A Skopos Analysis of Chinese Airline Brand Translation Strategies

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Abstract

This essay explores the English translation strategies of Chinese private airline brand names. As Chinese airlines expand globally, their naming choices reflect a complex balance between local culture and global markets. However, existing research often ignores the aviation sector, focusing instead on tangible goods. Therefore, this study analyzes 10 representative cases from China's private aviation industry using Skopos Theory. This study classifies these translations into two main categories based on their communicative purpose. First, strategies of cultural representation show how airlines use either domestication to ensure accessibility or foreignization to assert a unique cultural identity. Second, strategies of commercial adaptation show how airlines prioritize functional goals, such as corporate consistency or visual efficiency, over semantic meaning. The findings demonstrate that translation in this sector transcends linguistic improvisation, functioning instead as a strategic instrument of corporate positioning governed by teleological rationality. It highlights the explanatory power of Skopos Theory in unifying contradictory naming practices, demonstrating that translation serves as a strategic mechanism for balancing national identity with the imperatives of global market integration.

Keywords

Skopos Theory, Brand translation, Chinese airlines, Cultural representation, Commercial adaptation

Introduction

Airlines serve as powerful national name cards that project a country's image to the world. These brands function as unique symbols that mix national pride with the logic of global capital. In the context of China, the aviation market has changed significantly in recent years. While traditional state-owned carriers often follow a rigid, literal translation style, the rising sector of private and regional airlines shows a new diversity. These names range from the culturally specific, such as Loong Air, to the purely functional, such as 9 Air. Recent studies confirm that such airline naming is not just a linguistic label but reflects broader social and market shifts in emerging economies [1].

Despite this significance, current academic research on brand translation remains limited. Most studies focus heavily on tangible goods like fashion or the hospitality sector, largely ignoring the aviation industry [2,3]. More critically, existing scholarship often relies on the binary framework of domestication and foreignization, viewing the omission of source culture as a form of cultural loss or linguistic deficit. This perspective is insufficient for analyzing modern corporate branding, as it overlooks the possibility that in the context of global capitalism, deculturalization is not a failure but a deliberate strategic choice. Functional translations like Okay Airways or Longjiang (LJ) Air do not simply fail to convey culture, they actively abandon it to prioritize efficiency and visual appeal. This creates a clear research gap: the lack of a unified theoretical framework capable of reconciling the often-conflicting demands of global business strategy, cultural identity, and translation purpose [4].

To address the research gap identified above, this essay applies Skopos Theory as the primary theoretical framework. This theory posits that translation is a purposeful action where the end justifies the means. The theory establishes a hierarchy of three rules: the Skopos Theory rule, the Coherence rule, and the Fidelity rule. In the context of commercial branding, this study argues that the Skopos Theory rule is dominant: The target text must simply function for the target recipient, often necessitating a deliberate violation of linguistic fidelity to achieve market entry. However, a purely functionalist approach risks being interpreted as allowing any translation as long as it works. This rovide a more robust

ethical dimension, this study incorporates the principle of function plus loyalty.

Methodologically, this research uses a qualitative comparative case study approach. It selects 10 representative cases from China's private aviation sector to show the full spectrum of strategies. Data for these cases were collected from their official websites and annual reports. The 10 cases were selected using maximum variation sampling to represent the full spectrum of strategies, ranging from literal translation to complete semiotic transformation. In the following analysis, specific cases are presented using the abbreviations source text (ST), referring to the Chinese brand name and pinyin, literal translation (LT) and target text (TT), referring to the official English brand name.

Literature review

The study of translation has changed a lot over the years, moving from a focus on word-for-word accuracy to a focus on the goal of the text. This change is best seen in Skopos Theory, which argues that translation is a purposeful activity rather than just a linguistic task. In this view, the success of a translation is judged by how well it works in the target culture to achieve a specific result. For companies trying to name their brands, translation becomes a strategic tool to reach business goals. The most important part of this theory is the Skopos Theory rule, which says that the purpose of the translation decides the methods the translator should use. Translators follow a set of rules where the goal of communication is the highest priority, followed by the need for the text to make sense to the readers and finally the need to stay true to the original text. This allows for more creativity, as the specific instructions given to the translator become the main guide [5].

While Skopos Theory is popular, some people worry that focusing too much on the goal might cause the translator to ignore what the original author wanted [6]. To fix this, the idea of function plus loyalty was created. This means the translator has a responsibility to be fair to both the person who owns the brand and the customers who use it. In branding, a translation should help a business succeed while still keeping its core identity. This helps translators decide how to handle cultural differences, such as whether to keep the deep cultural meaning of a name or simplify it for a new market. By focusing on how a name functions, translators help brands cross cultural borders more easily. This matches the idea that translators can choose either hide or show a foreign culture based on their strategic goals. Today, the quality of a translation is measured by how well it does its job in the real world rather than just how accurate the dictionary's meaning is. If a name is easy to remember and works well for a business, it is considered a good translation even if it does not capture every detail of the original name [7].

Beyond the words themselves, a brand name is a complex system of signs that carries deep meaning. Scholars now look at branding through social semiotics, which say that the meaning of a brand comes from words, images, and the social context. Branding is a process where companies create symbols that customers can recognize and value. For airlines, this is very important because they act as mobile territories that carry a national image as they fly between countries. Airline branding often mixes national pride with the needs of global business, using signs to tell a story about where the airline comes from. In this way, an airline's name acts like a diplomatic tool that defines the relationship between its home country and the rest of the world. The airplane itself becomes a place where social and political ideas are shown through metaphors and symbols.

Effective branding uses a mix of visual and verbal signs to make sure the message is clear to a global audience. When an airline translates its name, it is often redesigning its whole story to fit into a new market [8,9]. A big challenge for these companies is managing cultural authenticity. Customers often want brands that feel real and true to their origins. There is often a difference between the image an airline wants to show and how the customer actually sees it [10]. Some brands use traditional cultural symbols to show a strong identity, while others create a simplified version of their culture that is easier for foreigners to understand. While some names focus on luxury and status, others focus on being modern and efficient [11]. A unique name can help an airline stand out, but if the brand does not meet customer expectations, people may speak negatively about it. Many airlines now choose names that move away from deep cultural signs to focus on efficiency and speed. This shows that in the global market, the functional value of a name often becomes more important than its historical meaning.

When brands go global, they must choose between two main translation strategies: domestication and foreignization. Domestication makes a brand name feel familiar to the local audience, while foreignization keeps the original cultural elements to show the brand's roots. This is a strategic decision that affects how people see the brand [12]. Domestication can make it easier for customers to accept a brand, but foreignization can help a brand stand out by appearing exotic [13]. This creates a paradox where companies must try to be both global and local at the same time [14]. The decision often depends on the goals of the company and how different the two cultures are [15]. Power also plays a role in these choices, as English is often the dominant language in global business, leading to many brands choosing English names [16]. Multinational companies use language to control their image, but domestication can sometimes hide the original culture, leading to a loss of cultural diversity [17].

From a marketing point of view, these strategies are used to influence how customers behave. Domestication can make a product feel more relevant to a person's daily life. However, how a person reacts depends on their own values. Some people prefer brands from their own country because of national pride, while others enjoy global connections and are more open to foreign brands. For these global-minded customers, a foreign name might feel more authentic and provide a sense of status. The ultimate goal is to build trust and legitimacy. If a brand uses too much domestication, it might lose its foreign appeal and feel fake [18-20]. If it uses too much foreignization, it might be too difficult for the local market to understand. Brands must find a balance between being understood and keeping their unique identity [21].

Many companies also use a strategy called deculturalization, which involves removing specific cultural markers to make a brand more acceptable to everyone [22]. This is not a loss of identity but a way to manage how a company is seen globally. A part of this is de-ethnicization, where a brand hides its ethnic roots to fit into a mainstream market. This helps a brand look like a world citizen rather than just a representative of one nation. In translation, this is done through strategic omission, where information is purposefully left out to make the message work better in a new environment.

This is a tactical choice to ensure the message is clear. By leaving out complex meanings, a brand ensures its name is easy to read and remember [23,24].

The main reason for simplifying a brand name is to manage the cognitive load, or the mental effort needed to understand it. If a brand name is too complex, it can lead to a negative attitude from customers [25]. In a fast market, people make choices quickly based on how easily they can understand a sign [26]. High mental effort can stop a customer from connecting with a brand. Therefore, using simple words or numbers of helps consumers process information faster and with less effort. This drive for simplicity is a form of functional reductionism, where a brand is reduced to its most basic parts to be more effective [27,28]. In industries like aviation, the function of a name is often more important than its history. This often leads to a mix of cultural and global standards, where traditional ideas are changed to be more universal. Strategic omission also helps avoid the risk of a cultural discount, where an original meaning is misunderstood or disliked by foreigners. By using simple English or well-chosen numbers, brands can bypass deep cultural issues and create an identity that is clean, efficient, and ready for the global market. These choices are not random; they are careful business decisions made to ensure commercial success and global recognition [29].

Strategies of cultural representation

According to Skopos Theory, translation is not a random linguistic process but a purposeful action. The translator must define the specific function of the target text before choosing a strategy. In the context of airline naming, the most complex challenge is how to handle cultural attributes. The airline must decide whether to hide its foreign origin to fit in, or to highlight its unique heritage to stand out. Based on the specific Skopos Theory of the brand, Chinese airlines use two distinct approaches within this category: domestication for market accessibility and foreignization for cultural assertion.

For mass-market airlines, the dominant purpose is often to lower the cognitive barrier for international passengers. The Skopos Theory here is accessibility and acceptability. To achieve this, airlines frequently use domestication. This strategy replaces specific Chinese cultural concepts with general, positive English words. Example 1:

ST: Chunqiu Hangkong

LT: Spring and Autumn Airlines

TT: Spring Airlines

As illustrated in Example 1, Spring Airlines drops the historical reference to the Spring and Autumn Period, which represents tradition but lacks global recognition. By keeping only spring, the brand evokes universal associations of energy. This shift prioritizes commercial friendliness over historical accuracy.

This strategy of strategic omission is used to lower the cognitive load for international customers. By removing the historical context of the Spring and Autumn Period, the brand avoids confusing passengers with deep cultural signs that they might not understand. This ensures the name is easy to process quickly, which is essential in the fast-paced travel market where consumers make decisions based on how easily they can understand a sign.

From a marketing psychology perspective, the omission of autumn is strategic. In the travel industry, spring connotes vitality and new beginnings, whereas autumn can subtly imply decline or weathering. By filtering out the potentially negative semantic component, the translation aligns perfectly with the Skopos Theory of attracting leisure travelers seeking a vibrant experience. Similarly, market acceptance often overrides semantic accuracy.

Example 2:

ST: Xiangpeng Hangkong

LT: Auspicious Roc Airlines

TT: Lucky Air

In Example 2, the character *Peng* refers to the mythical Roc. Since this image is unfamiliar to Western audiences, Lucky Air translates the adjective Xiang (Auspicious) into Lucky. This choice clearly shows that the Skopos Theory of being liked outweighs the Skopos Theory of being accurate.

This domestication approach acts as a way to manage the cultural discount, where foreign customers might dislike or feel distant from a brand if it feels too exotic or difficult to grasp. By choosing a simple and positive word like Lucky, the company follows the Principle of Loyalty by being fair to the international customer's expectations and needs. The airline prioritizes market speed and visual efficiency over the complex semiotic meaning of the original bird symbol, making the brand feel more relevant to the consumer's daily life.

Example 3:

ST: Xibu Hangkong

LT: West Region Airlines

TT: West Air

A functional approach is seen in Example 3. Since Xibu is a geographic indicator, West Air translates it directly. This is not merely a linguistic default but a strategic positioning choice. By retaining the stark geographic signifier, the brand positions itself as a dominant regional specialist rather than a generic national carrier.

This reflects a form of functional reductionism, where the brand name is reduced to its most basic job: showing where the airline operates. As a mobile territory, West Air uses its name to define its relationship with a specific geography, helping passengers instantly understand its territory and service area. This simple, functional choice helps build brand legitimacy without requiring the consumer to engage in high mental effort to understand the brand's identity.

The Skopos Theory here is to leverage the destination's identity as a primary selling point, establishing immediate operational authority in that specific territory.

Example 4:

ST: Changlong Hangkong

LT: Long Dragon Airlines

TT: Loong Air

Example 4, Loong Air, rejects the standard dragon to avoid negative Western connotations of the beast. Instead, it uses the transliteration Loong. Crucially, this aligns with a shift in state ideology regarding external publicity, moving toward self-defined narratives.

By choosing Loong instead of Dragon, the airline engages in a purposeful act of projected authenticity, showing a strong sense of national identity and cultural pride. This foreignization strategy allows the brand to act as a diplomatic tool that manages the national image of China on the global stage. While domestication often hides the foreign culture to fit dominant global rules, Loong Air uses its name to maintain its unique cultural roots and show its core identity.

By participating in the standardization of Chinese terms, the airline achieves a dual Skopos Theory: avoiding misunderstanding while exporting cultural concepts. This approach stands in sharp contrast to the earlier domestication strategy of Lucky Air (Example 2). While

Lucky Air erases cultural specificity to play it safe, Loong Air reclaims it. This shift from domestication to foreignization mirrors the growing confidence of Chinese domestic brands in the global arena, signaling a move from fitting in to standing out.

Example 5:

ST: Jinpeng Hangkong

LT: Golden Roc Airlines

TT: Suparna Airlines

As illustrated in Example 5, Suparna Airlines targets a high-end market. Sharing the same Peng character as Lucky Air (Example 2), it chooses the Sanskrit *Suparna* (a divine bird) instead of simplifying.

This use of Sanskrit is a sophisticated semiotic choice designed to build a sense of luxury, wealth, and status. For cosmopolitan consumers who value global connections and are attracted to authentic foreign ideas, this foreignized name provides a sense of high value and brand uniqueness. By moving away from simple English, Suparna Airlines manages the dilemma of authenticity by offering a specific cultural experience that appeals to a premium market. This strategy ensures the airline stands out from competitors by highlighting its unique and exotic heritage. This sophisticated choice connects the brand to a high-context Asian heritage, positioning it as premium and culturally authentic.

The above strategies of cultural representation show a clear spectrum dictated by purpose. When the goal is mass-market safety, airlines like Spring Airlines and Lucky Air use domestication to erase cultural barriers, prioritizing a fluent experience for the customer. Conversely, when the goal is differentiation, airlines like Loong Air and Suparna Airlines use foreignization to highlight their origins, prioritizing cultural uniqueness. This shift substantiates that under Skopos Theory, the treatment of culture is simply a tool to achieve the specific commercial goals of the airline [30].

Strategies for commercial adaptation

While the previous section explored how airlines negotiate cultural identity, a significant number of Chinese airline names cannot be explained by cultural motives alone. In these cases, the translation ostensibly ignores the semantic meaning of the source text. From a traditional linguistic perspective, these translations could be construed as errors or betrayals of the original name. However, Skopos Theory provides a robust framework to explain these choices. It argues that if the dominant purpose (Skopos Theory) of the translation is purely functional, such as legal protection, visual efficiency, or market positioning, then linguistic faithfulness becomes irrelevant. Consequently, many airlines adopt commercial adaptation, where the English name is designed strictly to serve a business function rather than to convey cultural meaning. The first and perhaps most vital function in this category is corporate consistency. Large conglomerates often own airlines as subsidiary companies.

Example 6:

ST: Jixiang Hangkong

LT: Auspicious Airlines

TT: Juneyao Air

Juneyao Air (Example 6) exemplifies this. While Jixiang means auspicious, a literal translation would sever the link to the parent Juneyao Group. The airline accepts a semantic gap to fulfill the purpose of brand asset protection and corporate unity: the Chinese says good luck while the English names the founder.

This decision reflects a clear move toward de-ethnicization, where the company hides its specific cultural roots to fit into a mainstream business structure. By using the parent company's name, the brand creates a unified corporate identity that works across different industries. This helps build brand legitimacy and trust with global partners, as the name signals a professional and stable business organization rather than just a local airline.

This decision reflects a sophisticated understanding of brand equity transfer. By utilizing the founder's name, the airline inherits the established reputation and financial credibility of the parent conglomerate, which is far more valuable for attracting international investors and partners than a generic culturally positive adjective. Beyond corporate consistency, another driving force for commercial adaptation is visual efficiency.

Example 7:

ST: Longjiang Hangkong

LT: Dragon River Airlines

TT: LJ Air

A clear case is LJ Air (Example 7). The name Longjiang means dragon river, a potent cultural image. However, the airline avoids translating it or using Pinyin. Instead, it adopts the acronym LJ. This radical reduction strips

away meaning to prioritize visual function.

This is a strong example of deculturalization, where the brand systematically removes cultural markers like the *Dragon* to become more acceptable to a wide international audience. The use of strategic omissions here is a purposeful choice to serve the goal of clear communication. By leaving out the complex cultural narrative, the brand ensures its identity is clean and works effectively in the global capital system.

LJ is short, easy to type, and fits perfectly into square logos, arguing that visual speed is more valuable than cultural depth. Taking the concept of efficiency further, some airlines use semiotics to signal their market positioning.

Example 8:

ST: Jiuyuan Hangkong

LT: Nine Yuan Airlines

TT: 9 Air

Example 8, 9 Air, exemplifies this. Jiuyuan references cheap ticket prices. The airline replaces the word nine with the numeral 9. Theoretically, this represents an act of intersemiotic translation, which is a transmutation from verbal signs to non-verbal numerical systems.

This choice is primarily designed to manage the cognitive load of the consumer. Since numbers are processed faster than words, using 9 helps the customer understand the brand message with very little mental effort. It follows the logic of functional reductionism, where the brand is reduced to its most basic functional par, affordability, to be more effective in a fast-paced market. By focusing on visual efficiency, the airline ensures its low-cost identity is immediately clear to a global audience.

Unlike LJ Air, which uses brevity for logo constraints, 9 Air uses the number to signal affordability. In marketing semiotics, numbers of bypass language barriers are linked to discounts. By using 9, the brand creates a psychological link to low cost, indicating that pragmatic signaling overrides linguistic form.

Example 9:

ST: Aokai Hangkong

LT: N/A (Phonetic Transliteration)

TT: Okay Airways

While 9 Air uses visual symbols, Example 9 illustrates how Okay Airways exploits sound symbolism. The name Aokai is abstract, but sounds like the English okay. In aviation, it is a pragmatic marker implying safety and readiness.

Adopting Okay is a domestication strategy that makes the brand feel familiar and easy to understand for an international audience. This creates a form of perceived authenticity, where the consumer feels the brand is modern and reliable because it uses a word that is recognized worldwide. The brand is not just changing its name. It is redesigning its entire narrative to fit a global market where okay serves as a symbol of success and safety.

Adopting Okay Airways abandons the original definition for an English word that sounds similar but carries a useful marketing message. Also, Consumers serve as active listeners who infer brand attributes directly from phonemes, independent of lexical meaning. By leveraging the inherent positive effect of the sound okay, the brand creates an unconscious sense of trust, a phenomenon further confirmed by recent studies in hospitality branding [31]. Finally, the most basic form of commercial adaptation is administrative standardization.

Example 10:

ST: Donghai Hangkong

LT: Eastern Sea Airlines

TT: Donghai Airlines

As seen in Example 10, Donghai Airlines follows this path. While East Sea is valid, the airline sticks to standard Pinyin. Unlike the calculated strategies above, this reflects a conservative Skopos Theory rooted in risk aversion.

This choice shows how power relationships and regulations shape translation. By following Pinyin, the airline prioritizes its relationship with domestic government authorities. This reflects the Coherence rule within Skopos Theory, as the name must first make sense and be acceptable within its primary regulatory environment [32]. The function here is to signal stability and compliance, ensuring that the airline's identity remains true to its core administrative roots while still being accessible to a global market.

By prioritizing strict alignment with Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) regulations over marketing creativity, the airline ensures absolute legal and administrative consistency. In this context, the function of the name is not to attract foreign passengers, but to signal regulatory compliance and stability to

domestic stakeholders.

These above cases demonstrate that commercial adaptation is not a failure of translation, but a shift in purpose. Whether through corporate alignment, visual acronyms, numerical symbols, or phonetic puns, these airlines affirm that in the business world, the function of a name often outweighs its meaning [33]. Skopos Theory successfully unifies these diverse methods by identifying the specific commercial intent behind each choice.

Conclusion

This essay has analyzed the English translation strategies of Chinese private airline brand names through the lens of Skopos Theory. By examining 10 representative cases, the study argues that translation in the aviation sector is not merely a linguistic transfer, but a strategic act governed by specific communicative purposes. The findings reveal that Chinese private airlines eschew a monolithic translation approach, instead adopting dynamic strategies predicated on the brand's dominant functional imperative in the global market.

The analysis reveals two distinct patterns. First, in terms of cultural representation, the study finds a spectrum of choices. Mass-market airlines like Spring Airlines and Lucky Air tend to use domestication. They simplify cultural meanings to ensure accessibility and safety for international passengers. In contrast, newer carriers like Loong Air and Suparna Airlines use foreignization. They deliberately keep or borrow specific cultural terms to assert a unique identity and show national pride. This supports the view that the treatment of cultural heritage is a calculated decision based on the airline's desire to either fit in or stand out.

Second, the study highlights the importance of commercial adaptation. A significant number of airlines, such as Juneyao Air, LJ Air, and 9 Air, prioritize functional goals over semantic meaning. These cases suggest that factors like corporate consistency, visual efficiency, and market positioning often outweigh the need for linguistic faithfulness. By using acronyms, numbers, or sound symbolism, these airlines demonstrate that the best translation is the one that works most effectively for the business model, not the one that is most accurate to the dictionary.

Theoretically, this research validates the utility of Skopos Theory in analyzing commercial texts. It successfully unifies diverse strategies, from the cultural assertion of Loong to the pragmatic signaling of Okay Airways, under a single explanatory framework. Beyond theoretical validation, this study offers critical practical implications for Chinese enterprises going global. The findings suggest that translation strategies must be dynamically aligned with market positioning. However, this strategic flexibility comes with a caveat. While aggressive commercial adaptation, such as the acronymization seen in LJ Air, maximizes visual efficiency and lowers cognitive barriers, it risks stripping the brand of its unique cultural DNA. In the long run, this deculturalization could lead to a crisis of distinctiveness, leaving the brand indistinguishable in a crowded global market. Therefore, managers must carefully weigh the short-term benefits of rapid market entry against the long-term risks of brand homogenization.

However, this study has limitations. It relies on a small sample of 10 cases and focuses primarily on the linguistic and strategic analysis of the names themselves. It does not measure the actual reaction of passengers to these names. Future research could expand the sample size or use quantitative surveys to test how international consumers perceive these different naming strategies. Ultimately, this essay concludes that for Chinese airlines going global, translation is a vital tool for balancing local roots with global routes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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