WHIOCE PUBLISHING PTE. LTD.
PROVIDING
FIRST-CLASS SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION
FOR TOP SCHOLARS

2025 Volume 3, Issue 3
Contemporary Education Frontiers
ISSN (Online): 3029-1860 ISSN (Print): 3029-1879

A Study on Dish Names Translation in A Bite of China from the Perspective of Domestication and Foreignization

Huizhu Chen*, Yingyi Zeng
School of International Studies, Chengdu College of Arts and Sciences, Chengdu 610401, Sichuan, China

***Corresponding author:** Huizhu Chen, huizhu-007@163.com*

Abstract: The food documentary A Bite of China made a hit in China and has been translated into different languages for broadcast in various countries. Most of the relevant research has focused on food culture, subtitle translation, and communication studies, with relatively little attention given to its translation of dish names. This study explores the English translation of dish names from the perspective of domestication and foreignization. It has been found that A Bite of China flexibly applies domestication and foreignization in Chinese to English translation. Dish names that include ingredients and cooking methods, or those with metaphors, or abstract names, are primarily translated with domestication strategy, while dish names that have been well-known in the world, or those actively "going global", are mainly handled in a foreignization way; those with strong regional characteristics and have equivalent vocabulary in English demonstrate a translation combining both domestication and foreignization.

Keywords: A Bite of China; Dish names translation; Domestication; Foreignization

Online publication:

1. Introduction

A Bite of China, a high-quality culinary documentary produced by China Central Television (CCTV), has garnered both domestic acclaim and international recognition for its stunning cinematography and profound cultural depth. Translated into multiple languages for global distribution, the series has become a significant case study in cross-cultural communication. While existing research has predominantly focused on aspects such as food culture representation, subtitle translation, and media studies, comparatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the specific strategies employed in translating Chinese dish names. This study examines the English translations of culinary terms in A Bite of China through the theoretical framework of domestication and foreignization, thereby contributing to the growing body of research on culinary translation while offering practical insights for the international promotion of Chinese gastronomic culture.

2. Nomenclature of Chinese dish names

The art of naming Chinese dishes is an integral part of Chinese culinary culture. It is not merely a description of food but also a means of expression and inheritance of culture. Some dish names directly reflect the main ingredients, such as "Kung Pao Chicken", where "chicken" indicates the primary ingredient. Cooking methods are also a significant component of

Chinese dish names, as seen in “Steamed Perch”, where “steamed” specifies the cooking technique. Color and shape are common elements in Chinese dish names, such as “Squirrel-shaped Mandarin Fish”, which uses “squirrel” to describe the dish’s appearance, offering both visual and gustatory appeal. Many dish names are rooted in history or legends, such as “Dongpo Pork”, named after the Song Dynasty literary figure Su Dongpo, reflecting his passion for food and culinary skills. Some dish names highlight regional characteristics, such as “Yangzhou Fried Rice”, evoking the refined cooking style of Yangzhou. Others carry profound symbolic meanings, such as “Fu Lu Shou Xi”, which represents blessings of happiness, prosperity, longevity, and joy. Additionally, some dish names emphasize texture and flavor, like “Sweet and Sour Spare Ribs”, where “sweet and sour” indicates the dish’s taste profile. Chinese dish names not only provide information about the food but also serve as a medium for cultural exchange.

3. Theoretical framework: Domestication and foreignization

In an 1813 lecture, the German ideologist Friedrich Schleiermacher stated that there are “only two methods of translation”: one that brings the reader closer to the author, and another that brings the author closer to the reader [1]. These concepts were later formalized as “domestication” and “foreignization” by American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti in his influential work The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation [2]. Domestication requires the translator to adapt the source language’s expressions and culture to some extent into the target language’s expressions and culture, whereas foreignization demands that the translator highlight the linguistic and cultural differences between the source and target languages. In other words, a domestication translation reads like a native work, while a foreignization translation retains a distinctly exotic flavor.

Professor Jianzhong Guo is likely the first scholar in China to introduce the domestication and foreignization translation strategies and later provide a comprehensive introduction to Venuti’s “foreignization” translation theory. He initially introduced “domestication” and “foreignization” in his article Cultural Factors in Translation: Domestication and Foreignization [3]. Subsequently, through his paper Venuti and His Deconstructive Translation Strategies and his monograph Contemporary American Translation Theories, he offered a complete exposition of the content, origins, and influence of the “foreignization”, which triggered a debate between domestication and foreignization within China’s translation community [4].

Zhili Sun put forward in the article Literary Translation in China: From Domestication to Foreignization that Chinese literary translation in the 21st century is expected to further embrace foreignization. Specifically, this means striving to convey the original work’s exotic cultural features, foreign linguistic forms, and the author’s unique writing techniques. However, it is also noted that foreignization must be applied with caution and moderation, and when impractical, domestication should be employed as a supplementary approach [5].

Domestication prioritizes target-culture norms, adapting source texts to enhance accessibility for the intended audience. This approach often involves cultural substitution or explanatory additions, as seen in rendering “ 饺子 ” as “dumpling”, a term familiar to Western audiences despite its imperfect correspondence with the original. Conversely, foreignization emphasizes preserving source-language cultural elements, intentionally maintaining linguistic and conceptual differences. This strategy might involve direct borrowing, e.g., translating “ 饺子 ” as “Jiaozi” or calque translations that retain the original’s cultural specificity, thereby exposing target audiences to authentic Chinese culinary concepts.

4. Domestication and foreignization in the dish names translation in A Bite of China

The translation of Chinese culinary terms presents unique challenges due to fundamental differences between Chinese and Western naming conventions. While Chinese dish names frequently incorporate cultural allusions, historical references, and poetic imagery, their Western counterparts typically employ more literal, descriptive terminology. Moreover,

Chinese names often elaborate on cooking techniques with greater specificity than Western culinary vocabulary. Through comparative analysis of original Chinese dish names and their English translations in A Bite of China, this study identifies and evaluates three distinct translation approaches: domestication, foreignization, and hybrid strategies that blend both methods. The examination of these cases provides valuable insights into effective practices for bridging cultural gaps in culinary translation.

4.1. Domestication

4.1.1. Dish names containing ingredients and cooking methods

炸藕夹 Deep-fried Lotus Root Sandwich

金汤水煮鳜鱼 Stewed Mandarin Fish in Pumpkin Soup

腌笃鲜 Bamboo Shoot Soup with Fresh and Pickled Streaky Pork

Deep-fried lotus root sandwich is a traditional Chinese delicacy where minced meat is sandwiched between two slices of lotus root, coated in batter, and deep-fried until golden and crispy. This method preserves the crisp texture of the lotus root while infusing it with the savory richness of the meat filling. The term "sandwich" is familiar to Western audiences, referring to ingredients layered between two slices of bread. The translation cleverly substitutes "lotus root sandwich" for the Chinese " 藕夹 " (Oujia), drawing a parallel between the two foods' similar structures. Rendering " 炸藕夹 " as "Deep-fried lotus root sandwich" exemplifies a domestication strategy. A direct transliteration of "Oujia" by adapting the foreignization approach would leave foreign audiences confused. By choosing the culturally analogous "sandwich", the translation provides an intuitive understanding of the dish for Western audiences.

Stewed mandarin fish in pumpkin soup is a beloved Guangdong dish featuring tender mandarin fish. The fish is sliced and lightly coated in egg liquid for extra silkiness. Fresh fish slices are set aside while the bones, head, and pumpkin are simmered into a broth. The fish slices are then gently stewed in the broth until they curl and cook through. Finally, seasonings are placed on the fish, and hot oil is drizzled over the top, creating a flavorful and refreshing dish. In "stewed mandarin fish in pumpkin soup", the "golden soup" (金汤) is translated as "pumpkin soup", allowing foreign audiences to quickly grasp the dish's key ingredients—fish and pumpkin—enhancing cultural accessibility and acceptance.

Bamboo shoot soup with fresh and pickled streaky pork combines fresh bamboo shoots, cured pork belly, and fresh pork slices. The term " 笃 " refers to the sound of the slow-cooking process in a clay pot or stew pot, where ingredients are simmered over low heat with ample water or broth until fully tender. "Bamboo shoot" is the English equivalent for " 竹笋 ", while "soup" clearly conveys the liquid or semi-liquid nature of the dish. "Fresh and pickled streaky pork" describes the two types of pork used: "fresh" equals " 鲜 " and "pickled" equals " 腌 ", with "streaky pork" indicating marbled meat. The translation "bamboo shoot soup with fresh and pickled streaky pork" adapts the name " 腌笃鲜 " into a descriptive soup label, embodying domestication and enabling English-speaking audiences to easily recognize the dish's flavors and ingredients.

馒头 Steamed Bread

In A Bite of China, " 馒头 " is translated as "steamed bread", allowing the target audience to quickly understand the food's ingredients and cooking method. The translation is concise and clear, ensuring high receptivity and adaptability. However, the trend of translating it as "Mantou" is gaining traction, reflecting a shift from domestication to foreignization and signaling Chinese culture's proactive global outreach. Foreignization ultimately fosters greater recognition among international audiences for this staple food in China.

4.1.2. Dish names with metaphors

红烧狮子头 Braised Pork Balls

紫炝虎尾 Boiled Eel in Sauce

翡翠羹 Vegetable Soup

Braised pork balls have a story rich in whimsy and historical flair. Legend has it that ancient Chinese nobility, when hosting banquets, found the dish's plump, rounded shape reminiscent of a lion's head, hence it got this vivid name. The

dish features seasoned minced pork shaped into large meatballs, first deep-fried then braised to a glossy reddish-brown perfection, yielding tender, succulent bites. While the Chinese name poetically likens the meatballs to a lion's head, Western audiences, who typically avoid eating animal heads, offal, or feet, might misinterpret or even recoil from a literal translation such as "braised lion's head." Instead, the domestication translation "braised pork balls" pragmatically highlights the core ingredient (pork) and shape (balls), sidestepping cultural discomfort while preserving the dish's essence.

Similarly, boiled eel in sauce derives its Chinese name from its visual resemblance to a tiger's tail. The dish uses eel tail segments, sliced and simmered with spices until the texture and appearance evoke the striped flourish of a tiger's tail. A direct translation like "tiger's tail" could alarm Western diners unaccustomed to tiger meat, so the translation of "boiled eel in sauce" under domestication strategy plainly signals the key ingredient (eel) and preparation (sauced), meeting with the audience's culinary expectations.

Vegetable Soup, a vibrant and wholesome dish, dazzles with its jade-green hue against a white backdrop, mirroring the gemstone it is named after. Typically made from puréed spinach or lettuce blended with starch and egg for silkiness, its recipe varies regionally, sometimes enriched with seafood, meat, or spices. While a foreignization translation of "Jade Soup" retains the poetic cultural imagery, it obscures the actual ingredients for non-Chinese audiences. The domestication translation of "Vegetable Soup" sacrifices some lyrical charm for clarity, instantly conveying its green-vegetable base but dulling the cultural luster of its namesake.

4.1.3. Abstract dish names

腊味 Cured Meat

刀板香 Sliced Salted Pork

烩南北 Stewed Mushrooms with Winter Bamboo Shoots

Cured meat refers to meats like bacon, sausages, chicken, or fish that are cured and air-dried, a traditional winter preparation in nearly every Chinese household. The name "La Wei" offers no linguistic clue about its meat content, so the domestication translation "cured meat" efficiently conveys the preservation method. However, this simplification strips away the cultural connotation of "La Wei", which embodies Chinese New Year traditions.

Sliced salted pork is an iconic Anhui cuisine, one of the eight major cuisines in China. Dao Ban Xiang (刀板香) evokes the image of "fragrance lingering on the cutting board". Unlike many preserved meats, this dish forgoes smoking; instead, the salted pork is steamed atop aromatic camphor wood planks. As the wood absorbs excess fat, the result is a savory, tender slice with rich flavor but no greasiness. The English translation "Sliced Salted Pork" effectively conveys the key elements of the dish: pork and its preparation, while subtly alluding to the "knife" in the original name. However, it omits the defining camphor-wood steaming technique, which is central to its unique taste. A combination of domestication and foreignization, like "Dao Ban Xiang (Camphor-Steamed Salted Pork)", would better preserve its exotic charm while explaining its uniqueness.

Stewed mushrooms with winter bamboo shoots, a Hebei classic dish. It unites mushrooms (representing northern China) and bamboo shoots (representing the southern Jiangnan region). Sliced thin, stir-fried, and braised in broth, its name "烩南北" (stewed north-south) metaphorically bridges China's culinary geography. The domestication translation "stewed mushrooms with winter bamboo shoots" replaces the cultural metaphor with literal ingredients, easing comprehension but erasing the poetic north-south symbolism.

4.2. Foreignization

4.2.1. Dish names with international recognition

饺子 Jiaozi

粽子 Zongzi

麻婆豆腐 Mapo Tofu

With the deepening of globalization and cultural exchange, many non-English words have been widely accepted

and understood, among which China's "Jiaozi" is a prime example. The transliteration "Jiaozi" preserves the linguistic characteristics of Chinese without adopting any English equivalents, encouraging the target audience to explore and recognize the cultural context of the source language. In English, "dumplings" generally refer to a type of food made by wrapping dough around various fillings, which can be sweet or savory, and prepared through methods such as boiling, steaming, frying, or deep-frying. If "Jiaozi" were translated as "dumplings", it could refer to both Jiaozi and Tangyuan (sweet glutinous rice balls), even though the two are distinct in appearance, fillings, and flavors. "Jiaozi", however, retains its unique cultural identity.

Eating Zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival is a traditional Chinese custom. Zongzi are made by wrapping glutinous rice and fillings in leaves, forming shapes like equilateral triangles, squares, pyramids, rectangles, and more. Fillings can include red dates, mung beans, pork, sweet bean paste, mixed nuts, ham, mushrooms, egg yolk, and others. Zongzi originated from commemorating Qu Yuan, a poet of the Warring States period from the state of Chu. Unable to bear the fall of his homeland, Qu Yuan drowned himself in the Miluo River on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. To prevent fish and shrimp from devouring his body, people raced in boats to retrieve his remains and scattered rice into the river. This tradition evolved into the customs of dragon boat racing and eating Zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival. The translation of Zongzi under the foreignization strategy helps with the global promotion of this traditional Chinese festival food. However, without annotations or explanations, much of its cultural backstory is lost.

Mapo tofu is a renowned traditional dish from Sichuan Province, known for its spicy, numbing, and aromatic flavors. Tofu and minced pork are cooked with seasonings such as fermented bean paste, Sichuan peppercorns, and chili peppers. As the tofu absorbs the flavors of the meat and spices, the dish becomes rich and savory. Legend has it that Mapo tofu was created by a woman named Chen Mapo, who had pockmarks on her face. During the Qing Dynasty, she ran a small restaurant where her tofu dish gained fame and became a favorite among customers. Over time, Mapo tofu grew in popularity, becoming a classic representative of Sichuan cuisine and earning acclaim both domestically and internationally. "Mapo tofu" is a typical example of foreignization—"Mapo" preserves the original pronunciation and cultural essence of the Chinese term, while "tofu" is used instead of "bean curd", sparking curiosity and interest among English-speaking audiences about the cultural background of the dish. Nowadays, Mapo tofu has become a widely recognized Chinese dish worldwide, and this foreignization translation strategy reflects the strong acceptance of this name among target audiences.

4.2.2. Actively "going global" dish names

Chinese culinary culture is vast and profound, encompassing not only the eight major cuisines but also unique local delicacies from various areas. Due to factors such as regional economic development and sociocultural promotion, some foods have yet to gain widespread recognition among international audiences. However, as part of China's rich culinary heritage, there is a growing need to promote these dish names and food cultures abroad through foreignization strategies in translation, especially in the current era of actively promoting Chinese culture globally.

馕 Naan

锅盔 Guokwei (Dried Bun)

烧卖 Siu Mai (Steamed Pork Dumplings)

Naan is a round flatbread originating from China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, typically 40–50 cm in diameter, and holds significant importance in local dietary culture. The dough is infused with specific spices and then baked until the exterior is crispy while the interior remains soft, making it a versatile staple that pairs well with various dishes. By retaining the pinyin "Naan", the translation respects and preserves the cultural and regional characteristics of the original term, allowing audiences to engage with this unique food name. This foreignization strategy reflects the translator's confidence in the target audience's willingness to embrace new vocabulary, encouraging them to accept and learn about new cultural elements. Such an approach helps expand the international recognition of Chinese dish names and promotes their global presence.

Guokwei is a traditional baked pastry snack from the Guanzhong region of Shaanxi Province, northern Shanxi, as

well as Gansu and Sichuan. It is typically baked in an oven or over a fire, resulting in a crispy exterior and a soft interior. In some regions, Guokwei is stuffed with various fillings such as meat, vegetables, or other ingredients, enhancing its flavor and variety. The name Guokwei originates from ancient times when soldiers baked the dough on their metal helmets, hence the description "using a helmet as a pot, resembling both a pot and a helmet." If translated as "dried bun", foreigners might confuse it with other Chinese pastries. Therefore, the translator adopts the transliteration "Guokwei", preserving the cultural essence of the original name while sparking curiosity about the story behind this snack's unique name. This approach also allows international audiences to appreciate the diversity of Chinese cuisine.

Siu Mai is a traditional Cantonese dim sum dish. A firm dough made from flour and water is rested, rolled into thin wrappers with pleated edges resembling lotus leaves, and then filled with pork before being steamed. While its preparation is somewhat similar to that of dumplings, Siu Mai differs in that its top remains partially open, often garnished with fish roe or diced carrots. Translating it directly as "steamed pork dumplings" could lead to confusion among foreign audiences, making it difficult for them to distinguish from Jiaozi. Instead, the translator uses the Cantonese pronunciation "Siu Mai", maintaining the dish's authentic flavor and regional identity while contributing to the global promotion of Chinese culinary culture.

4.3. Combination of domestication and foreignization

诺邓火腿 Nuodeng Ham

白吉馍 Baiji Baked Bun

Nuodeng ham originates from Nuodeng Village in Yunlong County, Yunnan Province. It is made from the hind legs of free-range mountain pigs and cured using locally produced Nuodeng salt, which contains potassium and offers health benefits with its mild flavor. The production process involves trimming, salting, stacking and pressing, washing and sun-drying, hanging for air-drying, and a three-year fermentation period to achieve its distinctive taste and nutritional value. With a history dating back to the Tang Dynasty, Nuodeng ham carries profound cultural and historical significance. Following its feature in documentaries like A Bite of China, Nuodeng ham gained widespread fame, attracting tourists and food enthusiasts alike. In translation, the term "Nuodeng ham" skillfully combines domestication and foreignization strategies. While Western audiences may be unfamiliar with the place name "Nuodeng", the word "ham" is widely recognized in English-speaking cultures. The transliteration "Nuodeng" preserves the dish's regional identity, while "ham" ensures clarity for the target audience. This balanced approach maintains the original cultural connotations while enhancing accessibility.

Similarly, the Baiji baked bun derives its name from "Baiji", a historic relay station along a major thoroughfare connecting Shaanxi and Gansu. In translation, the foreignization strategy is applied by retaining "Baiji" in pinyin to emphasize its regional origin, while "baked bun" is familiar to English speakers by adopting a domestication strategy.

When translating such terms, considerations must include the ingredient's regional characteristics, preparation methods, and historical context. By combining domestication and foreignization strategies, international audiences can better understand and appreciate these Chinese culinary specialties with their rich cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

Chinese culinary nomenclature serves as a rich cultural repository, encoding profound historical narratives and cultural values through its distinctive representation of ingredients, cooking techniques, visual aesthetics, regional heritage, and symbolic meanings. Far beyond mere functional descriptors, these gastronomic terms constitute an important medium for cultural transmission and identity preservation. The comparative analysis reveals fundamental divergences between Chinese and Western approaches to dish naming, particularly in their respective emphasis on cultural poetics versus utilitarian description.

The English translations of dish names in A Bite of China demonstrate a flexible and balanced application of domestication and foreignization strategies: For dish names that describe ingredients and cooking methods, or those with

implied metaphors or abstract meanings, domestication is primarily used. For dish names that already enjoy international recognition or those less familiar to foreign audiences but actively "going global", foreignization is prioritized. For dish names with strong regional characteristics that also have equivalent terms in English, the translations combine domestication and foreignization. The analysis demonstrates that while domestication enhances immediate comprehension of a dish's tangible attributes (composition, preparation, sensory qualities), excessive reliance on this approach risks eroding the cultural semiotics and historical narratives embedded in the original nomenclature. To address this, the study identifies the efficacy of complementary translation techniques, particularly transliteration coupled with contextual glosses, which successfully maintain cultural fidelity while ensuring functional intelligibility.

Notably, evolving trends in culinary globalization are precipitating a paradigm shift in translation norms, with formerly domesticated terms, e.g., "steamed bread" for " 馒头 ", increasingly giving way to foreignized forms, "Mantou" as Chinese gastronomic culture gains global familiarity. This transition reflects both China's growing cultural confidence and international audiences' increasing receptivity to authentic Chinese culinary concepts.

In summary, domestication facilitates audience comprehension and reduces cultural barriers but may sacrifice some authenticity and cultural elements. Foreignization preserves the original cultural and linguistic characteristics, fostering cross-cultural exchange and cognitive diversity, but it may pose challenges in audience understanding and global promotion. A balanced combination of domestication and foreignization retains cultural connotations while ensuring accessibility. Translators must consider the dish name's type, features, and cultural significance, along with the time and space constraints of documentary subtitling, to strike an optimal balance between domestication and foreignization for the most effective translation and communication outcomes.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Lefevere A, 1977, Translating literature: the German tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig. Van Gorcum, Drenthe.

[2] Venuti L, 1995, The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation. Routledge, New York.

[3] Guo JZ, 1998, Cultural Factors in Translation: Foreignization and Domestication. Journal of Foreign Languages, 1998(2): 12–19.

[4] Pan S, Wang Q, 2024, Domestication and Foreignization Theory and Its Guiding Significance for Literary Text Translation. Comparative Study of Cultural Innovation, 8(31): 16–19.

[5] Sun ZL, 2002, Literary Translation in China: From Domestication to Foreignization. Chinese Translators Journal, 23(1): 5.

[6] Wen XF, 2018, A Study on the English Translation of Dish Names in A Bite of China from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics, thesis, Xi'an International Studies University.

[7] Zhang TL, 2015, Translation Strategies for Dish Names in A Bite of China under the Guidance of Skopos Theory, thesis, Hunan Normal University.

[8] Liang LN, 2013, The Translation of Dish Names in A Bite of China under the Guidance of Skopos Theory, thesis, Soochow University.

[9] Qin XF, 2024, Research and Practice on Strategies for Translating Chinese Food Culture. Food and Machinery, 40(7): 249.