



Research on Translation of English Film Titles Into Chinese From the Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

With the increasing development of globalization, films become a significant medium of cultural exchange among different countries. The film title, a key component of a film, plays an essential role in the propaganda of the film. Therefore, the translation of the film titles is critically important. This paper discusses the functions of film titles, analyzes the basic principles of English film title translation and cultural differences between China and western countries influencing the translation of English film titles, and then puts forward some translation strategies, including literal translation and transliteration, literal translation plus explanatory words and transliteration plus explanatory words, liberal translation, and creative translation, in the hope that these strategies to some extent can give some enlightenment to translators when English film titles are translated.

Key words: English film titles; Translation; Functions; Principles; Strategies; Cultural differences

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the continuous intensification of economic globalization, the cultural exchanges between China and other countries have become more frequent. As

a medium of cultural exchange, more foreign films, especially English films, have flooded into China's film market. Film, as a visual art, is different from books and magazines which can be watched beforehand, so film title plays a vital role in helping audience to learn about the film. Judging from the film title, audience can know about the content and themes of the film, and decide whether they will watch it. Therefore, a great translation of film title is very critical, which can even persuade the potential audience into going to the cinema to watch the film. However, the translation of the film titles is not an easy job, because the film titles contain rich cultural information via concentrated and condensed words. In the last two decades, scholars in China conducted research on the theories and techniques of film title translation (Wu, 1995; He, 1998; He, 2001, Long, 2003; Wu, 2005; Zheng & Wang, 2006; Si & Tian, 2015), but few scholars studied the film title translation from cultural perspective. This is the concern of this paper. This paper analyzes the functions of film titles, discusses the basic principles of English film title translation and cultural differences between China and western countries and puts forward some translation strategies.

2. FUNCTIONS OF ENGLISH FILM TITLES

Waard and Nida (1986) divided the functions of language into 9 categories: expressive, cognitive, interpersonal, informative, imperative, performative, emotive, aesthetic and metalingual. In regard to English film titles, the authors supposed that they have three functions: informative, imperative and aesthetic.

2.1 Informative Function

English film title is an important way for audience to learn about the basic information of the film, thus, the title must have informative function. It may summarize the content

of the film and illustrate the topic of the film, or it may provide the film information on setting (including places and time) or leading character etc.. For example, from the English film title *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the audience can know that the story happens in 2001 and it is about the space exploration. Another example is the film title *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. From this title, the audience can realize that the film is about the strange thing which happened to Benjamin Button.

2.2 Aesthetic Function

Film is a special art form, of which film title is a vital component. It should not only show the audience the basic information of the film, but also meet audience's aesthetic demand and present audience the beauty of language to arouse audience's interest in watching the film. Hence, many rhetorical devices are adopted in English film titles. Take alliteration for example. All of the following film titles use alliteration: *Dumb and Dumber*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Bathing Beauty*. Doubtless, such English film titles are easy to remember and can make audience feel the sound beauty of language as well.

2.3 Imperative Function

Film is a kind of goods and film companies earn profits by selling tickets. Film titles play a vital role in appealing to potential audience. A good film title can arouse potential audience's curiosity and passion to watch the film. Take the English film title *Mission: Impossible* as an example. When the potential audience read it, they may be curious about the following questions: What kind of mission is it? Why is it so difficult to accomplish? Is the mission finished at last? To satisfy their curiosity, they may determine to go to the movie theater and find out the truth.

3. THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ENGLISH FILM TITLE TRANSLATION

In 1960s, the famous American translation theorist Eugene A. Nida put forward the dynamic or functional equivalence theory. In his book *Toward a Science of Translating*, Nida pointed out "In such a translation (dynamic translation) one is not so concerned with matching the receptor—language message with the source language message, but with the dynamic relationship, that the relationship between the receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message." (Nida, 1964, p.159) He also proposed a definition of dynamic equivalence translation in this book: "One way of defining a D-E translation is to describe it as 'the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message.'" (Nida, 1964, p.166) In his another book *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Nida gave a further explanation of dynamic equivalence, "Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms

of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language. This response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalent of response or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose"(Nida, 1969, p.24). Nida (Waard & Nida, 1986) replaced "dynamic equivalence" with "functional equivalence" in the book *From One Language to Another* in order to avoid misunderstanding. In accordance with Nida's functional equivalence theory and functions of English film titles mentioned above, the authors argued that the translator should obey three basic principles when he/she translates English film titles: principle of information delivery, principle of aesthetic value and principle of being easy to understand.

3.1 Principle of Information Delivery

English film title has information function, so does its corresponding translation. The translated text must convey important information on the film to potential audience. The information may show the genre of the film, the topic of the film, the content of the film, the leading character of the film or the setting of the film etc.. The film title *Maleficent* can be used as an example to illustrate this point. This film is adapted from *Sleeping Beauty* in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, which is a household story worldwide. Maleficent is an important character in the story *Sleeping Beauty* and becomes the leading character of the film. If the film title is translated as "梅尔菲森特" according to the pronunciation of the word "Maleficent", the majority of Chinese audience will lose interest in watching the film, because Chinese audience may know the story *Sleeping Beauty*, but many of them can't remember a witch's name in the story. Without doubt, the translation "梅尔菲森特" can't deliver enough information to potential Chinese audience. When the film was released in China, the title was translated into "沉睡魔咒" (sleeping curse). Such translation demonstrates the main content of the film and the genre of the film (fantasy). It is a successful translation in terms of the principle of information delivery.

3.2 Principle of Aesthetic Value

Translation is an art, so does the translation of English film titles. When translating English film titles, translators should treat them as an artistic work and recreate it by using another language. The recreation should meet target-language audience's aesthetic demand and present target-language audience the features and beauty of target language so as to leave a deep impression on them and arouse their interest in watching the film. Take the film title *Speed* as an example. The film is about a speeding bus which is rigged by a mad bomber and will explode if it ever drops

below 50 mph. If the title is translated literally as “速度”, the translation is unable to deliver enough information to potential audience, and fails to lure the potential audience to watch the film as well, because “速度” in Chinese is a common phrase and can not present the features and beauty of Chinese. If the title is translated into “生死时速” (speed that influences the life and death of people), this translation is capable of delivering enough information to potential audience, showing the features of Chinese and satisfying target-language audience’s aesthetic requirements, in that four character phrases have a long history in Chinese and are loved deeply by Chinese people, for they are concise and readable and easy to remember.

3.3 Principle of Being Easy to Understand

Doubtlessly, that the translation of the English film titles is not difficult to understand is a crucial factor resulting in successful film exportation. The translation of the English film titles should be easy to understand, because the majority of the potential audience are not artists or movie critics, but average people who have different education backgrounds. The film title *Tangled* can be cited as an example to explain this point. This film is an animation and its potential audience are teenagers and young adults. If the title is translated literally as “缠结” (twisted together), it is hard for these youngsters to imagine the film is a love story and a fantasy. If the title is translated as “魔发奇缘” (“魔发” means magical hair and “奇缘” means unexpected love), it is easy for young Chinese to understand such a title and figure out the theme and content of the film. Another example is the film title *The Matrix*. If the title is translated literally as “矩阵” (an arrangement of numbers, symbols, etc. in rows and columns, treated as a single quantity), the Chinese audience will have difficulty in understanding the title and have no idea about the content of the film. If this film title is translated as “黑客帝国” (hacker empire), it is much easier for Chinese audience to understand.

Table 1
English film titles

The number of words	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 and above
The number of film titles	25	19	24	9	6	7	0	0	0	1
Percentage	27.5%	20.9%	26.4%	9.9%	6.6%	7.7%	0	0	0	1.1%

Table 2
Chinese film titles

The number of words	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 and above
The number of film titles	0	11	10	33	16	4	5	9	0	4
Percentage	0	12%	10.9%	35.9%	17.4%	4.3%	5.4%	9.8%	0	4.3%

Table 1 showed that the titles which contain 3 words and below account for the majority of the titles of Oscar best picture winners and one English word titles account for highest percentage. Table 2 presented that four

4. THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINA AND WESTERN COUNTRIES INFLUENCING FILM TITLE TRANSLATION

The word “culture” has been described in various ways by scholars, which makes people feel that it is complicated and all-inclusive. Every ethnic group or nation has its unique culture. The differences in cultures are reflected in many aspects: language, lifestyle, social values, religion, custom, way of thinking and so on, which may impact the translation activity. In this paper, the authors just explained the cultural differences between China and western countries related to the translation of English film titles.

4.1 Language

Lotman’s theory states, “no language (in the full sense of the word) can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have, at its centre, the structure of natural language”(Lotman, 1978, p.212). Language is an important part of culture and the carrier of culture as well. Accordingly, the language difference is one of the main cultural differences in China and western countries. Chinese and English respectively belongs to different language systems. Chinese belongs to Sino-Tibetan language, while English belongs to Indo-European language. These two languages have many differences in pronunciation, grammar and usage. As to the film titles, the majority of Chinese film titles and English film titles are short and concise. To find out whether there is any difference between Chinese film titles and English film titles in language use, the authors chose the titles of Oscar best picture winners from 1927 to 2019 (Wikipedia, 2020) and the titles of top 100 Chinese box office movies till February 2018 (Fu, 2018) to make comparison from the perspective of the number of words used in the titles. The film series only count as one. Eventually, the authors got 91 English film titles and 92 Chinese film titles. Table 1 and Table 2 showed the distribution of the number of words.

Chinese character titles account for highest percentage (35.9%) and there isn’t one Chinese character film title in the table. Why do Chinese film companies prefer to use four Chinese characters to name the film? There are so

many four character idioms in Chinese, which are passed down from generation to generation. Chinese people love four character idioms deeply because they have symmetry beauty in shape, convey information more compactly and are easy to remember. When the film companies name their films, they are inclined to imitate or adopt four character idioms, sometimes even coin new four character idioms or phrases. For example, the Chinese film title “卧虎藏龙” (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon) is a four Chinese character idiom which describes a place or situation that is full of unnoticed masters. Hence, when a translator translates an English film title into Chinese, four Chinese characters are a better choice.

4.2 Ways of Thinking

It is well acknowledged that people from different nations and countries may have different ways of thinking due to different geographical environment, historical background, and philosophy. There is no exception for Chinese and Westerners. Chinese famous translator Fu Lei once said, “There is basic difference between Eastern people’s way of thinking and Western people’s way of thinking: Chinese people lay emphasis on comprehensiveness, induction and hint while Westerners concentrate on analysis, nuance and logic...” (as cited in Chen, 1998, p.37) To be specific, Chinese way of thinking is holistic, comprehensive and sentimental, while western way of thinking is analytic and rational. Chinese people usually prefer to see the whole picture of something, while western people tend to focus on certain part of an object. With respect to film titles, Chinese film titles are holistic and comprehensive to give audience clues of the film topic, theme or type. For example, “流浪地球” (the wandering Earth), “烈火英雄” (“烈火” means strong fire, “英雄” means heroes), “让子弹飞” (let the bullet fly), “我不是药神” (I am not the God of Medicine), “天下无贼” (a world without thieves), “无名之辈” (people who have no fame and social status), “一吻定情” (fall in love at first kiss) etc.. In contrast, English film titles are more simple and direct and named after the main character, the matter, the place or the time which play an important role in the film. For example, *Forrest Gump*, *Tully*, *Widows*, *Crash*, *Searching*, *Wildlife*, *The Truman Show*, *Cold Mountain*, *1917* etc..

4.3 Values

Each culture has its own value system. Westerners value independence, equality and freedom, thus they have a strong sense of individualism; while Chinese have a strong sense of collectivism—they value the idea of unity and harmony under the influence of Confucianism, and even sometimes they will make sacrifice for the good of the whole group. There is another major value difference between China and western countries—family value. For most westerners, family value is individual-oriented. Although family is important to Westerners, they put more emphasis on personal development and self-value.

For Chinese, family is always put in the first place. They hold family bonds above individual needs or wants, and pay much attention to the hierarchy of a family, showing respect to the elders in the family. These value differences exert great impact on the naming of the film titles. Many English film titles are named after a common person’s name, such as *Erin Brockovich*, *Kate & Leopold*, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, *Hancock*, *Adam*, *John Carter* etc.. There are a few Chinese film titles which are named after a person, but most of them are named after famous people who have made great contribution to their hometown or country, such as “戚继光” (Qi Jiguang) “叶问” (Yip Man) “黄飞鸿” (Wong Fei-Huang), “焦裕禄” (Jiao Yulu), “周恩来” (Zhou Enlai) etc..

4.4 History and Customs

In the process of the establishment and formation of a country, historical figures appeared, historical events happened and unique customs gradually formed. For example, China and the west have different holidays and festivals and celebrate them in different ways. China has many holidays and festivals different from western countries such as Chinese New Year’s Eve, Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, Tomb Sweeping Day, Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival which are scheduled according to Chinese lunar calendar. In addition to Western Medicine, Chinese have their unique medicine for disease treatment—Traditional Chinese Medicine. People may not understand other country’s historical figures, historical events and customs which appear in film titles. There are numerous English or Chinese film titles named after historical figures or events and customs. For example, *The Odyssey*, *Patton*, *Ali*, *King Arthur*, *Schindler’s list*, *D-Day: Normandy 1944*, *Independence Day*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, “赤壁” (Red Cliff), “关云长” (The Lost Bladesman), “垂帘听政” (Reign Behind a Curtain), “南京! 南京!” (City of Life and Death), “地道战” (Tunnel Warfare), “开国大典” (The Birth of New China), “刮痧” (The Treatment), “神医扁鹊” (A Highly-skilled Doctor Bian Que) etc..

4.5 Religion

Religion is a kind of special and important cultural phenomenon, profoundly influencing people’s social life. In China, Taoism and Buddhism have a widespread effect on people’s lives. Many Chinese words, idioms and proverbs originated from Buddhism such as “醍醐灌顶” (be filled with wisdom or be enlightened), “三生有幸” (to consider oneself most fortunate), “救人一命胜造七级浮屠” (saving one life is better than setting up a seven-storey pagoda) and the like. Similarly, some Chinese film titles are related to Taoism and Buddhism, such as “八仙过海” (Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea), “太极张三丰” (The Tai-chi Master), “少林寺” (The Shaolin Temple), “大唐玄奘” (Xuan Zang), “八百罗汉” (800 Arhats) etc.. In western countries, Catholicism and Christianity

vitality impact Westerner's lives, including government operation, art, the standard of morality, codes of behaviors etc.. Some English film titles relate to Catholicism and Christianity, such as *The Song of Bernadette*, *Keep the Faith*, *Babel*, *Dogma* etc.. Due to different religions, Chinese and Westerners may have difficulty in understanding the film titles in regard to religion. Take the English film title *Babel* for example. For Westerners who are familiar with the Bible, they know the story of Tower of Babel, which can be found in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament. According to the story, after the Great Flood, the survivors of human race, who had one language and the same words, came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And then they decided to build a tower tall enough to reach heaven. God, observing their tower, confused their language so that they can no longer understand each other, and scattered them around the world. When seeing this film title, Westerners know what it means, but Chinese audience who have no related religious background knowledge cannot understand this title even though it is translated into Chinese.

5. TRANSLATION STRATEGIES OF ENGLISH FILM TITLES RELATED TO CULTURAL FACTORS

When translating English film titles, a translator should not only deal with language transformation but also handle the cultural factors under the guidance of three basic principles mentioned above. A translator can adopt the following translation strategies when dealing with cultural factors in English film titles.

5.1 Literal Translation and Transliteration

Literal translation means the target text "not only reproduces the content of the original text, but also retains the form of the source text, especially the metaphor, image, national and local characteristics." (Zhang et al., 1980, p.12) Transliteration means words in source language are translated into words with same or similar pronunciation in target language. Translators can use literal translation or transliteration to translate the English film titles which are named after world-famous persons, places or event and classical novels. For example, the film title *Churchill* is translated into "丘吉尔", *Nixon* into "尼克松", *Pearl Harbor* into "珍珠港", *Schindler's List* into "辛德勒的名单", *Pride and Prejudice* into "傲慢与偏见", *The Great Gatsby* into "了不起的盖茨比" etc.. Translators can also use literal translation and transliteration to translate film titles that are easy to understand and not able to cause target-language readers' misunderstanding though they contain source language cultural elements. For example, the film title *Around the World 80 Days* is translated into "环游世界80天", *The Hunger Games* into "饥饿游戏", *Pirates of Caribbean*

into "加勒比海盗", *The Mummy* into "木乃伊", *Gladiator* into "角斗士", *Hotel Rwanda* into "卢旺达饭店", *Escape from Pretoria* into "逃离勒陀利亚", *The Invisible Man* into "隐形人" etc..

5.2 Literal Translation Plus Explanatory Words and Transliteration Plus Explanatory Words

Some English film titles are named after persons, places and things that Chinese audience may not know. When translating such English film titles, translators can add some explanatory words after using literal translation or transliteration. By doing so, Chinese audience can better understand what the film is about, and furthermore, it is much easier for them to accept the exotic culture in the film title. Take the film title *Hacksaw Ridge* as an example. If it is translated into "钢锯岭" by using literal translation, Chinese audience will have no clue about what happened in Hacksaw Ridge. Thus, the title is translated into "血战钢锯岭" by adding the words "血战"(bloody battle). Such translation version can convey the information that the film is about a fierce battle happened in Hacksaw Ridge. Another example is the film title *Tarzan*. It is translated into "人猿泰山" by adding the words "人猿" (ape-man), which releases the information that the film is a story about ape-man Tarzan.

5.3 Liberal Translation

Liberal translation means the target text only keeps the main language functions of the source text and reproduces the general meaning of the source text without taking the form of the source text into consideration due to cultural differences. Some English film titles are hard to comprehend and even may cause Chinese audience's misunderstanding because of cultural differences when they are translated by using literal translation or transliteration. In this case, translators may use liberal translation to translate these English film titles. Take the English film title *Ghost* as an example. If this title is translated into "鬼" or "鬼魂" by using literal translation, the Chinese audience may think this is a horror film, but in fact it's a love story about a woman and a ghost. Accordingly, it is translated into "人鬼情未了"(endless love between a human being and a ghost) by using liberal translation. Another example is the film title *Dumbo*. If it is translated into "呆宝" by using transliteration, Chinese people will not understand what the film is about. Thus, the film title is translated into "小飞象" (a little flying elephant) by using liberal translation. One more example is the film title *Cleopatra*. If it is translated into "克莱奥普特拉" by using transliteration, Chinese will not know who she is. Thus, it is translated into "埃及艳后" (Egypt's pretty queen) by using liberal translation, which tells people the film is about an Egypt's queen.

5.4 Creative Translation

When the Chinese version of English film title, translated by using one of the strategies mentioned above, can't

present the theme, content or type of the film, and in addition, it is not appealing or understandable to Chinese owing to cultural differences, translators can use creative translation to recreate the title on the basis of the content or theme of the film. Take the film title *Up* as an example. It is translated into “飞屋环游记” (the story of travelling in a flying house) by using creative translation, resulting in a clear understanding of the film by Chinese. Another example is the film title *Independence Day*. If it is translated into “独立日” by using literal translation, Chinese audience will be confused. Therefore, another Chinese version “地球捍卫战” (the war of defending the Earth) is better. One more example is the film title *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. The translation version of “本杰明·巴顿奇事” by using literal translation and transliteration is not as appealing as the Chinese version “返老还童” (rejuvenating) to Chinese audience.

6. CONCLUSION

In a digital and information era in 21st century, films have gained increasing popularity among people, especially youngsters. Furthermore, cultural exchange has been more frequent and films can be served as a crucial medium and bridge of cultural exchange among different nations. A good and appropriate translation of film titles is extremely necessary. During the process of English film title translation, translators should attach importance to the cultural differences between different countries, such as different languages, values, ways of thinking, history and customs and religion. On account of these differences, proper translation methods should be adopted to deal with the translation of English film titles conforming to the functions of film titles and basic principles of English film title translation. The authors attempt to propose some translating strategies, including literal translation and transliteration, literal translation plus explanatory words and transliteration plus explanatory words, liberal translation, and creative translation, in the hope that these strategies to some extent can give some enlightenment to translators when English film titles are translated.

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