



## The Translation's Role in Chinese Film Entering the Western Market

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**Abstract:** Based on data retrieved from different databases and interviews with Chinese film translators, this research reviews the translation's role in Chinese films entering the Western markets, especially the American market. To increase the understanding of Chinese film translation involved in the film industry, the Translation Economics theory was applied in this paper. It is recommended that film translators bear in mind Nida's functional equivalence standard to produce a translation conducive to film profitability.

**Keywords:** Chinese films, American market, film translation

### 1. *Chinese film export since 1980*

In its broad sense, the 1980s was an era of the rise of Chinese language movies. Waves of movies from Hong Kong, then Taiwan and China, were brought to overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and other regions, becoming a new force in the international film industry. Among the films produced in China, the works produced by the "fifth generation" directors (i.e. graduates from the Beijing Film Academy in the 1980s) and animation movies produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio were first imported by European cinemas and TV stations. However, even in this unprecedented golden age, few commercial films produced in Hong Kong were able to enter the sub-market of Europe and America in the mode of "trade circulation", while Chinese movies were only "exotic" artworks appreciated by the western intellectual class. They were not parts of the mainstream consumer culture like Hollywood movies in the United States or animation and video games in Japan. Previously, the state-owned China Film Import & Export Corporation had exclusive export privileges. When private studios gained the rights to export Chinese movies, China Film Import & Export Corporation's export

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business shrank much. Most of the overseas distribution of work by the “fifth generation” was undertaken by Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japanese investors.

In recent years, a new generation of Chinese film directors and producers have shown their strength and international insight. High-quality films that have grossed over hundreds of millions of dollars at the Chinese box office have been distributed in European and American markets, bringing increasingly great profits. Among them, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* grossed US\$ 128 million in the USA, 60% of the worldwide total, topping the chart of Chinese films released overseas (Box Office Mojo, 2000). Nevertheless, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a rare case generating high profits in America. Most Chinese movies yielded less than one million dollars in the USA, with a few grossing several million. Due to the huge cultural differences between China and the west, Chinese films are not well recognized or appreciated by audiences in Europe and America. For example, the Chinese epic war film *Red Cliff* was only distributed in Asian markets. The cultural references in *Red Cliff* are very exotic to American audiences so it is difficult for them to understand. The total box office of *Red Cliff (Parts 1 & 2, 2018)* worldwide was 250 million US dollars, while its American version grossed only \$627,047 in 2019, less than 0.5% of the international total (Box Office Mojo, 2019). These box office receipts mainly come from China and Asian markets.

This paper intends to answer the following research questions: When will Chinese films have the opportunity to win coveted Oscars? When will Chinese movies join the overseas ten-million-dollar box office club? When can Chinese movies take on the responsibility of cultural communication between China and the world? To answer those questions, this research examines the mechanism for the Chinese film translation industry, identifies its shortcomings and proposes solutions.

## **2. Film translation cost**

The film transmits information through languages of picture and sound. The importance of translation cannot be overstressed for a Chinese film to be understood in English-speaking countries, but translation has not been valued highly by the Chinese film industry. To better understand the film translation industry in China, a professional film translator’s online journal (J. Dong, 2020) was analyzed and relevant movie data analyzed. The translator, Dong Jing, is the founder of Beijing Erdongxuan Translation Studio. The studio has participated in the translation of famous film and television programs such as *Wandering Earth (2019)*, *Crazy Alien (2019)* and *Sheep without a Shepherd (2019)*.

Through the analysis, it is found that translators of Chinese Films have not been given full credit. For example, in 2019, Dong Jing, the translator mentioned above, checked three films translated by his team and discovered that only in one movie, his name and his studio’s logo were included. From 2010 to 2020, Dong Jing has been involved in the

translation of dozens of films, and eight out of the ten clients considered his prices for translation were too high.

Dong Jing described how his translation studio gave quotes. A complete movie script usually has 30,000-50,000 words, and the subtitles are about 9,000-15,000 words. The translation price quoted is less than 100,000 yuan (15, 313 USD) for the translation of both the script and subtitles by native English speakers. Most customers considered that price too high. In sharp contrast, these film production companies are usually willing to invest more than 200,000 yuan on the production of one second of special effects.

The market outlook for TV programs translators is not strong either. For example, for the translation of a TV series, with about 8,000 words in one episode, the customer budget maybe only 1000 yuan, and needs to be completed within one day. According to Dong Jing, his company's experienced Chinese translators with more than 10 years' experience usually can only complete 2,000 - 3,000 words of translation from Chinese to English per day, and even translators who are bilingual in English and Chinese can only translate up to 5,000 words a day.

The price 150 yuan (23 USD) for the English translation of one thousand Chinese characters to be completed within one day is extremely low. To cut the cost and complete such a project within the expected time, a translator can use machine translation (e.g. Google), then post-edit it. Though the deadline may be met, the translation quality is low. As Michael Sinterniklaas, an American dubbing actor and founder of NYAV Post recording studio suggested, Chinese film companies should invest no less money in translation than the cost of filming and promoting movies, to ensure the movie's success in the western market.

Currently, to release a Chinese film in overseas markets, the first step is to send the English version of the script outline to overseas partners and publishers; the second step is to ensure that the reviewers from different countries in each film festival can understand and like the script; the third step is for the foreign audience to read the subtitles (usually disappearing quickly on the screen) and understand the story and feelings of the characters. In each step, the corresponding script outline (including story brief and biographies), script and subtitles all contribute to the audience's perception of the whole movie.

A Chinese movie may create more than 2 billion yuan (306 million USD) of profit in the Chinese market but only less than 1 million dollars at the overseas box office. The cultural barrier may be the main contributing factor of the low profit overseas, but the ineffective translation produced by Chinese translators (non-native English speakers) can be another major factor. As native English speakers are a portion of the expected audience, it is suggested that professional native English speaker translators produce and evaluate the translation. The English spoken by Native English speakers is the most dominant language among all the languages used by different audience groups, so their use of the language is the most acceptable and practical in film translation.

### ***3. Film translation quality control***

Influenced by the “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” (aka *xindaya*) theory prevalent in China, many producers believe that Chinese-English translation must also embody faithfulness and elegance. However, the translation standard “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” is inapplicable in the film translation. As translation clients or patrons, the film production company may misuse the standards choosing translation service providers. The standards applied by these translation amateurs to evaluate translation professionals are unreliable.

As Dong revealed, rather than hiring native English speakers to translate a film or evaluate a film translation, Chinese film producers often ask a Chinese staff member proficient in English to check the translation quality using the translation standard “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance”. Even if the original script is not literary (or “elegant”), these translation gatekeepers (quality control) still expect the translation to be “high-class and elegant” and “beautifully written”. However, these Chinese translators hired are non-native English speakers and may produce “elegant” translation that contains grammar and word usage errors.

The film production crew members judging the translation are usually not qualified in this matter, as their English level is often not sufficient. Furthermore, these translation gatekeepers may have only been exposed to the “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” standard, unaware of other translation theories. The “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” standard, proposed by the famous translator Yan Fu, is not a systemic theory (Huang, 2003). It remains to be well expounded and improved.

Compared with the “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” standard, Eugene Nida's “functional equivalence” theory is more applicable for the translation of commercial films which stress profitability. In translation academia, Nida's “functional equivalence” theory has received wide and attention. According to Nida, “Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style” (Nida, 1969:12), and “there should be a high degree of equivalence of response, or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose” (Nida, 1969:24). By Nida's “functional equivalence” standard, the meaning is the most important, followed by linguistic form. In other words, it is necessary to avoid mechanical translation in the process of switching between two languages and achieve functional equivalence in the transfer of meaning between the two languages. It can be seen that translation is the reproduction of the form and meaning of the source language in the target language, and the form may hinder the reader's understanding of the meaning. The purpose of film translation is to help the target language audience receive the amount of entertainment similar to that of the source language audience. Therefore, without an understanding of the meaning conveyed in the film, the audience will not be able to enjoy the film fully, and the film production company or distributor will suffer a loss of revenue.

By using the “functional equivalence” translation standard, film translation is expected to be the most functional one that is often (though not always) colloquial and easy to understand. As Zhou Tiedong, a famous translation reviewer of China Film Group Corporation argued in the interview, from the perspective of producers, screenwriters and directors, the Chinese films for export should overcome the tendency of one-way personal expression; movies are a product, so they should be audience-oriented and the market should be considered (K. Dong, 2011). In that sense, Chinese film translation should tell a Chinese story in a way that foreign audience can understand.

#### ***4. Balancing between time and quality***

The expectations of film and television translation customers are always that the translation should be both “fast” and “good”, but they create a dilemma for the translator as they usually need adequate time to produce a high-quality translation. Many film and television producers have not recognized that translating scripts is, just like writing scripts, art that requires time.

A high-quality translation requires close cooperation between film producers and translators. For example, in the summer of 2016, film translator Dong Jing and his team translated the script of *Wandering Earth* from Chinese into English. The producer of *Wandering Earth* gave them a very detailed glossary at the beginning, which was very helpful in increasing work efficiency. At that time, Dong Jing led two translators and translated more than 20,000 words in seven days. With the original English script for reference, Dong Jing clarified the basic elements of script translation, such as format, tense and style. To complete the translation in a short time, the producer of *Wandering Earth* found more than one translation team, and Dong Jing’s team only did part of the translation project.

Another example illustrating the importance of cooperation between the translators and the film production company is translating *Crazy Alien* (2019). In the early stage of *Crazy Alien*, Dong Jing’s team was the only translation team outside of the film production crew, and they raced against the clock to ensure the quality. However, the crew still hoped that the translation team could complete the translation within one week or update the script within two or three days. *Crazy Alien* had numerous versions of the script. While they were translating between Chinese and English, the Chinese and American screenwriters were also revising the scripts. It took the translation team around four months to complete the work.

Errors occurring in English subtitles of Chinese movies are mostly because the film production company does not provide translators with the actual film. For the sake of confidentiality, the company only provides some lines or subtitles. When a scene changes greatly, it is often difficult for translators to understand the connections between two scenarios so they can only guess what happened.

Another difficulty translators often encounter in film and television translation is the frequent changes in the original text. After finishing the first edition of Chinese and

English subtitles, movies are often edited and modified more than once, which means that the translation and subtitle timing should be changed too. If the changes are not communicated to the translator in time, then mistranslation or misplacement of subtitles will occur.

The advantage of teamwork is that the project can be completed quickly, and the disadvantage is that it is difficult and time-consuming to unify different team members' translation styles and quality. The ideal method to translate a film or a television program is to use only one translator to translate a script from beginning to end, which is most conducive to maintaining a consistent terminology and style. If it is Chinese-English translation, it is recommended to have native English translators involved in translation or proofreading.

In China, film translation for export is often completed by Chinese translators who are not native English speakers. That is mostly due to the high cost of using native English speaker translators. Film translation customers are often skeptical about native English speaker translators' Chinese proficiency as in their impression, very few native English speakers can speak Chinese. However, as Dong Jing stated, American translators that they have cooperated with for a long time have not only high proficiency in Chinese but also more than ten years' experience in translating literary works and publishing translated books. Nevertheless, the price of native English speakers is considered high for most customers. So it is important to caution them that the lack of native English speaker translators may lead to the failure of the English translation.

### ***5. Dubbing, an expensive but effective translation mode***

Due to its high labor cost and longtime requirement, dubbing is an expensive translation option for a small-budget film distribution company. Nevertheless, it may be an investment risk that is worth taking. For example, after *Ne Zha* grossed over 700 million US dollars in China, ranking No. 2 on the box office chart for all films screened on the Chinese mainland in 2019, the film entered overseas markets, equipped with the English dubbing aiming to eliminate the cultural barrier. In August 2019, *Ne Zha (English dubbed version)* was screened in North American cinemas. The English subtitles and dubbing were produced professionally in the United States and helped the film yield over 3 million dollars in the American market.

Chinese films are usually subtitled and rarely dubbed in the USA. In comparison, most Hollywood films entering the Chinese market are dubbed in Chinese. Compared with subtitling, dubbing is more time consuming and the cost is more than ten times higher. So the film distribution company has a difficult decision to make in terms of producing a dubbed version for the film. When a Chinese film's overseas box office is expected to be \$500,000, the \$100,000 budget for the subtitle translation may be too high. However, if the box office is expected to be \$10 million, it will be a cost-effective option to spend \$2 million on English dubbing. Although it costs more than subtitling, the dubbing produced by native English speakers and voice actors allows the audience to understand the

dialogue without relying on subtitles. Compared with English subtitles, English dubbing is an easier way for English-speaking audiences of all ages and different cultural levels to appreciate Chinese movies.

## 6. Conclusion

To further promote the “going out” of Chinese films and television programs, more private enterprises should be encouraged to participate in the distribution overseas as the overseas distribution monopoly by China Film Group has been broken. To promote Chinese culture overseas, it is suggested that film translation, along with the artistry and technicality of films, should be improved to win over the audience. For a Chinese film to be exported is a product for profit, film translation should be conducted and judged by the “functional equivalence” rather than the “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” standard. If the budget allows, native English speaker translators should be employed for the film translation work; and dubbing (rather than subtitling) should be used to maximize the profit.

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