*, the narrative of the Chinese TV series underwent a certain degree of abridgement in the American version. This abridgement can be viewed as a form of adaptation and was motivated by certain creative decisions in the production process. Hence, *Empresses in the Palace* is considered to be an adaptation of the Chinese TV series which was creatively and functionally repurposed to reach the target audience.

The discussion so far suggests that the affinities between translation and adaptation can lead to fruitful synergies when both processes are at work, as happens in *Empresses in the Palace*. As previously noted, the American adaptation was a joint product of Netflix and LeTV. In fact, this project was the first one in LeTV's plan to roll-out a cloud-based platform of Chinese and English language content, initially focusing on US audiences and later extending

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to European territory as well (Jaafar 2015). At the same time, Netflix aimed to reach out to Chinese audiences and "make a big push into the Chinese market" (Olin 2015). As a result, the cultural and financial interests at play created new opportunities for a widespread distribution of new narratives.

Sub-section 2.1 discusses the changes that have taken place between *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and *Empresses in the Palace* (i.e. *adaptation shifts*) by means of a model which looks into the narratives in the two media (Perdikaki forthcoming). In sub-section 2.2, the adaptation shifts are interpreted by means of paratexts that relate to the Chinese TV series and the American adaptation.

2.1 Identifying the adaptation shifts

Empresses in the Palace tells the story of Zhen Huan, who is a concubine at the palace of Emperor Yongzheng during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Zhen Huan has to deal with plots and schemes by other concubines who fight over their place as the Emperor's wife. As already pointed out, the American adaptation consists of only 6 episodes as opposed to the 76 episodes of the Chinese version. This severe condensation has a significant impact on the overall plot structure.

Many sub-plots involving minor (i.e. less central) characters are omitted, and some of those less central characters are also omitted. The plot is therefore simplified in the adaptation due to the deletion of these sub-plots. It is worth noting that the translation often appears to be tailored to the plot changes imposed by the adaptation process, as happens in the following example:

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Example (1)   ST: 皇上真的下旨杀了他们

BT: His majesty gave order to kill them

TT: She is to take her own life by His Majesty's decree.

In the above example, the pronoun "them" refers to minor characters who have been edited out in the American adaptation. The character referred to as "she" has been maintained and is a relatively important character in *Empresses in the Palace*. Therefore, viewers are familiar with that character, who also appears in scenes adjacent to the one corresponding to this subtitle. As can be seen in example (1), the English subtitle has been changed so that it only refers to the character included in the adaptation, thus following the plot changes.

Along with the plot simplification described above, another plot change can be noted. The plot of the American adaptation focuses primarily on the protagonist, Zhen Huan, her efforts to rise to the throne and the obstacles thrown at her in the process. Conspiracy, betrayal and scheming are salient plot characteristics, emphasised in both the overall series and in the promotional trailer (discussed in 2.2). As a result, the plot is amplified in regard to Zhen Huan's story.

These two plot patterns seem to create a double effect of plot simplification-amplification. On the one hand, many sub-plots are omitted, which leads to an overall simplification of the plot; on the other hand, the focus is placed on one concubine, namely Zhen Huan, and thus her story plot is amplified. This, ironically, contradicts the change implied in the series title; the change from *The Legend of Zhen Huan* (in the Chinese version) to *Empresses in the Palace* (in the American adaptation) suggests a dilution in emphasis in that the story encompasses all the concubines in the palace. In other words, the title of the Chinese TV series closes in on one empress, namely Zhen Huan, whereas the English title suggests that the TV series touches upon the stories of many empresses, one among whom is Zhen Huan. Nevertheless, as already argued, this does not seem to be the case in the adaptation as such. On the contrary, Zhen Huan seems to be the protagonist in the American adaptation, although her name is not part of the series title.

It follows then that adaptation shifts in plot structure and characterisation appear to be inter-dependent. As already mentioned, the simplification of the plot is linked with the omission of

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certain minor characters. On the other hand, the amplification of the plot is interconnected with the amplification of the main character, Zhen Huan, in this case. Another adaptation shift that relates to characterisation patterns seems to be the emphasis on the characters' emotional reactions. This can be attributed to the condensing of episodes in the American adaptation. The frequent editing out of shots and scenes leads to an accumulation of instances where characters often exhibit exaggerated behaviours and emotional outbursts. This often results in a sense of incoherence in character portrayals and plot development alike (noted by viewers as well, as 2.2 illustrates). Put differently, the characters' reactions seem to occur without prior motivation which would justify their behaviours.

A similar lack of continuity seems to exist in plot development, that is, in the way in which one event leads to the next one. It needs to be noted that each episode of the American adaptation features added new introductory and concluding scenes (Qianwen 2013) which frame the narrative of the given episode in relation to the previous and the following episode respectively. These scenes do not exist in the Chinese version and aim at facilitating the audience's understanding of the unfolding events. It can be argued that these scenes may contribute to the supra-textual coherence of the adaptation as a whole. Nevertheless, the editing within each episode is not similarly conducive to the narrative coherence of the individual episode. This narrative incoherence can be juxtaposed with the intersemiotic incoherence often observed when blandly rendered subtitles are used to convey marked emotional reactions (further elaborated in section 4).

An aspect of historical Chinese culture which is highlighted in *Empresses in the Palace* is the temporal and spatial setting. The period style of the series is obvious in the *mise-en-scène* and the costumes in both the Chinese and the American version. Moreover, the above-mentioned added introductory and concluding scenes feature vivid colours and elements of the indigenous countryside. As a result, the Chinese landscape is amplified in the adaptation through the insertion of these scenes. These scenes represent instances of plot shifts, given that they contextualize the plot within the overall narrative. Therefore, it can be argued that adaptation shifts in plot and setting are interrelated. This seems to be another pattern of shift interrelation in the examined adaptation, a further one being the inter-dependence between plot and characterisation shifts discussed above.

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Sub-section 2.2 interprets the identified adaptation shifts discussed here with the aid of relevant paratexts. Drawing upon Genette (1997) and Gray (2010), paratexts (or paratextual material) are here defined as monomedial or multimedial texts which accompany a given product (audiovisual or otherwise) and which condition our experience of it.

2.2 Explaining the adaptation shifts

In this sub-section, the adaptation shifts outlined in 2.1 are interpreted against paratextual material of the Chinese and the American versions. The paratexts in question include the following:

- Extracts from three blogs on *Empresses in the Palace* and *The Legend of Zhen Huan*;
- Two reviews which compare the Chinese TV series with its American adaptation;
- Two articles which comment on the collaboration between the Chinese and the American broadcasting companies;
- An interview of the director of the Chinese TV series, where he discusses the adaptation as well as the concomitant translation difficulties; and
- The trailer of the American adaptation.

These paratexts contribute to interpreting the shifts observed in the adaptation against the sociocultural context of its production and reception. This is achieved by tapping into insights by agents involved in both ends of the creative process. Put differently, looking into the director's interview can give rise to how the series was approached from the production aspect. On the other hand, examining comments by viewers and reviewers can help draw some conclusions as to how the production decisions were received by the audience.

As already argued, the adaptation *Empresses in the Palace* marks the beginning of a potentially highly profitable collaboration between LeTV and international broadcast companies, one of which is Netflix. As Jaafar (2015) explains, LeTV planned to export audiovisual material to countries with a substantial Chinese diaspora and would move to further partnerships with leading content providers in the US, such as Sony and HBO. Netflix's chief content officer had a similar intention of branching out to the Chinese market, despite his concerns about the regulations and censorship encountered with Chinese policy-making bodies (Jaafar 2015).

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It follows then that the adaptation as a project involved both economic and cultural interests. The editing of the series was assigned to the American partners, according to the director of the Chinese version (yule.sohu 2015); he himself had a minor advisory role in the process. Given the absence of relevant paratexts commenting on the abridgement of the episodes, it can only be speculated that cutting the series down to so few episodes was time-saving and cost-effective for the final production, especially since this was a first attempt at a Chinese-American collaboration. The short length of the series also minimized the risk of viewers' dissatisfaction; in case the series did not prove to be popular (as happened eventually), it would only last for a few episodes. However, it is worth noting that the fact that each episode of the American adaptation lasts for 90 minutes may have magnified the narrative incoherence observed in the series overall. The fact that the adaptation consists of only 6 episodes is put forward as an incentive for American viewers to watch the series and thus have a glimpse at historical Chinese culture (heisui 2015). Nevertheless, the same 'privilege' serves as the basis for harsh criticism against the adaptation. According to chineseportal (2015), *Empresses in the Palace* "has flopped in North America" for two reasons predominantly:

1. The severe abridgement creates a lack of coherence to the story that discourages prospective viewers from watching it and
2. The often-inaccurate translation seems to baffle audiences.

The adaptation did not enjoy rapturous acclaim in the American context. This clashes with the reception of the Chinese version, which was praised for its communication of the Chinese history and culture and for its character portrayals (Chingu 2014; dramanice n.d.; Toh 2015).

In fact, viewers of the Chinese version appreciated the gradually built-up climax and denouement as well as the coming-of-age of the young protagonist. On the contrary, the characters in the American adaptation come across as overly emotional and erratic at times. As previously noted, this can be attributed to the editing of scenes and episodes. Nevertheless, another reason may be the expectations that were created in the promotional trailer of the series (xfrankx83 2015). In the trailer, due emphasis is placed on the plot aspects that are amplified in the overall story, i.e. treachery, conspiracy and manipulation, and the spotlight is once again cast on the main protagonist, Zhen Huan. A rapid succession of edited shots

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depicting the scheming against Zhen Huan is accompanied by a dramatic voice-over and an epic background music which matches the soundscape of Chinese period dramas. The popularity of the Chinese TV series is pronounced in the trailer as "the epic sensation that took China by storm" (xfrankx83 2015). The trailer also highlights the renowned acting careers and accolades of the Chinese cast.

According to Gray (2010) and Kernan (2004), trailers aim at attracting audiences through underscoring the product's unique features. This is obvious in this trailer which pitches the American adaptation to prospective viewers. It can be argued that the expectations set in the trailer are fulfilled in the sense that the plot and characters are as dramatized in the series as advertised in the trailer. Nonetheless, according to viewers' comments (chineseportal 2015; heisui 2015), the American version comes undone due to the sloppy editing and unwieldy translation. Even though the trailer manifests film-making techniques often encountered in Hollywood film trailers (e.g. finely edited sequences, imposing music and deep-voiced slowly-articulated narration), the series itself lacks in meticulousness and subtlety, as pointed out in viewers' comments.

In addition, the adaptation is advertised as a Chinese period drama which takes place during the Qing Dynasty period and is based on a "true story" (xfrankx83 2015). Although the novel on which the Chinese series was based is fictional, the protagonist is mapped onto a real-life person, namely the mother of Emperor Qianlong (Toh 2015). Therefore, there seems to be a strong sense of national and cultural identity in the TV series which is to be promoted to an international audiovisual market. This works together with the amplification of the setting in the adaptation (discussed in 2.1); the locales and the *mise-en-scène* add to the focus on the cultural content from an aesthetic point of view. The emphasis placed on the Chinese culture and landscape manifests the sociocultural interests embedded in the Chinese-American project. This is further corroborated by the fact that the American version is introduced by a brand new theme song which features traditional sounds of China. As the song introduces the credits of the series, Chinese ideograms appear onscreen, preparing the audience for their immersion into the time and place of the story-world.

As the above-mentioned discussion suggests, the adaptation of a Chinese series for an American audience can be particularly challenging when it fails to take into account

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intercultural considerations and medial conventions of the target context. One of the main criticisms against the adaptation was the overload of events and characters within its shrunken duration. Given the target audience's relative unfamiliarity with Chinese audiovisual products, the sharply edited version seemed to create plot gaps which could not be easily filled unless the series is re-watched. This uneasiness is possibly aggravated by the mystifying translation, as explained in the following section.

3. Culture-specific references (CSRs) and translation

Chiaro (2009:156) defines CSRs as "entities that are typical of one particular culture, […] and they can either be exclusively or predominantly visual, exclusively verbal or else both visual and verbal in nature". This definition is helpful in that it draws upon the interactive and inter-compensating relationship between images and words that is present in audiovisual texts. However, CSRs are not only "entities"; the contextualising language itself is also culture-specific due to its unique vocabulary, grammar and structures (Franco Aixelá 1996). The difficulty of translating CSRs can lead to "culture bumps" (Leppihalme 1997:3), as it may not always be possible to find equivalents in the target culture/language.

The translation strategies used to render CSRs can reflect whether the translation is oriented to the source culture or to the target culture. As regards CSRs in AVT, Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2007) propose a set of subtitling strategies which take into account the interlingual and intersemiotic aspects involved in subtitling. These strategies are based on Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/2002:127-137) and are namely the following: *loan*, *calque*, *explicitation*, *addition*, *substitution*, *transposition*, *lexical creation*, *compensation* and *omission* (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007:202-207). In general, *loan* and *calque* are source-culture-oriented, maintaining or literally translating the CSR respectively. The rest of the strategies usually aim at adapting the foreign term for the target audience, for example, by adding supplementary information thus aiding the target audience's comprehension (*explicitation*, *addition*) or by adapting the source-language CSR to an image familiar to the target audience (*substitution*, *transposition*, *lexical recreation*). Most of these strategies were identified in the English subtitles of *Empresses in the Palace* and are discussed in section 4.

In *Empresses in the Palace*, translation challenges firstly arise from the fictional setting of the TV series. To be more specific, the TV series is set in the palace in the Forbidden City, during

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the Qing Dynasty period. Due to this setting and to the fact that the dialogues keep to those of the source novel on which the TV series is based, the style comes across as primarily poetic; the characters tend to use Chinese idioms, culture-specific items and extracts of poems. It is worth noting that the novel, on which the TV series is based, was published in 2007. As in many modern productions of re-enactment and recreation of ancient times, the language used in the novel, and in the TV adaptation in this case, can be defined as pseudo-archaic, i.e. a modern creation of a linguistic form which cannot authentically represent the historical use but evokes the impression that it could have been part of the language of former times (Traxel 2012).

For the reasons outlined so far, it is reasonable to assume that the translation of the novel itself presents a number of difficulties. When it comes to the TV series, its translation needs to additionally comply with certain spatio-temporal constraints affecting subtitling (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007). When subtitling from Chinese into English, compliance with the character number per line is usually challenging due to the fact that the Chinese-to-English translation tends to take up more space compared to the English-to-Chinese direction (Pellatt, Liu and Chen 2014: 159). This arises as a result of the different graphological systems between Chinese and English. A simple example of the graphological differences between the two languages is the following. The name of an important female character in the series is "陵容" in Chinese but turns into "Lingrong" in English; the Chinese word consists of four characters, whereas the English one consists of eight characters.

The fact that subtitling entails a change from the oral to the written mode further adds to the challenges involved in subtitling from Chinese into English. Chinese is a compact language and the speech rate is higher than English. Relevant literature suggests that the ratio of Chinese characters to English words is approximately 1.3:1, meaning that every 1.3 Chinese characters are approximately translated as one English word (Li 2010). An example from the series can better illustrate this challenge. At the beginning of the second episode, Zhenhuan, the major female character, has a monologue of a total of 154 Chinese characters in 46 seconds. Following the 1.3:1 ratio, the monologue would require 118.5 words in the English translation. This exceeds the optimal rate of 140 words per minute for subtitle presentation (Williams 2009). Although subtitling inherently entails condensation to some extent, the Chinese-to-English translation in this case is all the more challenging due to the fact that the

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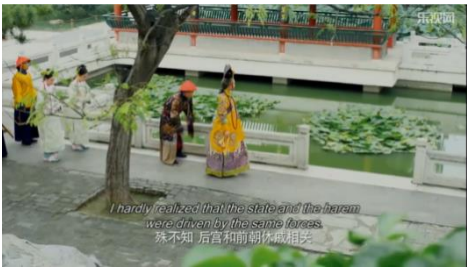
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subtitling constraints frequently clash with the information load of the utterances. As already mentioned, the poetic and culture-specific features may need more space to be explained which cannot be afforded in subtitling. As a result, the subtitles may involve considerable text reduction, which, however, affects the semantic content of the subtitled text. This seems to be the case in *Empresses in the Palace*, where some Chinese viewers found that "the flavour of Chinese language is lost" because of the text reduction (yule.sohu 2015; our translation).

The following section examines the subtitling strategies used for the translation of CSRs. It must be noted that the analysis focuses on two episodes of the American adaptation, i.e. episodes 2 and 3, in particular. These episodes were selected because they capture the core of the overall plot and because they offer a good variety of verbo-pictorial cultural references.

4. The translation of CSRs in *Empresses in the Palace*

As already mentioned, the setting of the TV series unavoidably features many culture-specific items. One such category consists in names of places and forms of address specific to the Chinese culture of the period. The main translation strategies adopted in this case are *transposition* and *loan*. In other words, source-culture CSRs are substituted by CSRs from another culture (i.e. transposition) or they are maintained unaltered in the subtitles (i.e. as loans). The table below illustrates some indicative examples:

Table 1: CSRs – names of places and forms of address

Example	Episode	Source Text	Literal Translation	Subtitle Text
(2)	2 [00:02:39]	殊不知后宫和前朝休戚相关	I hardly realized that **the back palace and the front court** are interwoven.	I hardly realized that **the state and the harem** were driven by the same forces.

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(3)	2 [00:18:49]	安答应	N/A	Second Attendant An
(4)	2 [00:19:02]	陵容	N/A	Lingrong

In example (2), the CSR "Hougong" means "back palace", which is the place where all the emperor's concubines live. This CSR is translated as "harem". The method used here is *transposition*, as there has been a substitution of "Hougong" with a CSR from a non-Chinese culture. However, the lexical item "harem" has a strong Muslim connotation (Collins Dictionary, n.d.), which may also reinforce western viewers' orientalism, something that in turn may not have a positive effect in authentic culture mediation. Therefore, it does not seem suitable for the Chinese context of the TV series. The translation of CSRs needs to take into account the audience's assumed knowledge as well as the fictional context of the audiovisual text (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007; Perdikaki 2014). In this case, although the audience will probably be familiar with the CSR "harem", this choice is incongruous with the visual setting of "Chineseness" accompanying the subtitle. If the literal translation were to be kept in the subtitle, the CSRs would have been retained without taking up additional space: as Table 1 above shows, the literal translation takes up 75 characters whereas the subtitle text is 78 characters long.

Examples (3) and (4) highlight another culture-specific aspect which may be problematic in the English subtitles, i.e. the address forms of the concubines. The name tradition for the concubines in the palace is quite complex: apart from their family name and their first name, concubines are also called by the name of their rank, which indicates their position in the concubine hierarchy, and by their honour name, which is the name given by the emperor.

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Following the sociocultural rules of politeness, different people address the same person differently according to their relative rank, position and closeness to that person. This is not clearly reflected in the subtitles, where two different address forms are used for the same person without providing any relevant explanation beforehand. This is the case in (3) and (4) in Table 2 above: "Second Attendant An" and "Lingrong" both refer to the same female character (as seen in the respective screenshots). The English audience may be baffled if they lack the relevant sociocultural knowledge. They may feel all the more confused given that there are many characters in the series and the different forms of address are often used interchangeably. This can result in the audience not comprehending the plot. Although it is possible that this confusion may be somewhat mitigated by the visuals accompanying the subtitles, a considerable degree of cognitive effort is still required.

Another aspect of CSRs is the use of idioms. The strategies of *explicitation* and *transposition* are also used in such cases: the translation explains the literal meaning of the idiom (examples (5) and (7) in Table 3 below) or replaces the idiom with an equivalent one in English (example (6)).

Table 3: CSRs – Idioms

Example	Episode	Source Text	Literal Translation	Subtitle Text
(5)	2 [00:18:04]	弓弦上的功夫	For the time as an arrow leaves its bow	All it requires is a length of bowstring.
(6)	2 [00:19:27]	兔子急了也会咬人	Even rabbits bite if disturbed	A baited cat grows as fierce as a lion.
(7)	3 [00:27:59]	白璧微瑕了	White jade with slight flaw	It would be as a slight flaw in pure white jade.

The examples above indicate that there is little consistency in the strategies used for the translation of CSRs. It is worth noting that there is rarely consistency in subtitled programmes as far as the translation of CSRs is concerned. The inconsistency in this case can be attributed

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to the speed with which subtitles are created and to the lack of quality assurance procedures during the translation. According to the end credits, the subtitling was undertaken as a joint work of companies and individuals, namely Beijing Tianzixing Cultural Development Co. Ltd., Technology Department of Beijing TV Art Centre, Zhang Jian, Sun Baojin, Zhu Liming, and Su Zhen. When we contacted some of the companies, we confirmed that they were involved in the production of only the Chinese subtitles and were not aware of the specifics of the English translation. No other information was provided in the closing credits and, therefore, we were unable to investigate further the process of producing the English subtitles. This suggests that the issue of transparency in such collaborative projects needs to be further explored.

From the above follows that the visibility of subtitlers and subtitling institutions needs to be improved and further researched. Although fansubbing in the Chinese context has received notable attention as amateur translation practice, there seems to be little research as regards professional translators and the translation process involved in such large-scale projects which are most likely to be collaborative. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Chinese subtitling started without institutional organization; in the early days of Chinese subtitling in the 1980s, "professional help" was sought from universities (Qian 2004). In the case of *Empresses in the Palace*, the collaborative nature of this subtitling project would require a high degree of project coordination among translators and efficient management for the consistency of style and content. Given the end translation product and the lack of transparency of the professional AVT industry in China, it can be inferred that there may have been a lack of effective communication between the translators. It is also likely that the absence of a style-guide in regard to the translation of CSRs can further account for such discrepancies in the employed translation strategies.

As mentioned in section 3, the language of the TV series follows a pseudo-archaic style. In order to mimic this style, the English translation uses less frequently-used words or archaic lexical items to create the pseudo-archaic feel. However, the word choices are not always in line with the original meaning and may even sound unnatural and grandiloquent. Table 4 below presents such examples:

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Table 4: The use of pseudo-archaic style

Example	Episode	Source Text	Literal Translation	Subtitle Text
(8)	2 [00:11:34]	废物	Useless thing	The wretch
(9)	3 [00:22:33]	怎么不杀了那个贱妇以此泄恨	Why not kill that bitch to let out the anger	Why not kill that wench to vent our hatred

In examples (8) and (9), the words "wretch" and "wench" come from Old and Middle English respectively (Collins Dictionary, n.d.), which is acceptable in terms of creating the pseudo-archaic style. However, the word "wretch" (derived from *wrecca* in Old English) in (8) signifies "a person of despicable character", while the Chinese word "废物" is a degrading name stressing the person's uselessness. Therefore, the translation is not semantically equivalent to the ST. In (9), both the original Chinese and the word "wench" (derived from *wenche* in Middle English) can be used for swearing to women. Furthermore, the choice of this archaic word can qualify as stylistically equivalent in the text on its own right. Nevertheless, this translation choice seems to create intersemiotic incoherence with the fictional setting of the TV series. More specifically, the Chinese characters are shown to converse in Shakespearean language while scolding or swearing. The archaic and oftentimes obsolete word choices in the English subtitles seem to clash with the visual channel of the text. Example (9) in Table 4 shows the protagonist "curse in style", although her facial expressions and gestures show that emotions run high in this scene. Imitating the poetic tone and the pseudo-archaic sense of the ST by using medieval and old English word choices could have been more successful had the intersemiotic coherence been taken into account.

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Given that audiovisual products are inherently multimedial and that the cultural identity can be communicated through the *mise-en-scène* (e.g. setting, clothes, mannerisms of characters) as well as the musical score, it can be argued that the cultural content may possibly have reached the target audience in this respect. Therefore, it may have been safer if the subtitles relayed the semantic content with a more limited source-culture orientation. The analysis of the adaptation and the translation involved in *Empresses in the Palace* provides important insights with regard to cultural representation in audiovisual products which cross intersemiotic and international boundaries. These are discussed in the following section.

5. Conclusion

This study suggests that there is a mutual effect between adaptation and translation as regards the communication of narrative and cultural content. The American adaptation offers English-speaking audiences an abridged version of the Chinese series, which nevertheless may come across as quite fractured. The drastic condensation of narrative content appears to require a straightforward translation so that the audience can cope with the abridgement of the plot. However, the subtitles of the series often carry considerable information load in respect to cultural elements; this may be difficult for the audience to register within an already fast-paced series. Such issues could perhaps be alleviated with a potential revamping of mainstream subtitling strategies. More specifically, in such projects where the official policy is to project an image about China, the translation of CSRs could be inspired by bottom-up approaches to cultural appropriation, e.g. by fansubbing strategies, where clarifying headnotes are added to aid the audience's comprehension. Of course, this solution is not without its own issues, as then a problem arises of cramming too much text into limited space, or inserting text on many parts of the screen, thus obscuring the audiovisual product.

As regards the relation between translation and adaptation practices in *Empresses in the Palace*, there seems to be a mismatch between the effort put in the adaptation of the series and its English subtitling. As argued in section 2, the American adaptation introduced a new theme song and included new scenes. Furthermore, it was promoted by means of a trailer which emulated the American standards of film trailers. However, there does not seem to be a similarly meticulous treatment as far as the translation is concerned. Scenes and characters that are omitted from the American version are still mentioned in the dialogues sometimes.

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This means that, in these cases, the translation needs to strike a balance between rendering the SL message and facilitating the audience's understanding (see example (1)). Further research could examine whether a similar interrelation between adaptation and translation holds in other cases as well. For example, if the adaptation is based on a relatively well-known source text, it is possible that translation choices can afford to be less explicit. This may also be the case when the adaptation is distributed to markets and audiences familiar with the culture of origin of the adaptation.

As far as the translation of CSRs is concerned, the English translation often comes across as foreignizing: it maintains the quality of "Chineseness" instead of compromising the cultural element for a more audience-accessible register and style. Keeping the SL cultural references within the subtitles can cause confusion to viewers, as some references remain unexplained and thus inaccessible to English-speaking viewers (as in examples (3) and (4)). This can be attributed to the compact nature of the Chinese language which may be further sacrificed due to the subtitling constraints (as explained in section 3). A conclusion that can be drawn from the point mentioned above is that the translation of CSRs needs to take into account the sociocultural circumstances of production and distribution of the given audiovisual product. If the product is aimed at an international audience familiar with its cultural content, the translation may be bolder in adopting foreignizing strategies in order to render the culture-specific references. On the other hand, if the cultural content is less familiar to the audience, it may be necessary to opt for a more explicit and fluent translation. Reception studies can shed light on the audiences' preferences, i.e. whether viewers are willing to spend more time watching (and re-watching) a programme and have full access to its cultural contents or whether they prefer sacrificing one aspect over the other. To echo the "Culture Going Out" policy, decision makers of such collaborative projects would need to be aware of those preferences so that they respond to the demands of audiences receptive to the foreign culture.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that, in the case examined in this paper, the transmitting medium is a video-on-demand platform, Netflix. The convenience of being able to pause and rewind the audiovisual programme deviates from the traditional way of video consumption based on TV airing, where reception is fleeting. *Empresses in the Palace* belongs to those audiovisual texts for which "digitisation has created the conditions for their asynchronous and iterative consumption" (Crewe *et al.* 2005 cited in Pérez-González 2014: 77). Despite the

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relatively hard-to-register subtitles, viewers can take advantage of the method of consumption and pause or re-watch the part where the translation is less easy to grasp at first glance, thus gaining control over their audiovisual experience. This new way of consuming audiovisual products can encourage a change in subtitling as regards the technical constraints, which have been over-emphasised to some extent (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007; Díaz Cintas 2010). Put differently, the new media of distribution seem to call for new subtitling standards which would be adjusted to the needs and expectations of audiences who choose to consume audiovisual products through streaming platforms like Netflix. Further research is necessary to look into audiences' preferences in this respect. Examining these preferences could enable a new outlook on AVT which would take into account the medium of distribution along with the audience's role in product consumption.

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