



Article

Strategies and Challenges in English to Chinese Translation of Selected Song Lyrics

Mansour Amini¹, Faith Ooi Fang Xi², Sue Anne Choo Xuan-En³, Narges Saffari⁴, Kam-Fong Lee⁵, Latha Ravindran⁶

¹School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

^{2,3}Faculty of Social Sciences and Liberal Arts, UCSI University Malaysia, Malaysia

⁴Academic Service Center, Nyenrode Business University, Netherlands

^{5,6}Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology and Music, SEGi University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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CORRESPONDENCE

E-mail: mansour@usm.my

A B S T R A C T

The translation of song lyrics is challenging for translators primarily due to the intricate poetic and musical elements, which often compel them to employ specific strategies for effective translation. This study was an attempt to investigate the translation strategies in selected translated movie song lyrics and explore the challenges in translating the lyrics. In this qualitative study, the songs were purposefully selected from “Mulan” (1998) and “Aladdin” (2019) movies. Low’s (2013) translation strategies were applied during the process of translation. The “Translation” (transfer of material with a reasonably high degree of semantic fidelity), and “Replacement” (a re-creation of text by only preserving the music element) strategies were found as the common strategies in the translation of song lyrics. The use of a replacement strategy could be due to technical difficulties in translating songs, such as the constraint of rhythm, hence a total replacement of meanings to match the rhythm of the song. A significant challenge in translating song lyrics from English to Chinese was in translating the concept of face-saving, which is an eminent process in social interactions in Chinese culture. It was concluded that the use of a translation strategy depended on the lyrics, translators’ creativity, melody, rhyme, and the differences between the languages and cultures, while the “skopos”, i.e., the correspondence of aim/purpose in the source and target cultures should play the key role.

I. INTRODUCTION

Songs, as a type of literary work, are significant parts of animations and musical movies that are usually well-received by translation users or audiences from all nations (Susam-Sarajeva, 2008). A song can intensify the emotional effect of a given scene in the movie and aid in expressing the thoughts and feelings of the characters (Aminoroaya & Amirian, 2016). This may not be attainably expressed in the movie considering the time restriction in revealing a lot of information.

As a leading production company, the Walt Disney Company has produced many animated feature films over the decades, along with songs

specifically composed for the films (Holliday, 2023). The songs often contain central ideas in these films and the popularity of the films has in turn catapulted the songs themselves into their popularity and success (Hischak & Robinson, 2009). Disney has had a long history of adapting its music into several languages, one which extends decades ago and even continues today (Bontrager, 2011). In the works of other production companies, the music is usually incorporated into the background and functions to establish appropriate moods (Park, 2015). This adaptation is necessary for the company due to multiple factors. The songs serve for the characters to express themselves. Hence, for the audience to be connected to the story, adaptations of songs cannot

be disregarded. The second factor could be related to the age of target audiences, to whom these films are primarily aimed (Leonardo et al., 2009).

While some research has been conducted on the challenges of song translation, there is still a significant need for more focused study, particularly in establishing norms and developing or validating strategies tailored to the unique features of song lyrics. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent the translation strategies are used in selected translated song lyrics from Chinese to English?
2. What are the reasons behind the challenges in translating selected song lyrics from Chinese to English?

The interdisciplinary approach to song translation integrates insights from literary, music, and theatre studies alongside traditional translation studies, reflecting the multifaceted nature of translating lyrics that encompass both poetic and musical dimensions (Khoshsaligheh et al., 2023). Despite this comprehensive approach, research in song translation often suffers from a lack of robust methodological frameworks, leading to inconsistent results and varying quality in translations. For instance, an examination of translation strategies employed by students demonstrated diverse methods but also highlighted notable inconsistencies in translation quality, underscoring a gap in effective, standardized approaches (Fadli et al., 2023). Additionally, the broader field of translation studies has largely overlooked the complexities inherent in song translation, which uniquely challenges translators due to the intricate interplay between poetic devices and musical elements (Fadli et al., 2023; Tambunan et al., 2024). This underexplored aspect points to a critical need for further research to develop more refined strategies for translating songs, addressing a significant gap in both theory and practice that merits deeper investigation and attention. In addition, translating songs involves addressing numerous challenges that are distinct from other forms of interlingual translation, such as poetry translation. For instance, in a study on song translation, Xu Yuanhong's translations of "The Book of Songs" demonstrated the need to balance aesthetic features with content, highlighting the complexities involved in translating lyrical works (Guo et al., 2024). Despite the growing interest in song translation, the field still needs systematic

exploration to unify its diverse elements and address methodological weaknesses (Zhang, 2024). Low (2005) highlights the importance of creating "singable" translations that maintain the musical integrity of the original piece. This involves managing constraints like note-values, rhymes, stresses, and the need for paraphrasing (Wan & Amini, 2020). The originality of the music imposes additional restrictions, making song translation particularly complex. The originality of music imposes additional restrictions that significantly complicate the process of song translation, due to the intricate interplay of cultural, linguistic, and artistic elements inherent in musical compositions. Unlike standard text, songs are a fusion of lyrical content, melodic structure, rhythm, and emotional nuance, each of which contributes to the overall artistic expression and meaning.

The absence of well-established norms and organized systems for song translation is a significant issue in the field (Dong & Zhang, 2023). Bontrager (2011) notes that without clear guidelines, translators often struggle to create accurate and effective adaptations. This underscores the need for the translation field to develop more structured approaches to song translation, recognizing its distinct demands. While translating songs, particularly those in musicals, is widely recognized as a demanding art that requires both creativity and experience (Smola, 2011), unlike other forms of translation which primarily focus on converting text from one language to another, song translation involves a complex interplay of linguistic and musical elements that must be harmoniously integrated. Translators in this field are not only required to possess advanced language skills but also need a deep understanding of musicality, including rhythm, melody, and the emotional impact of the music. Bontrager (2011) highlights that successful song translation goes beyond merely translating words; it demands a passionate commitment to capturing and conveying the song's original essence, cultural context, and emotional resonance in the target language. This process requires significant creative effort and innovation to adapt lyrics while maintaining the musical and lyrical integrity of the original composition. Furthermore, the literature indicates a notable ambiguity surrounding the professional identity of song translators, with Franzon (2008) noting that this lack of clear definition contributes to the marginalization of song translation within

the broader translation field. The absence of a well-defined professional identity not only affects the recognition and support for song translators but also underscores the need for more research and professional development in this specialized area. Such efforts are crucial for advancing the understanding and appreciation of the expertise required for effective song translation and for elevating its status within the broader translation profession.

In this study, Skopos theory is used for the song translation to maintain the target language and culture rather than the source. In Skopos, 'purpose' in Greek, the translation is determined by its purpose (skopos). Skopos theory, established by the German linguist Hans Vermeer in 1978, encompasses the idea that the process of translation and interpretation should substantially focus on the function of both the ST and TT. Hence, the strategies and methods employed in producing a translation are governed by the TT's intended purpose. This is embellished by the difference between equivalence-driven theories and Skopos theory. The former bases its orientation towards the ST, its effects on the source language audience, and/or the function assigned to it by the author, whereas in the latter the intended function (Skopos) of the target text (TT) is determined by the client and the translator (Metin Tekin & Uluc Isisag, 2017). One "must translate consciously and consistently", being by principles respecting the TT, with the principles varying between specific cases (Vermeer, 1989, p.182). Therefore, the application of Skopos theory in the translation of songs from English to Chinese highlights the significance of the translation's purpose, coherence, and cultural fidelity in producing effective translations. Skopos theory can offer a valuable framework for handling the complex task of translating song lyrics. This theory is particularly relevant when translating musical songs, where the interplay between language, culture, and emotion is paramount.

In a related study, Daud et al. (2021) explored the application of Skopos theory in evaluating the readability and cohesion of English-to-Malay translations of selected children's fables. Their research focused on how effectively the "purpose" of children's literary texts is conveyed in translation. The findings suggest that Skopos theory is instrumental in maintaining the intended message and readability in translated literature,

which is essential for preserving the educational and entertainment value of children's stories (Wan & Amini, 2020).

The importance of aligning translation with its intended purpose is further emphasized by Lin et al. (2023), who specifically examine the translation of folk songs. Their research underscores that folk songs are not merely musical compositions but are deeply imbued with rich cultural meanings and emotional depth that are integral to their original context. These songs often embody specific cultural narratives, traditions, and sentiments that reflect the values and experiences of a particular community. Lin et al. argue that translating folk songs requires an approach that is acutely sensitive to these cultural and emotional dimensions. This means that translators must carefully consider the communicative goals of the original work, which include not only the literal meaning of the lyrics but also the intended emotional resonance and cultural significance. By prioritizing these communicative goals, translators are better equipped to convey the nuanced cultural and emotional layers of folk songs in the translated version. This approach helps ensure that the translated work preserves the original impact and effectiveness, allowing the new audience to experience the same depth of meaning and emotion as the original listeners. In this way, Lin et al.'s research highlights the critical role of purpose-driven translation in maintaining the integrity and essence of folk songs across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Yang (2024) underscores the critical importance of cultural considerations when translating songs. The study reveals that translating musical content from English to Chinese requires more than just linguistic proficiency; it demands a deep understanding of the cultural, historical, and social factors that shape audience perceptions and expectations in China. Yang argues that a successful translation must maintain the cultural integrity of the original while ensuring that the translated version resonates with the target audience. This balance is crucial for preserving the emotional impact and meaning of the song, which are often deeply rooted in cultural context (Yang, 2024).

Lan and Zhao (2024) further enrich the discourse on song translation by illustrating the practical applications of Skopos theory in achieving coherence and meeting communicative objectives. Their study highlights how Skopos

theory, which emphasizes the purpose or function of a translation in the target context, plays a pivotal role in maintaining both the structural integrity and the cultural relevance of the lyrics. By applying Skopos theory, translators can ensure that the translated song not only preserves the original lyrical structure but also adapts the content to align with the cultural and emotional expectations of the target audience. This adaptability is crucial in song translation, as it involves more than mere linguistic accuracy; it requires the lyrics to resonate deeply with listeners on an emotional level, reflecting the nuances of the original while also engaging the new audience in a meaningful way. Lan and Zhao's research underscores the importance of considering the translation's purpose and audience impact, demonstrating that effective song translation involves a careful balance between fidelity to the original and responsiveness to the cultural and emotional needs of the target audience. Collectively, these studies suggest that integrating Skopos theory into the translation process is crucial for improving the overall quality of translations, particularly in culturally rich and emotionally charged content such as songs and children's literature. By adapting content to align with the cultural and emotional context of the target audience, translators can ensure that the translated works not only convey the original message but also resonate deeply with the target audience (He et al., 2024). This approach enhances cross-cultural understanding and fulfills the communicative purpose of the original work, making Skopos theory an indispensable tool in the field of translation.

Skopos theory is chosen as the theoretical framework for this paper because it emphasizes the importance of the target language and culture in the translation process, particularly in the context of song translation. This focus aligns with the needs of song translation, where the goal is often to make the lyrics resonate with the target audience in their own cultural and linguistic context. Moreover, the theory allows for flexibility in translation strategies based on the specific purpose of the TT, as indicated by Vermeer's emphasis on conscious and consistent translation principles that vary between cases to effectively convey the original meaning, emotion, and cultural nuances. Additionally, the text highlights that unlike equivalence-driven theories, which focus on maintaining the effects of the source text on its original audience, Skopos theory centers on the TT's intended function as

determined by the translator and client. This is particularly relevant in song translation, where the goal is not just to replicate the source text but to create a version that works effectively in the target culture, often requiring adaptation and creativity. Likewise, given that song lyrics often carry significant cultural, poetic, and emotional weight, Skopos theory's focus on the TT's function and audience is particularly appropriate. The theory supports the idea that translators must consider the cultural and linguistic context of the TT audience, ensuring that the translated lyrics are not only accurate but also culturally relevant and emotionally impactful. Furthermore, although the source and TTs can have identical functions (Vermeer, 2000), the function changes due to the skopos (Nord, 1997), which may differ due to the needs of the types of source and target audiences belonging to independent linguistic and social backgrounds. It is this skopos that determines if a text should be "translated," "paraphrased," or completely "re-edited" (Vermeer, 2000, p. 237). Therefore, translation is not limited to ST only, and the TT is the focus.

In the present study, the term "strategy" is operationally defined as the specific method employed by the translator to address and resolve a particular translation problem. This definition underscores the strategic nature of translation, where the choice of method is crucial for effectively overcoming challenges encountered during the translation process. It is important to recognize that different scholars might use varying terminologies to describe similar concepts, reflecting their philosophical perspectives and research scopes. For instance, what one scholar labels as a "strategy" might be referred to by another as a "procedure," "technique," "solution," or "approach." These alternative terms might emphasize different aspects or nuances of the translation process, highlighting the diversity in the terminology used within the field of translation studies. Specifically, the "translation" strategy is the transfer of a message from the ST/SL "with a reasonably high degree of semantic fidelity" to the TT/TL (Low, 2013, p. 231). It displays omissions, additions, or/and other deviations from the ST to the TT. In other words, a translation strategy is where all the important and significant details of the meaning in ST are transferred into the TT (Metin Tekin & Uluc Isisag, 2017; Wong et al., 2019). "Adaptation" means adjusting the translation to the target culture.

In other words, adaptation is “a TT that draws on an ST, but which has extensively modified it for a new cultural context” (Munday, 2009, p. 166). Adaptation can contribute to “wilfully modifying a text to create meanings that readers would never find in the source” (Low, 2013, p. 230). The distinction between “translation” and “adaptation” is that adaptation can be modified easily. For example, there could be a difference in the cultural context, change of names, substitution of metaphors, or lengthening or shortening of text (Wan et al., 2018). Thus, adaptation aligns with the Skopos theory as function-driven and purpose-oriented. At the same time, adaptation creates more flexibility in the possible deviations. However, when considerable changes are made to suit the text for a specific audience (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 1997). Thus, “adaptation” is less equivalent (to the ST) compared to “translation” due to the extensive deviations from the ST. The third strategy, “replacement (of text)” refers to re-writing the text and preserving the melody or the music elements. In other words, a replacement could be useful when “a song lyric created to be used with a pre-existing melody yet manifesting no semantic transfer from the text previously sung to that melody” (Low, 2013, p. 231). It is the rewriting of the original song with changes in the setting, structure, or themes, but maintaining the tune or melody in the translated text. At the same time, the meaning of the translated song can be completely altered since the text is non-derivative and there is no echo from the original lyric. The only similarity between the ST and the TT is the rhythm, i.e., it can be sung in the same melody or tune. Moreover, the writing of replacement text in translating texts is “among the non-translating options available for the songs (alongside the option of performance in the SL)” (Low, 2013, p. 239).

In addition, in the field of translation studies, researchers have increasingly focused on the complexities involved in translating culturally rich and context-specific texts, such as proper names, song lyrics, comics (Goh et al., 2022), audiovisual content (Tee et al., 2022), and ancient poetry (Hee et al., 2022). The application of various translation strategies has proven essential in addressing these challenges. For example, Amini et al. (2022) explored the challenges associated with translating proper names, particularly geographical names, in the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. The study highlights how proper names carry significant

cultural, historical, and semantic meanings that are often difficult to convey in translation. They found that the most effective strategies for translating these names were rendition, transposition, and a mixed procedure.

In another study, Batmanathan et al. (2022) explored the subtitling strategies used in the Malay-to-English translation of the Malaysian movie *Ejen Ali: The Movie*. The study focused specifically on the criterion of “accuracy” and the findings revealed that the most accurate translations employed strategies such as “transfer,” “paraphrase,” and “expansion.” In contrast, “dislocation” was frequently found in less accurate translations. The study identified nine of Gottlieb’s ten strategies (excluding transcription) and described nine additional mixed strategies used in the subtitling process. The results suggest that a more strategic selection of subtitling approaches could improve translation accuracy, thereby enhancing the viewer’s understanding and enjoyment of the film.

Goh et al. (2022) investigated the problems and effective strategies for translating Chinese comics into English. The study analyzed 71 comic strips, focusing on the technical and linguistic difficulties encountered in the translation process. The findings indicated that the major challenges were related to the translation of linguistic paratexts and onomatopoeias, which are integral to the comic’s narrative and humor. The study identified five effective strategies out of six, highlighting the importance of a nuanced approach to comic translation that considers both the visual and verbal aspects of the medium. Translation strategies for ancient Chinese poetry are crucial due to the significant challenges involved in preserving both the artistic conception (Yi Jing) and the cultural significance of the original text. Hee et al. (2022) conducted an in-depth study on the translation of five ancient Chinese poems, with a particular focus on how the artistic conceptions of these works were preserved. They utilized Vinay and Darbelnet’s translation model to analyze the various strategies employed in the translation process, with a specific emphasis on the use of footnotes as a means to convey additional context. The study found that “equivalence” was the predominant strategy used in translating these poems. This strategy involves finding a translation that closely matches the meaning of the source text in the target language while attempting to maintain similar artistic effects.

“Modulation” was the second most frequently employed strategy, which involves altering the form of the message to achieve a more natural expression in the target language while retaining the original message’s essence. Other strategies, such as “literal translation,” “transliteration,” “borrowing,” and “adaptation,” were also used but to a lesser extent. “Literal translation” focuses on translating the source text word-for-word, which can be effective for preserving the exact wording but may struggle with maintaining artistic nuances. “Transliteration” involves converting text from one script to another, which is useful for preserving proper names and specific terms but may not always convey the full meaning. “Borrowing” involves taking terms or phrases directly from the source language, which can be useful for preserving specific cultural references but may require additional explanation for the target audience. “Adaptation” involves modifying elements of the text to better suit the target culture, which can help the translation resonate with readers but may alter the original meaning. The study also highlighted several challenges in translating elements that reflect the rich cultural and historical context of the poems. These challenges include conveying symbolic meanings and traditional references that may not have direct equivalents in the target language. Hee et al. (2022) concluded that incorporating footnotes in translations can effectively bridge these gaps by providing additional explanations and context. This approach helps to preserve the artistic intentions and cultural significance of the original text while minimizing potential confusion among readers. By applying these strategies and considering the use of footnotes, translators can better address the complexities involved in translating ancient Chinese poetry, ensuring that both the artistic and cultural dimensions of the original works are effectively communicated to a new audience.

Furthermore, on the importance of cultural knowledge, Afshord and Amirdabbaghian (2024) emphasized the intricate relationship between language and culture, where a lack of cultural understanding could lead to misinterpretation of the intended message. Likewise, the researchers reported that insufficient cultural knowledge influences translation accuracy.

Moreover, song translation aims to be able to sing the words in the target language (TL) while preserving the rhythms and the tune of the

original music (Low, 2013). Song translation requires compromises in linguistics (Adawiyah & Firdausi, 2023) and extra-linguistic features. These features include cultural context (e.g., Tambunan et al., 2024), nonlinguistic presuppositions (e.g., Misievici, 2023), and the interplay between music and lyrics (e.g., Sánchez, 2019). For example, if the translation intends to maintain the original music in the source language (SL), then the translation may disregard the original text’s extra-linguistic features. Low (2003) proposed the pentathlon approach to produce a text that a singer can sing to an audience (Gorlee, 2005, p. 185). Low (2003) introduced the five criteria of song translation to maintain a balance, for example in determining whether the ST “should be translated, paraphrased or completely re-edited” (Vermeer, 2000, p. 231). The five criteria include: (a) singability, (b) sense, (c) naturalness, (d) rhythm, and (e) rhyme, while singability is the utmost factor to be taken into consideration in translating lyrics. At the same time, a translator should also maintain the balance between these criteria to produce a singable, meaningful, and natural translation (James et al., 2018; Jing, & Amini, 2019). Low suggested guidelines for translators to maintain the balance between the verbal text and the music element (Low, 2005, p. 189). The suggestions include respecting the rhythms, finding and respecting the meaning, respecting the style, respecting the rhymes, respecting the sound, respecting choice of intended listeners, respect the original. The Pentathlon approach explains the possible changes in the semantic content of the source text to maintain the rhythm and musical feel related to a song’s words. Low (2013) suggested three strategies (a) translation, (b) adaptation, and (c) replacement for translating songs, which are used in the present study.

The studies collectively underscore the critical role of employing appropriate translation strategies to preserve the cultural, historical, and emotional integrity of the source text. It is essential for translators to carefully consider both the purpose of the translation and the cultural context in which it will be received. Skopos theory’s emphasis on the purpose-driven nature of translation is especially relevant in this context, guiding the translation of song lyrics to maintain their singability (Zheng & Gao, 2024), rhythm, and cultural relevance (Qi, 2024).

The present study positions song translation as a complex and creative task that demands careful consideration of the target audience's needs.

II. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore Disney songs' lyrics from two Walt Disney musical movies; "Mulan" (1998) and "Aladdin" (2019). Two songs were purposefully selected from each of these movies. The translation strategies suggested by Low (2013) were employed in the analysis of the song lyrics. The reason for selecting these two songs from "Mulan" (1998) and "Aladdin" (2019) is to analyze how cultural elements and themes specific to each story are conveyed through the lyrics and how these elements are adapted or preserved in the translation process. "Mulan" and "Aladdin" are both rich in cultural references, making them ideal for examining how song translation navigates cultural nuances, particularly in preserving the original context and meaning while ensuring the songs remain singable and resonate with the target audience. These songs also provide a comparative basis to explore how translation strategies may differ between the older and more recent Disney productions. The two songs were "I'll make a man out of you" in the "Mulan" movie and "Speechless" in the "Aladdin" movie. The translated version of these two songs into Mandarin was found on the official YouTube channel (Disney Channel Asia). This channel provides various types of translated songs from Disney movies sung by renowned singers. The original lyrics were selected from the channel Disney Music Vevo and Disney.

Each song was segmented and the source text in English and the target text in Mandarin were categorized for further analysis. The process continued with back-translation (See Appendix A) and an in-depth analysis of the translation strategies employed. Finally, the data were discussed about the translational strategies, and conclusions were drawn based on the findings.

Ethical considerations for this study include ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the data by using official sources for both the original and translated song lyrics from the publicly accessible versions of the songs. Since the study involves textual analysis rather than human subjects, issues related to confidentiality and consent are not applicable, but to maintain ethical research

standards sources were carefully attributed.

III. RESULTS

Both songs were analyzed, and the frequency and percentages of the strategies were presented. A total of 63 lines from the two songs were analyzed. Overall, the "Translation" strategy was the most frequent in the translated texts (38.1%), followed by "adaptation" (33.3%), and the "replacement" strategy (28.6%).

Table 1. The overall analysis of strategies

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Translation	24	38.1
Adaptation	21	33.3
Replacement	18	28.6
Total	63	100

There were 29 lines in the song *I'll Make A Man Out Of You* (Mulan). Table 2 shows the percentage of frequency of the translation strategies identified in the *I'll Make A Man Out Of You*.

Table 2. Analysis of strategies used in "I'll make a man out of you by Disney"

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Translation	10	34.5
Adaptation	9	31
Replacement	10	34.5
Total	29	100

"Adaptation" had a slightly lower percentage than the other two strategies (31%).

Table 3. Analysis of strategies used in "Speechless"

Translation Strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Translation	14	41.2
Adaptation	12	35.3
Replacement	8	23.5
Total	34	100

"Translation" has the highest percentage among the three translational strategies (41.2%). The second highest is "adaptation" (35.3%), followed by "replacement" (23.5%).

Translational Strategies: "Translation"

Low (2013) proposed that the "translation" strategy is the transfer of material with a reasonably high degree of semantic fidelity from the ST to the TT. Table 4 shows examples of analysis of the "translation" strategy in "I'll make a man out of you" sung in "Mulan".

In this song, the example displays omission; “be a man” (ST) to “man” (TT). Next, there is an omission of one word from “Time is racing toward us, till the Huns arrive” (ST) to “Time is not ruthless; the Huns are approaching” (TT). In another example, there is also an addition of words, “Heed my every order, and you might survive” (ST) to “Listen to my instruction then you can live” (TT). In these three examples, the important details were transferred into the TT. For example, the word “man”, “time”, and “Hun” were found in the TT. Although there are changes in the word choice, the semantic fidelity was transferred to the TT. Table 5 shows examples of analysis of the “translation” strategy in “Speechless”.

There are omissions and additions in the “translation”. For example, “Cause I know that I won’t go speechless” (ST) has eight words, translated into nine words (“因为我绝对不会沉默”). Next, in the translation of “speechless” (ST) to two words – “沉默” (TT). There was no omission or addition in the word count and the significant meaning in the ST was transferred to TT, e.g., in

“breathe”.

Translational Strategies: “Adaptation”

Low (2013) also proposed that “adaptation” is to suit the target culture where the TT has been extensively modified into a new cultural context.

“Adaptation” is used to modify the ST to fit into the target culture. Since it is a purpose-oriented approach, the target reader should be able to relate to it. This song was translated into Mandarin in China; hence the translated text shows the elements of Chinese (Mainland China) culture. For example, the ST “daughter” is translated to “姑娘 [gu] 娘 [niang]”, i.e., “lady”. In another example, the TT uses “my breath is as short as a cow’s” to represent “never gonna catch my breath”. The TT uses “short as a cow’s”, which is an idiom used in Mandarin to illustrate a person’s incapability. Next, the word used in the TT has the element of martial arts, such as in “action is fast” considering that China is renowned for martial arts, while the ST uses the word “swift”.

Table 4. “Translation” strategy in “I’ll make a man out of you”

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
Be a man	男子漢 (nan zi han)	Man	Translation
Time is racing toward us, till the Huns arrive	時光毫不留情匈奴快逼近 (shi guang hao bu liu qing xiong nu kuai bi jin)	Time is not ruthless; the Huns are approaching	Translation
Heed my every order, and you might survive	聽從我的指令才能夠活命 (ting cong wo de zhi ling cai neng gou huo ming)	Listen to my instructions then you can live	Translation

Table 5. “Translation” strategy in “Speechless”

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
Speechless	沉默 (chen mo)	Silence	Translation
‘Cause I know that I won’t go speechless	因为我绝对不会沉默 (yin wei wo jue dui bu hui chen mo)	Because I will never be silent	Translation
‘Cause I’ll breathe	要呼吸 (yao hu xi)	Breathe	Translation

Table 6. “Adaptation” strategy in “I’ll make a man out of you”

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
Did they send me daughters, when I asked for sons?	為何這群士兵都像個姑娘 (wei he zhe qun shi bing dou xiang ge gu niang)	Why these soldiers look like girls?	Adaptation
I’m never gonna catch my breath	我氣喘如牛快斷氣 (wo qi quan ru niu kuai duan qi)	I am as short as a cow	Adaptation
We must be swift as a coursing river	行動快速像那江河湍急 (xing dong kuai shu xiang na jiang he tuan ji)	The action is fast like the river	Adaptation

Table 7 provides examples of the “adaptation” strategy used in “Speechless” in “Aladdin”. “Adaptation” allows flexibility in the translated text. For example, the ST segment “Written in stone” can be back-translated as “written a long time ago or was written ages ago,” but the TT correspondence (“古老传统”) is straightforward and means “ancient tradition.” Similarly, “stay in your place” can have several meanings, such as “to be quiet or to stay still,” but the TT “要守规矩” means “to follow the rules.” Here, the TT is more direct compared to the ST. For instance, “要沉默不惹事” means “have to be silent and not to make trouble,” which is longer than the ST “better seen and not heard.” “Adaptation” allows flexibility in the translated text. For example, the ST segment “Written in stone” can be back-translated as “written a long time ago or was written ages ago,” but the TT correspondence (“古老传统”) is straightforward and means “ancient tradition.” Similarly, “stay in your place” can have several meanings, such as “to be quiet or to stay still,” but the TT “要守规矩” means “to follow the rules.” Here, the TT is more direct compared to the ST. For instance, “要沉默不惹事” means “have to be silent and not to make trouble,” which is longer than the ST “better seen and not heard.”

Replacement (Text)

Low (2013) stated that “replacement (text)” means a re-creation of text that has no relation to the ST, but the music element is preserved. Table 8 illustrates the use of the “Replacement (Text)” strategy in translating “I’ll make a man out of you” in “Mulan,” where the music element is retained but the text is significantly altered.

In “replacement” the lyrics are re-written with changes but the tune in the translated text is preserved. In other words, the rhythm is preserved, but the meaning is altered. For instance, “but you can bet before we’re through” (ST) and “我會改變你的前途” (TT), both have eight words (English)/characters (Mandarin), but the meaning is different from the ST as shown in the backtranslation above. “And you haven’t got a clue” and “You panic and helpless” (back translation) do not seem to relate exactly. Table 9 shows examples of the “replacement” strategy used in “Speechless” in “Aladdin”.

“Replacement” is the re-written form of text in which the meaning can be different from the ST because this strategy aims to preserve the melody (Low, 2013). Therefore, the ST and the TT might indicate a slightly different meaning. For example,

Table 7. “Adaptation” strategy in “Speechless”

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
Written in stone	古老传统 (gu lao chuan tong)	Ancient tradition	Adaptation
Stay in your place	要守规矩 (yao shou gui ju)	Follow the rules	Adaptation
Better seen and not heard	要沉默不惹事 (yao chen mob u re shi)	Have to be silent and not cause trouble	Adaptation

Table 8. “Replacement (Text)” strategy in I’ll make a man out of you”

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
But you can bet before we’re through	我會改變你的前途 (wo hui gai bian ni de qian tu)	I will change your future	Replacement
And you haven’t got a clue	你驚慌茫然無助 (ni jing huang mang ran wu zhu)	You panic and helpless	Replacement
Say goodbye to those who knew me	西方極樂等我光臨 (xi fang ji le deng wo guang ling)	Western bliss waiting for me to visit	Replacement

Table 9. “Replacement” strategy in “Speechless”

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
You can’t keep me quiet	你听听我的故事 (ni ting ting wo de gu shi)	Listen to my story	Replacement
I cannot be broken	我一定都抵禦 (wo yi ding di yu)	I will defend all	Replacement
When they try to suffocate me	我向往的自由空气 (wo xiang wang de zi you kong qi)	Freedom in the air that I yearn for	Replacement

in “you can’t keep me quiet” (ST), “你听听我的故事” (TT), “listen to my story” (back-translation). In another example, “我一定都抵禦” meaning “I will defend all” is different from the ST “I cannot be broken”. Lats, “when they try to suffocate me” was translated with a completely different meaning in the TT, “我向往的自由空气” which means “freedom in the air that I yearn for”.

Challenges in Translating Songs

Translating songs that appear in movies involves the interdependence of words, music, and images, which together create unique constraints for the translator, particularly when transferring linguistic and cultural references (Aminoroaya & Amirian, 2016). This section explores two significant challenges in translating songs: preserving the cultural concept of “face” and maintaining rhythm.

Face-Saving in Translation

In Chinese culture, the concept of “face” plays a crucial role in regulating social interactions (Brunner & You, 1988). “Face” represents a person’s social worth and reputation, and any actions that might cause someone to lose face are carefully avoided. This cultural dynamic poses a challenge when translating songs into Chinese, as translators must be sensitive to the nuances of face-saving to avoid offending. The concept of face-saving (mianzi 面子) is central to Chinese culture and influences social interactions by prioritizing the maintenance of dignity, reputation, and social status (Keevak, 2022). This cultural emphasis on face-saving presents challenges in translating English song lyrics into Chinese, as Western cultures often prioritize directness and individual expression (Lin, 2024), which can conflict with the more indirect and context-sensitive nature of Chinese communication, such as in humour translation (Tee et al., 2022; Xia et al., 2023).

Translators must carefully navigate these cultural differences to ensure that the translated lyrics resonate with Chinese audiences, often requiring adaptations that go beyond direct translation to preserve the intended meaning. This challenge reflects the broader difficulties in translating between cultures with differing social norms and values. For instance, the phrase “Mister, I’ll make a man out of you” in the source text implies that the addressee lacks the qualities of a man, which could cause the addressee to “lose face.” The target text adapts this to a more general statement, “[in order] to be a man, don’t admit defeat,” to mitigate the potential offense. Similarly, while the source text “You’re unsuited for the rage of war” might be considered an insult, the target text shifts focus to the harshness of the battlefield, thus softening the critique.

Table 10 presents examples from the song “I’ll make a man out of you”. As an example, is implied in the ST that the addressee has no qualities of a man, which can be a cause of “losing face”, hence the adaptation of the TT to address with a more general reach “[in order] to be a man, don’t admit defeat”. In another case, TT has the insertion of additional meanings “bravery” to the ST with “but still fighting” when the ST only mentions the addressee’s timidity. Face-saving can also be seen in two other lines, whereby the ST indicates insults towards the addressees, but the TT alters slightly the angle of view to lessen the harshness of insults: “You’re unsuited for the rage of war” construes how one is incapable of withstanding the dangers of war, yet the TT places the focus on how the battlefield is too harsh to enter, or in “go home, you’re through”, the TT does not reflect this aspect.

Rhythm in Translation

Rhythm is integral to the musicality of a song, and translating lyrics requires careful attention to syllable count, stress patterns, and note lengths

Table 10. “Face” challenge in translating “I’ll make a man out of you”

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
Mister, I’ll make a man out of you	要成為男子漢不認輸 (yao cheng wei nan zi han bu ren shu)	To be a man, don’t admit defeat	Adaptation
This guy’s got ‘em scared to death	他們心驚膽又戰 (ta men xin jing dan you zhan)	They are scared but still fighting	Translation
You’re unsuited for the rage of war	沙場太殘酷 血光殺戮 (sha chang tai chan ku xie guang sha can)	The battlefield is too cruel, bloody killing	Adaptation
So pack up, go home, you’re through	若害怕踏上歸路 (ruo hai pa ta shang gui lu)	If you are afraid to step on the road	Adaptation

Table 11. “Rhythm” challenge in translating “I’ll make a man out of you”

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
But you can bet before we’re through	我會改變你的前途 (wo hui gai bian ni de qian tu)	I will change your future	Replacement
Say goodbye to those who knew me	西方極樂等我光臨 (xi fang ji le deng wo guang ling)	Western bliss waiting for me to visit	Replacement
Boy, was I a fool in school for cutting gym	我看大家全都被他嚇傻了 (wo kan da jia quan dou bei ta xia sha le)	I think everyone is scared of him	Replacement

Table 12. “Word/syllable count” challenge in the translation of the song “I’ll make a man out of you”

Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
Be a man	男子漢 (nan zi han)	Man	Translation

(Low, 2005). A significant technical problem a song translator has to deal with is how to match the rhythms of the source and target lyrics of songs (Aminoroaya & Amirian, 2016). To preserve rhythm, the ST and the TT should have an identical number of syllables in each line (Low 2005). However, this can lead to the omission, addition, or even total replacement of words in the TT to match the rhythm of the song, which might not always carry the same semantic function as the ST. This can be seen in “I’ll make a man out of you”. In several lines, the number of syllables in the ST and ST are identical. Although the TT syllables match the ST syllables, the semantic meanings are mostly replaced, with the main purpose of fitting the syllables in the restricted space. Table 11 demonstrates how rhythm constraints were handled in the translation of “I’ll Make a Man Out of You.”

Low (2005) notes that when there is a discrepancy in syllable count between the source and target texts, translators might need to add or repeat words to preserve the rhythm. For example, in the phrase “Be a man,” the target text uses ‘男子漢’ (nan zi han), which has three syllables, the same as the source text. However, this translation does not fully capture the source text’s meaning, demonstrating the trade-offs involved in maintaining rhythm.

In sum, the analysis revealed that the most frequently used translation strategy across both songs was the “translation” strategy. In “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” the strategies of “translation” and “replacement” were dominant, while “translation” was more prevalent in “Speechless.” These findings indicate that the translators prioritized retaining the primary meanings of the source text (ST), particularly in “Speechless.” In

contrast, the frequent use of the “replacement” strategy in “I’ll Make a Man Out of You” suggests that translators faced technical challenges such as rhythm constraints, leading to more significant modifications to match the song’s musicality.

IV. DISCUSSION

The topic of song translation remains marginalized in translation studies despite the many challenges that translators navigate because of the poetic and musical features in song lyrics. Therefore, investigating strategies in translating songs, could help to identify and describe the adaptations required in song-lyrics translation. One element distinguishing song translation from other translations, such as poetry translation, is the making of “singable” translations. Another challenge is maintaining the “originality” [sense] of the music. The challenges include numerous complex features such as note-values, rhymes, stresses, paraphrasing, and the absence of established norms to arrive at such adaptations. It is necessary to have creative and experienced translators to translate songs or rewrite the translated songs. Translators should put more effort into not only translating the words of a song but to skilfully adapting the intricate poetic and musical features from one language to another, a task that requires significant effort and passion.

The analysis of translation strategies in the two Disney songs, “I’ll Make a Man Out of You” from *Mulan* and “Speechless” from *Aladdin*, reveals distinct patterns. The “Translation” strategy was the most commonly used overall, which suggests a strong emphasis on maintaining the original meaning and semantic fidelity of the source text (ST) in the target text (TT). This aligns to convey the core messages of the songs without

significant alterations. The results also indicate that the “Replacement” strategy was more frequently used in “I’ll Make a Man Out of You” compared to “Speechless,” possibly due to the technical challenges in translating lyrics that need to match the rhythm and cultural context of the original songs.

The findings align with Low’s (2013) theory that the “Translation” strategy is preferred when a high degree of semantic fidelity is needed. However, the relatively high use of the “Replacement” strategy, particularly in “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” suggests that maintaining rhythm and cultural relevance often necessitates significant deviations from the original text. This is consistent with Aminoroaya and Amirian’s (2016) observation that song translation requires balancing the preservation of meaning with musicality and cultural adaptation. The study also supports Brunner and You’s (1988) insights into the challenges of translating concepts like “face-saving” in Chinese culture, where indirect communication is preferred, leading to adaptations that soften potentially offensive content.

The findings have several implications for both translation theory and practice. The dominance of the “Translation” strategy suggests that translators prioritize retaining the original message when possible. However, the frequent use of “Replacement” highlights the importance of flexibility in translation, especially in contexts where rhythm and cultural nuances are crucial. For practitioners, these results emphasize the need for a careful balance between maintaining the original meaning and adapting the text to fit the target culture and musical constraints. The study contributes to the broader discourse on cross-cultural translation, emphasizing the need for translators to prioritize the target culture’s quality “expectations” (Kuek et al., 2024), aligned with the “Skopos” theory.

This study has several limitations that may affect the interpretation of the results. Firstly, the sample size is limited to two songs from Disney movies, which may not be representative of translation strategies used in other types of songs. Additionally, the focus on Mandarin translations limits the generalizability of the findings to other languages and cultures. The analysis also primarily focuses on the text, with less emphasis on how the musical elements influence translation choices or the broader reception of these translations by the target audience.

Based on the findings and limitations, several areas for future research are suggested. Investigating the role of musical elements, such as rhythm and melody, in shaping translation decisions could offer deeper insights. Additionally, exploring how different cultural concepts, like “face-saving,” influence translation strategies across various cultures could further enhance our understanding of cross-cultural translation challenges. Future research could expand on this study by exploring a broader range of songs and genres to assess whether the findings hold in different musical contexts. Additionally, examining the audience reception of translated songs could provide valuable insights into how effectively translation strategies convey the intended meaning and emotional impact.

V. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that balancing fidelity to the original text with the technical demands of song translation, such as melody and rhythm, while the translation strategy chosen depends heavily on the specific needs of the lyrics and the translator’s creativity, as well as the cultural nuances that must be conveyed. The concept of face-saving, crucial in Chinese social interactions, poses a unique challenge in translation, requiring a careful approach to ensure that cultural values are respected.

This study sheds light on the complexities of translating song lyrics between Chinese and English, underscoring the delicate balance required between maintaining the original meaning and adapting to the musical and cultural constraints of the target language. By exploring the translation strategies used in Disney songs, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricacies involved in cross-cultural translation, offering implications for both translators and language learners. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the importance of creativity and cultural sensitivity in the translation process, aligning with the broader goal of achieving effective and meaningful communication across languages.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors have read and followed the ethical requirements for publication in *Jurnal Arbitrer*, and the current work does not involve human subjects, animal experiments, or any data collected from social media platforms.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Dr. Mansour Amini: Conceptualization, Review, Polishing the Final Draft, and Project Supervision; **Faith Ooi Fang Xi:** Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Drafting of the Initial Manuscript; **Sue Anne Choo Xuan-En:** Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Drafting of the Initial Manuscript; **Dr. Narges Saffari:** Review, and Updating the Literature Review; **Dr. Latha Ravindran:** Validating the Sources, and Re-writing Introduction; **Dr Kam-Fong Lee:** Validating the Back-translations, and Validating the Analysis).

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Disney Song “I’ll make a man out of you” from Disney Movie – Mulan

Verse 1

No	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
1	Let’s get down to business, to defeat the Huns	大家同心作戰 讓匈奴絕望	Fighting together with each other, let the Huns despair	Translation
2	Did they send me daughters, when I asked for sons?	為何這群士兵都像個姑娘	Why do these soldiers look like girls?	Adaptation
3	You’re the saddest bunch I ever met	你們笨拙散漫又扭捏	You are clumsy and tweaking	Translation
4	But you can bet before we’re through	我會改變你的前途	I will change your future	Replacement
5	Mister, I’ll make a man out of you	要成為男子漢不認輸	To be a man, don’t admit defeat	Replacement

Verse 2

No	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
6	Tranquil as a forest, but on fire within	紮穩你的步履 內心要堅定	Stabilize your steps, be firm inside	Adaptation
7	Once you find your center, you are sure to win	開闊你的胸襟 求勝要決心	Broaden your chest, be determined to win	Adaptation
8	You’re a spineless, pale pathetic lot	膽小又害怕 心亂如麻	Timid and scared	Replacement
9	And you haven’t got a clue	你驚慌茫然無助	You panic and helpless	Replacement
10	Somehow I’ll make a man out of you	要成為男子漢不認輸	To be a man, don’t admit defeat	Replacement

Bridge

No	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
11	I’m never gonna catch my breath	我氣喘如牛快斷氣	I am as short as a cow	Adaptation
12	Say goodbye to those who knew me	西方極樂等我光臨	Western bliss waiting for me to visit	Replacement
13	Boy, was I a fool in school for cutting gym	我看大家全都被他嚇傻了	I think everyone is scared of him	Replacement
14	This guy’s got ‘em scared to death	他們心驚膽又戰	They are scared but still fighting	Translation
15	Hope he doesn’t see right through me	我的身份還是秘密	My identity is still a secret	Translation
16	Now I really wish that I knew how to swim	掉到水裏可能會要了我小命	Falling into the water will kill me	Adaptation

Chorus

No	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
17	Be a man	男子漢	Man	Translation
18	We must be swift as a coursing river	行動快速像那江河湍急	The action is fast like the river	Adaptation
19	Be a man	男子漢	Man	Translation
20	With all the force of a great typhoon	破壞力像那風暴無情	Destructive power is like a storm	Adaptation
21	Be a man	男子漢	Man	Translation
22	With all the strength of a raging fire	滿腔熱血像那野火壓境	Full of blood like the wildfire	Adaptation
23	Mysterious as the dark side of the moon	神出鬼沒像那暗夜的惡夢	Mysterious just like the nightmare of the night	Adaptation
24	Be a man	男子漢	Man	Translation

Verse 3

No	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
25	Time is racing toward us, till the Huns arrive	時光毫不留情匈奴快逼近	Time is not ruthless; the Huns are approaching	Translation
26	Heed my every order, and you might survive	聽從我的指令才能夠活命	Listen to my instructions then you can live	Translation
27	You're unsuited for the rage of war	沙場太殘酷 血光殺戮	The battlefield is too cruel, bloody killing	Replacement
28	So pack up, go home, you're through	若害怕踏上歸路	If you are afraid to step on the road	Replacement
29	How could I make a man out of you?	要成為男子漢不認輸	To be a man, don't admit defeat	Replacement

Appendix B: Disney Song "Speechless" from Disney Movie – Aladdin

Verse 1

	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
1	Written in stone	古老传统	Ancient tradition	Adaptation
2	Every rule, every word	记下的每一句	Every sentence is written down	Adaptation
3	Centuries old and unbending	世世代代不能抗拒	Cannot be resisted for generations	Translation
4	Stay in your place	要守规矩	Follow the rules	Adaptation
5	Better seen and not heard	要沉默不惹事	Have to be silent and not cause trouble	Adaptation
6	But now that story is ending	我偏要改写这故事	I have to rewrite this story	Adaptation

Pre-Chorus

No	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
7	'Cause I	现在	Right now	Replacement
8	I cannot start to crumble	我不能够不坚持	I cannot be impersistent	Translation
9	So come on and try	你可以尝试夺去我	You can try to take away	Adaptation
10	Try to shut me and cut me down	自主的权利	My right to freedom	Adaptation

Chorus 1

No	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
11	I won't be silenced	我不再沉默	I won't be silent anymore	Translation
12	You can't keep me quiet	你听听我的故事	Listen to my story	Replacement
13	Won't tremble when you try it	我不怕你的攻击	I am not afraid of your attack	Adaptation
14	All I know is I won't go speechless	因为我绝对不会沉默	Because I will never be silent	Translation
15	Speechless	沉默	Silence	Translation
16	Let the storm in	面对风雨	Facing the wind and rain	Adaptation
17	I cannot be broken	我一定都抵御	I will defend all	Replacement
18	No, I won't live unspoken	不让命运被摆布	Won't be manipulated by fate	Replacement
19	'Cause I know that I won't go speechless	因为我绝对不会沉默	Because I will never be silent	Translation

Bridge

No	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
20	Try to lock me in this cage	谁要把我关牢笼	Who wants to hold me caged?	Adaptation
21	I won't just lay me down and die	我一定全力去反抗	I must go all out to resist	Adaptation
22	I will take these broken wings	带着折断的翅膀	With broken wings	Translation
23	And watch me burn across the sky	燃烧中在天空飞翔	Flying in the sky while burning	Translation
24	And it echoes saying-	听听我心中声音	Listen to my heart	Replacement

Chorus 2

No	Source Text	Target Text	Back Translation	Strategy
25	I won't be silenced	正在回响	Resounding	Replacement
26	No, you will not see me tremble when you try it	如果你要看我跌倒你会失望	If you want to see me fall, you will be disappointed	Adaptation
27	All I know is I won't go speechless	因为我绝对不会沉默	Because I will never be silent	Translation
28	Speechless	沉默	Silence	Translation
29	'Cause I'll breathe	要呼吸	Breathe	Translation
30	When they try to suffocate me	我向往的自由空气	Freedom in the air that I yearn for	Replacement
31	Don't you underestimate me	你们不能让我窒息	You can't let me suffocate	Replacement
32	'Cause I know that I won't go speechless	因为我绝对不会沉默	Because I will never be silent	Translation
33	All I know is I won't go speechless	我是我绝对不会沉默	I will definitely not be silent	Translation
34	Speechless	沉默	Silence	Translation