

# TRANSCENDING LANGUAGE BARRIERS: AN ANALYTICAL EXPLORATION OF TRANSLATION METHODS IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE FILM TITLES

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## Abstract

Film titles serve as an important tool for film promotion and attract the attention of the audience. The translation of film titles is crucial when films are viewed globally. This article is a contrastive study of English and Chinese film titles and focuses on the language characteristics of film titles and the different translation methods used for realizing the film's functions. The four main functions of film titles are informative, expressive, vocative, and aesthetic, each playing a significant role in the promotion of the film. The study highlights the similarities and differences between the two languages in terms of word structure, thinking, and cultural backgrounds. The article emphasizes the necessity of appropriate translation methods that retain the original charm and conform to the characteristics of the target language to spread culture and promote the film better. This work suggests that a literal translation can be preferred when foreign audiences can understand the meaning of the original titles. Still, free translation may be used to better convey the general idea of the original text when the title's meaning loses its significance in translation. The study points out some of the existing problems in Chinese film title translations that can mar the effective promotion of films. This article provides insights into film title translation and contributes to the development of film title studies.

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**Keywords:** Film Title Translation, Contrastive Study, Translation methods, Informative Function, Expressive Function, Vocative Function, Aesthetic Function.

## Introduction

As a kind of visual art, film is not only the source of mass entertainment, but also a powerful medium to educate citizens. Film title is an important part of a film. Firstly, title is the door that leads the audiences to understand the film. Secondly, film title is a high degree of generalization and induction for the content and theme of the film by use of the simple and concise words. Apart from that, a successful film title should also have the aesthetic feeling.

With the development of cultural exchanges, the spread of film is more and more extensive. Many outstanding foreign films have been introduced into China, while more and more Chinese films are embracing the world. Therefore, the translation of film titles becomes one of the issues that worth full concern. Because of the differences between English and Chinese in various factors, the film titles of the two have their own characteristics. It demands that translators should translate based on these differences, making the translation conform to the characteristics of the target language, at the same time, the translation should retain the functions like the original titles.

## Chapter One General Review on Film Title 1.1 Concept of Film Title

Film title, as the name indicates, is the title of a film. Film title is a high generalization and induction of the content and theme of a film by using brief and precise language, which usually applies rhetorical devices such as metaphor, symbolism, allusion and so on.

## **1.2 Functions of Film Title**

Generally, there mainly four functions of film titles: informative function, expressive function, vocative function and aesthetic function. Informative function is the basic function of a film title. It means that a title of film should convey the information about the film to the audiences. Reflecting the theme of the film, film title should tell people what the film is about.

Expressive function is another function of film title. Through using some special words and expressions, the film title can imply its emotion and ideas, which can make people attracted by it and achieve emotional resonance. Emotional tone is usually set in the title.

Vocative function, also known as business function, is also an essential function of film title. Based on the faithfulness to the content and theme, the film title should try to make the audiences curious about the film and buy the tickets, which promotes the commercial interests of the film. Aesthetics function means that a good film title is able to touch the audience with beautiful language and make people remember it. And rhetoric methods are often used to achieve this function. In a word, most of the film titles generally realize at least one of these functions. Some titles even can have several functions at the same time.

## **1.3 Development Status of Film Title Study**

The researches on film title mainly attach importance to the E-C translation of film titles from the angle of different translation theories. And Chinese translation of foreign film titles is specially stressed. There mainly three kinds of trends about translation of film titles in China. Firstly, translation of film titles is a part of literary translation, which should be guided by the traditional translation theory. "Faithfulness" or "fidelity" needs to be ranked as first<sup>1</sup>; Secondly, by the application of the theory of the Manipulation School, some scholars tried to explain the differences among the translation of film titles in Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Thirdly, in some other researchers' opinions, the translation of film titles is a branch of advertisement translation, it's necessary to consider the commercial factor in translation.

However, there exist some problems in the field of film title translation in China. Some translations ignore the artistic quality because of the excessive pursuit of commercial success. Another problem is some words and expressions are misused in the translation such as "xx 总动员" "xx 也疯狂" and so on, causing the aesthetic fatigue of audiences. In addition, the excessive differences among Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan also make Chinese audiences confused<sup>2</sup>. There relatively not many studies about English translation of Chinese films. Looking at the current situation of translation, most of the titles are literal translation, which doesn't have characteristics of English language. But there are also some good translations.

## **Chapter Two Comparison of English and Chinese Film Titles 2.1 Similarities between Chinese and English film titles**

There are several similarities between Chinese and English titles. Both Chinese and English titles need to realize their functions and effects. Limited by the screen, most of the film titles are brief and simple, which highly generalize the plot and idea of the films. Film titles usually consist of one or several words. The film titles as long as a sentence are usually rare in both Chinese and English films. Apart from that, a qualified film title must be easy to understand. Film is an artistic form of popular culture. It determines that too obscure and professional words and phrases are unsuited to be served as film titles. Popular language is a better choice, which makes the audiences understand the meanings of the title easily.

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Last but not least, a good film title should be attractive to make people go to the cinema and buy tickets. Thanks to the commercial factor of film, both English and Chinese film titles need to attract audiences, which is helpful to promote the box offices.

## **2.2 Differences between Chinese and English film titles**

### **2.2.1 Differences in Word**

There exist many differences between Chinese and English film titles in the number of words. In English films, the titles usually consist of one to three words, reflecting the simple, direct thinking mode of Western people. We can see the titles of the English films including *Twister*, *Ice Age*, *Rush Hour*, all of them have a title of no more than three words.

While Chinese film titles are often composed of four-characters such as 《非诚勿扰》《流浪地球》 and so on. Because idioms are familiar to Chinese, four-character film titles are able to be remembered by Chinese audiences.

Apart from number of words, the structure of words is also a distinction between Chinese and English film titles. Most of the English film titles are noun-oriented. Noun is the kind of words used most in English, and this characteristic also showed in English film titles. The structure of English film titles is generally the combination of head word and modifier. *Last Castle*, *Fair Game*, and *Man of Honor* are good examples of this, which embody the logical thinking mode of Western people. As for Chinese, on the contrary, Chinese is verb-oriented. Verb also plays the main role in the naming of Chinese films including the examples 《十面埋伏》《卧虎藏龙》

》 and so on, showing the imagery thinking of Chinese people. In terms of structure, subject-predicate structure, modification-center structure, and verb-object construction are often used in Chinese film titles.

### **2.2.2 Differences in Thinking**

Besides differences in word, Western people and Chinese also have distinct ways of thinking when naming a film. In terms of English film titles, they are often named with a key detail of the film including name of leading character, time, place, background of the film. Reflecting the analytical thinking of Western people, this kind of film titles not only imply the theme and ideas of the film, but also make the audiences curious about this film. We can see some films showing this characteristic: *Forrest Gump*, *World War II*, *Red Eye*, etc. Taking the film *Red Eye* as example, “Red Eye” refers to the flights launched by some airlines that take off in the middle of the night and arrive on the early morning. The film tells that Lisa had to take the red eye at night to arrive in Dallas for her grandmother’s funeral, she met a strange man, Jackson, and was threatened by him. In the title, the factor “Red Eye” is used to imply the plot of the film. On the contrary, Chinese film titles are mostly high generalizations of the theme and emotion of the film, audiences can get what this film wants to express easily and clearly. It’s the manifestation of comprehensive thinking of Chinese people. The Chinese films 《红海行动》《智取威虎山》 are all titles that generalize the film. For example, the film 《智取威虎山》 tells that the leading character Yang Zirong combated with the bandit Zuo Shandiao with his own wisdom and courage, and the audience can clearly have a general understanding of the content of the film.

### **2.2.3 Difference in Culture**

As is known to us all, Western countries and China have distinct cultural backgrounds, this kind of properties also show in the naming of films. In terms of philosophical differences, English-speaking countries usually express themselves in a bold and direct way, they don’t regard the words like “sex” as a kind of taboo; while in China, people usually express implicitly and directly, and film titles also have similar properties.

In terms of difference in allusion, although both English and Chinese films include the theme of myths, they have different contents. As for Western countries, *Clash of the Titans* and *Hercules: The Legend Begins* originate from Greek mythology, *Beowulf* and *Kingdom in Twilight* are from Northern mythology. And there are many mythologies in Chinese culture used in film titles. When it comes to fairy stories, you can see 《白蛇：缘起》《大闹天宫》 and some other films. Historical allusion is another important part. 《赤壁》 is an appropriate example.

In addition to the differences above, English and Chinese film titles often contain different implied meanings due to cultural backgrounds. For example, the same expression of colors in film titles may imply different emotional ideas because English and Chinese audiences usually hold different opinions on the meaning of colors. For instance, the color “red” usually implies revolutionary spirit and heroism in China such as 《红色娘子军》《红岩》 and so on. However, red is often regarded as the feeling of danger and violence in English-speaking countries such as *Red Eye* mentioned before. The “red” of the title implies the dangerous experience of Lisa.

### **Chapter Three Translation Methods of English and Chinese Film Titles 3.1 Literal Translation**

Literal translation is a kind of translation method that keeps both the content and the form of the original text, which is the most common method of translation. On the premise of not violating the plot and content of the film and not causing wrong association, translator can reproduce the title with vivid and appropriate language. It's the best choice when the translator finds that the foreign audiences are able to understand the meaning of the original titles.

There are many examples like 《天下无贼》(A World Without Thieves), 《红高粱》(Red Sorghum), Birdman (《鸟人》) and so on. Even though these titles are translated into another language without the changes of content and form, the target audiences will not misunderstand the titles because of the differences in characteristic of film titles. This kind of translation method is simple to understand and faithful to the original topic. At the same time, literal translation of film titles can minimize the loss of meaning and maximize the culture and charm of the film.

### **3.2 Free Translation**

Relative to literal translation, free translation refers that the translator does translation job according to the general idea of the original text instead of translating word for word. If the differences between English and Chinese film titles cannot be overcome directly, free translation will be the better method than literal translation. Guided by the content of original title, translator may change or delete the structural form or rhetoric means of it and translate it into target language fluently and clearly to make audiences understand what the film want to express.

For example, in the Chinese translation of English films, there exist two classic translations of film titles about the key word “bridge”(桥). The one of them is *Waterloo Bridge*. This film is a love tragedy of an officer Roy and a ballet dancer Myra. They first met on Waterloo Bridge and then fell in love. But the war made them miss each other, finally Myra ended her life on Waterloo Bridge. Of course, as mentioned above, the title is named by a detail, place, to imply the love tragedy of the film, which accords with the property of English films. Nevertheless, if using literal translation method, the Chinese title should be 《滑铁卢桥》, which will make Chinese audience confused about the emotion of the film. So it's necessary to make some changes on the basis of the original title. We can retain the image of “bridge” and add emotional color to the translation to make the title more general. 《魂断蓝桥》 is a wonderful name. “蓝桥” comes from a love tragedy in *Zhuang-Zi*, which is similar to

the story of *Waterloo Bridge*. Not only the title can express its emotion based on Chinese cultural background, but also shows artistic beauty. Another title about bridge is *The Bridge of Madison County*, which is also a love tragedy. Obviously, the free translation 《廊桥遗梦》 is better than the literal translation 《麦迪逊的桥》 because the former embodies the pitiful love between the hero and heroine.

And then we will discuss English translation of Chinese film titles. The example to be analyzed is 《我不是潘金莲》. The leading character, Li Xuelian, persevered in justice for herself in more than ten years of complaints. And the origin of this story is a word by her husband saying that Li is Pan Jinlian. Pan is a character of *The Water Margin* (《水浒传》) and it's a familiar image of woman for Chinese people, implying the fast and bad woman. However, Western people may not know the cultural meaning of the name. The English name of this film is *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, different from Pan Jinlian, Madame Bovary is a familiar image of woman for Westerners, which comes from Flaubert's Novel. Madame Bovary is also a woman who has a dissolute life. Both the fidelity to the content and the difference in culture are taken into consideration in this translation.

### 3.3 Transliteration

Transliteration refers to the translation of loanwords with similar pronunciation. This kind of translation no longer has its original meaning, but only retains its speech sounds and writing forms. When translating the title of a film, we often encounter the names of foreigners, proper nouns, places, historical events, and words that cannot be matched in Chinese. It can be transliterated directly without causing cultural misinterpretation. The films *Hamlet* (《哈姆雷特》), *Romeo and Juliet* (《罗密欧与朱丽叶》) are all titles using transliteration. On the one hand, these names come from masterpieces, both Westerners and Chinese are familiar with them; on the other hand, it's helpful to spread the culture to other countries.

### 3.4 Combination of Methods

Sometimes we need to combine several translation methods to achieve ideal effects. *Forrest Gump* (《阿甘正传》) is the combination of free translation and transliteration. “甘” is the transliteration of “Gump”, however, simple transliteration of title is not consistent with the characteristic of Chinese film title. 《阿甘正传》 borrows the context of 《阿 Q 正传》 (*Ah Q*) by Lu Xun, the name “阿甘” has shortened the distance with spectators, the pure and simple image of Gump will easily come to audiences' minds.

### 3.5 Translation According to Content

If the translation methods above are unable to achieve functions of film titles, the translator is supposed to show the subjective effects and innovation ability, renaming the film according to the theme and content of it.

*Themla&Louise* (《末路狂花》) can be regarded as a wonderful example. The original title is just the names of two heroines, the story of film centers around the two women. Taking names as film title is a common naming method of English films. *Themla&Louise* tells that Themla, an unhappy housewife and her lonely friend, Louise, planned to have a trip to relax, however, they had to escape because of an accidental killing. Their characters changed a lot on the way to escape. 《末路狂花》 is a great generalization of this story and it has four characters, according with the features of Chinese film titles. In addition, this title is both long aftertaste and attractive, which can be regarded as a



classic. Apart from this, the English films *Hilary and Jackie*'s Chinese translation is 《她比烟花寂寞》, it's also a representation of this kind of translation.

When it comes to English translation of Chinese film titles, a good example is the film 《老炮儿》 (*Mr. Six*). The leading character, Mr. Six, is an old gangster who was discarded by epoch. And the film is a story about the relationship between Mr. Six and his son and the confrontation between new and old forces. “老炮儿” is a slang in Beijing, referring to the old gangsters who are idle and grumpy. It's hard to use any translation methods, and foreigners can't know the meaning of this word. According to the characteristics of English films, we can know that English films are likely to use the name of leading character. Therefore, Mr. Six is an appropriate translation, which avoids the confusion of audiences due to the differences in cultural background.

#### **Chapter Four Conclusion**

Film title is an important part of a film. As for a film, a successful title can be the icing on the cake. With the development of cultural exchanges, translation of film titles is a question worthy of consideration. Good translation not only can show the functions of film titles, but also can help to spread the culture. Throughout the development and status of the translation of film titles, although it develops fast guided by translation theories, many shortages and problems still exist especially in China. In order to promote the quality of translation of film titles, it's necessary to take the similarities and differences between English and Chinese films into consideration.

In a word, translation of film title is a creative work with challenges for translators. When translating, the translator should concern the content and theme of the film, and should also show the subjective effects and innovation ability, making the target title has both functions and values. Considering the comparison of English and Chinese film titles, translation should make the foreign audiences understand the theme and emotion implied by the film. Choosing appropriate translation methods according to different situation is what the translator should do when conducting the translation work.

However, the principles and methods of the translation of film titles are not immutable and frozen. It depends on the specific situation. No matter what kind of translation, the appropriate is the best. (The paper is supported by the NCEPU “Double First-Class” Graduate Talent Cultivation Program)

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