English-Chinese Translation of Foreign Movie Titles

Ying-Ying GU
Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College, Zhangzhou, Fujian, China
153146085@qq.com

Keywords: Translation of Foreign Movie Titles, Requirements, Translation Methods, Rules, Values.

Abstract. Through the analysis of the phenomenon of English-Chinese translation of foreign movie titles, this article discusses the rules, principles and values applied in translating English movie titles in China. Simultaneously, the article also analyzes the different forms of English movie title translation in use in China.

Introduction

Since the opening-up of the Chinese cinema market to foreign film studios in 1995, an increasing number of foreign films are now accessible to average Chinese audiences. Through the usage of multimedia such as VCR Cassette, VCD, and DVD, foreign films’ availability in China has increased significantly. Moreover, the advances of streaming media, peer-to-peer file sharing, and online movie websites all provide additional channels through which foreign films can be distributed to Chinese movie spectators.

Out of all the foreign language films, movies in English, especially those produced by large Hollywood studios have been the most accessible and commercially successful. However, with the consistent growth of the Chinese economy, and the country’s entry into WTO, the Chinese cinema market is becoming increasingly competitive. Selecting an appropriate Chinese title for a foreign language film that can stand out from the crowd is now a top priority for movie studios. The difference between success and failure of a foreign film can be just a tiny mistake in the translation process of the title.

Two of the biggest problems in the translation of English movie titles in China are excessive usage of certain terminologies and vocabularies and the inconsistency in translation [1]. Most of the popular terminologies and vocabularies are either overly provocative or stimulating in order to draw Chinese movie audiences’ attention. Many of these translated film titles involve using terminologies and vocabularies related to sex, conflict, violence, death, and other provoking terms [2]. Movie titles that contain these terminologies are usually translated in this fashion for commercial purposes only, and consequently, greatly diminished the artistic values of these foreign films. Even worse, many of these movie titles have deeply misinformed average movie audiences.

Another problem in English movie title translation is that discrepancy in translation can be clearly seen in different Chinese titles used in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong of the same foreign movie. Many different reasons have contributed to the inconsistency in movie title translation between the three regions, including differences in cultural background, tradition or heritage, language dialect, foreign influence, and industry regulation. To be more specific, Taiwan and Hong Kong are all inseparable parts of China. Inhabitants of the two regions are all Chinese people. They share very similar culture background, language, and the way of thinking. However, because of the recent Chinese history, the two regions had been separated from China for a while. Consequently, there are dissimilarities caused by evolving tradition, regional dialect, outside influence, and governmental regulation, which brought unnecessary confusion in movie title translation to the Chinese movie industry [3].
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie Title</th>
<th>Translation in Hong Kong</th>
<th>Translation in Taiwan</th>
<th>Translation in Mainland China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One Day (2001)</td>
<td>Qing Yue Yi Tian</td>
<td>Zhen Ai Tiao Ri Zi</td>
<td>Yi Tian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sound of Music (1965)</td>
<td>Xian Yue Piao Piao Chu Chu Wen</td>
<td>Zhen Shan Mei</td>
<td>Yin Yue Zhi Sheng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up in the Air (2009)</td>
<td>Gua Lao Fei Xing Ji</td>
<td>Xing Nan Fei Xing Ri Zhi</td>
<td>Zai Yun Duan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inception (2010)</td>
<td>Qian Xing Xiong Jian</td>
<td>Quan Mian Qi Dong</td>
<td>Dao Meng Kong Jian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The King’s Speech (2010)</td>
<td>Huang Shang Wu Hua Er</td>
<td>Wang Zhe Zhi Sheng: Xuan Zhan Shi Ke</td>
<td>Guo Wang De Yan Jiang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up (2009)</td>
<td>Chong Tian Jiu Bing</td>
<td>Tian Wai Qi Ji</td>
<td>Fei Wu Huan You Ji</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Beauty (1999)</td>
<td>Mei Li You Zui</td>
<td>Mei Guo Xin Mei Gui Qing</td>
<td>Mei Guo Li Ren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratatouille (2007)</td>
<td>Wu Xing Ji Da Shu</td>
<td>Liao Li Shu Wang</td>
<td>Mei Shi Zong Dong Yuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Hill (2006)</td>
<td>Gui Mei Shan Fang</td>
<td>Chen Mo Zhi Qiu</td>
<td>Ji Jing Ling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. &amp; Mrs. Smith (2005)</td>
<td>Shi Mi Fu Yue Zhan Shi Mi Qi</td>
<td>Shi Mi Si Fu Fu</td>
<td>Shi Mi Si Fu Fu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnight in Paris (2011)</td>
<td>Wu Ye-Ba Li</td>
<td>Qing Mi Wu Ye Ba Li</td>
<td>Wu Ye Ba Li</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the list, we can find many differences in English movie title translations between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland. Different translations of one movie are caused by different aesthetics in these three regions. However, these titles are translated based on the same basic requirements and methods.

**Basic Requirements for a Successful Movie Title Translation**

Translating English movie titles into Chinese can be a very difficult task for movie studios. There are no single industry-wide standard or regulation in which all studios must follow in English movie title translations. However, there is a set of basic translation requirements and methods which all movie studios use to help with the translation of English movie titles into Chinese.

One of the first basic requirements is that the translators of a movie title must have a full understanding of that film’s story, background, setting, and characters [4]. This knowledge will help the translators to better comprehend the reasons why the original English title is chosen, and what translated title can best maintain the connection with the movie.

Another requirement is the need to respect the original movies itself, no matter what methods of movie translation are being used [4]. It is important for translated Chinese titles not to deceive or mislead the movie audiences for overly commercialized reason. Some of the most notorious examples of movies using misleading translated titles are those starred by Hollywood actor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. The Terminator, one of his most successful movies has been translated into Mo Gui Zhong Jie Zhe. This translation is successful because it shows respect to the original English title and the movie’s story. However, to capitalize on The Terminator’s success, movie studios have begun to place Mo Gui in the translated Chinese titles of Schwarzenegger’s films, even if those
films have absolutely nothing to do with Mo Gui [5]. Examples include Kindergarten Cop (Mo Gui Hai Zi Wang), Total Recall (Mo Gui Zong Dong Yuan), and Running Man (Mo Gui A Nuo).

Arnold Schwarzenegger’s films are also perfect examples of translated Chinese movie titles that overly focused on the third requirement, which states that movie titles need to be commercially viable [4]. In a competitive market, a movie needs to be able to distinguish itself from countless other films released around the same time. However, many movie studios have placed too much emphasis on creating commercially viable translated titles, and thus mislead or cause confusion to the movie audiences. The movie Earthquake (Jing Hun Duo Ming), is a perfect example of translated film title that successfully bring together all the three principles. By not using literal translation, which will change the movie title to Di Zhen, the movie avoids being confused with a scientific documentary. The title Jing Hun Duo Ming has effectively captured the excitement of the original storyline, while still being commercially viable [6].

Current Methods Used in Translating English Movie Titles in China

Transliteration is the easiest and most convenient way for translation. An English movie title is usually named after the main characters, places or important objects or events in this film [7]. Some of the movies are adapted from famous literary works, which are quite familiar to audiences or contain great historic values. In these cases, we adopt transliteration; in other words, using Chinese characters to sound out an English title. There are some famous and successful examples, including King Kong (Jin Gang), Jane Eyre (Jian Ai), Casablanca (Ka Sa Bu Lan Ka) and Romeo and Juliet (Luo Mi Ou Yu Zhu Li Ye ), Madam Currie ( Ju Li Fu Ren), Ben Hur (Bin He Zhaan) to name only a few. However, because of the difference in the pronunciation between Chinese and English, movie titles using transliteration are usually not exact and mostly just aiming at the closeness of the pronunciation with high aesthetic value.

One of the popular and commonly used methods is literal translation or direct translation. Literal translation means using titles from a source language and translating them exactly to a target language [8]. In movie titles that use literal translation, the exact meanings of the English titles are kept, but with more refine vocabularies and terminologies. Usually titles that are less culturally sensitive or easier to comprehend between cultures are those that use literal translation. This is because their meanings are more universal, and thus require less explanation. For example, the movie A Walk in the Clouds, which depicts a love story of a man and a woman in a vineyard, has been translated into Yun Zhong Man Bu. This version not only maintains the original meaning of the film, but also conveys a poetic and romantic feeling to Chinese movie audiences [9]. Other examples of movies titles that use literal translation include Moscow Does not Believe in Tears (Mo Si Ke Bu Xiang Xin Yan Lei), The Old Man and the Sea (Lao Ren Yu Hai), The Great Gatsby (Wei Da De Gai Ci Bi), A Streetcar Named Desired (Yu Wang Hao Jie Che), Judgement at Nuremberg (Niu Lun Bao Shen Pan) and The Cassandra Crossing (Ka Sang De La Da Qiao).

Literal translation with notes is another method for move title translation in China [10]. For certain film titles, literal translation may not be informative enough for the average movie audiences. However, by using additional notes with the literal translation, movie goers will be able to better understand the content of movies. For example, the movie Patton, if using literal translation, will be Ba Dun, not a very familiar name in China. However, by adding the term “general,” and changing the name to Ba Dun Jiang Jun, movie audiences will be more informative about the movie and understand that this is a war movie about a general named Patton [11]. Take Shrek, which has been translated into Guai Wu Shi Lai Ke , as another example. The Chinese title retains its original sound and at the same time helps the audience to know the characteristics of Shrek, an ogre in fact. Moreover, the movie Piano was not literally translated into Gang Qin, which may make the audience think that it is a scientific documentary. By adding a Chinese character Ke, the audiences will have a very general impression of the movie (Wang Jing 2004). Other examples
are *Toy Story* (*Wan Ju Zong Dong Yuan*), *Pretty Woman* (*Feng Yue Qiao Jia Ren*), *Tomb Raiders* (*Gu Mu Li Ying*) and *Legends of the Fall* (*Ran Qing Sui Yue*).

Due to the differences between languages, cultures, traditions, and backgrounds, it is impossible to translate some English movie titles by using *literal translation*, *literal translation with notes*, and *transliteration*. For these movies, *free translation* is used. *Free translation* allows the translators to use the setting, story, characters, and background of a movie to come up with a proper translated movie title [8]. At the same time, the translators can use *free translation* to produce a translated title that is informative, culturally sensitive, aesthetically sound, and commercially viable. One of the best examples of movie titles that use *free translation* is *Gone with the Wind*. The movie’s Chinese title is *Luan Shi Jia Ren*. *Luan Shi* is a perfect description for the movie’s setting, which refers to the American Civil War, and *Jia Ren* is used to represent the main character of the movie [9]. This Chinese title gives the audience a vivid picture of what has been suffered by the main character during the American Civil War. Another example is *The Wizard of Oz*. It can be directly translated into *Ao Zi Guo Li Xian Ji*, which has already shown the content of the movie. But it is too commonplace. If *free translation* is adopted here to translate it into *Lv Ye Xian Zong*, it seems that we can feel and touch the beauty of the grassland and even follows the traces of a fairy [9]. Other examples of movie titles that use *free translation* include *Die hard* (*Duo Mian Shuang Xiong*), *Catch Me If You Can* (*Xiao Yao Fa Wai*), *Now You See Me* (*Jing Tian Mo Dao Tuan*), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Xi Xian Wu Zhan Shi*), and *The Bridge of Madison County* (*Lang Qiao Yi Meng*).

The combination of literal and free translation is another type of translation method used in China. This method tries to combine the positive aspects of both *literal* and *free translation*. By using *literal translation* for part of its title, it allows the movie audiences to associate the movie with the original English title and provide them with more informative value [8]. At the same time, the usage of *free translation* means that the translators can select vocabularies and terminologies that are more culturally sensitive, aesthetically sound, and commercially viable. For example, an American film named *Ghost* depicts a romantic story about a couple. If it is translated into *Gui*, which will create a horrible atmosphere. The better translation for *Ghost* is *Ren Gui Qing Wei Liao*. The Chinese character *Gui* comes from the literal translation of *ghost* while the part *Ren* and *Qing Wei Liao* stems from the plot and contents of the movie, which makes a perfect combination [9]. Another example is the movie *Singing in the Rain*, which has been translated into *Yu Zhong Qu* instead of *Yu Zhong Chang Ge*. *Yu Zhong* using *literal translation* represents the “in the Rain” part of the original English movie title. However, instead of using *Chang Ge* for the “Singing” part, the translator has used *free translation* to come up with *Qu*. The combination of literal and free translation allows the translated title to sound more aesthetic, while still maintaining a strong root to the original English title. Other movies that use the combination of literal and free translation are *the Bathing Beauty* (*Chu Shui Fu Rong*) and *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die* (*Sheng Sha Da Quan*).

**How to Successfully Translate English Movie Titles**

There are many different ways to properly translate English movie titles into Chinese. Some titles concentrate on commercial viability, while others focus on staying true to the original titles. However, I believe that translated movie titles need to follow certain basic rules, and values in order to be successful.

**Basic Rules a Successful Movie Title Translation Should Follow**

One of the rules in use is the *deletion rule*. The main purpose of this rule is to eliminate those propositions which are not relevant for the interpretation of the movie title [12]. The deletion rule can be very important when translating movie titles which are very lengthy, verbose, or excessively difficult to translate into another language. The rule allows certain phases and terminologies to be deleted without negatively affecting the overall meaning of the movie titles. For example, the movie *She is So Lovely* has been translated into *Ke Ren Er* and the film *In the Heat of the Night* has been
Another rule used by movie studios is the generalization rule, which is to recast material in a more general way [12]. This rule allows the transformation of difficult-to-understand and overly detailed movie titles into something that are more easily comprehensible by the general public. The generalization rule permits movie studios to translate a complicated English movie title into one that the Chinese movie audiences can easily identify with and appreciate. This rule is especially important for translating English movie titles while using terminologies and vocabularies that are very culturally specified. For example, the movie *Mission Impossible* has been translated into *Die Zhong Die* in Chinese. Without using the generalization rule, the movie will probably be known as *Bu Ke Neng De Ren Wu*. However, it will be very difficult for the average Chinese movie audiences to associate *Bu Ke Neng De Ren Wu* with counter-intelligence. The inclusion of *Die* in the Chinese movie title instantly allows the audiences to associate the title with the movie’s theme.

The construction rule allows for the creation of new materials to be subsumed into a movie title. This method is used to create new titles that are completely different from the literal translation of original English movie titles [12]. A new title is created through the usage of information gathered from a movie’s theme, story, and characters. Usually the new title is created so that it will be more suitable for an intended local market. This method is adopted for the translation of many English language films because literal translations of certain titles are not adequate for a local market because of the differences in culture, language, and politics. For example, the movie *Waterloo Bridge* was translated to *Hun Duan Lan Qiao* instead of *Hua Tie Lu Qiao* because the average Chinese audiences will instantly relate *Hua Tie Lu* with Napoleon and his final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo [13]. Overall, the construction rule allows English movie titles to be translated with much more flexibility than those using other rules.

Values a Successful Movie Title Translation Should Enjoy

To succeed locally in the Chinese cinema market, translated foreign movie titles must also contain a certain set of values: informative value, cultural value, aesthetic value and commercial value. They are also the effects of good movies’ translations. First, a translated title must have informative value, which means that it must be able to inform the audiences of the story of the film [14]. Some translated movie titles, such as *Kindergarten Cop (Mo Gui Hai Zi Wang)* has gone away from the story of the film and the original movie title, thus misinforming the movie audiences. The story of the movie itself has nothing to do with *Mo Gui*, yet the phrase has been inserted to associate the movie with other works by Arnold Schwarzenegger, especially the Terminators (*Mo Gui Zhong Jie Zhe*). This is just one of the many examples of English movies using translated titles that fail to contain any informative value.

Successful translated titles should also incorporate cultural value. Translated titles must be able to adapt to local culture, customs, language, and regulation, while still be able to maintain connection to its root [14]. This value is especially important for English movie titles that contain terminologies and vocabularies which are culturally different. For example, *Seven*, a movie with a strong connection to the Bible is literally translated into Qi. However, Chinese movie audiences are not familiar with stories from the Bible, so *Qi Zong Zai* has been used instead to describe seven different crimes depicted in the movie [14].

Aesthetic value is another important aspect of creating an effective movie title translation. A translated movie title should have an artistic feeling, while still containing informative and cultural values [15]. Some examples of translated foreign movie titles with high aesthetic value are the *Wizard of OZ (Lv Ye Xian Zong)*, *Blood and Sand (Bi Xie Huang Sha)*, and the *Bathing Beauty (Chu Shui Fu Rong)*. These translations have not only retained the original meaning of the English titles, but also increased the aesthetic value. Four Chinese characters movie titles are especially popular in China, because these titles are very easy to pronounce, understand, and remember. They are also very high on aesthetic value, and as a result, over sixty percent of all translated movie titles in China use only four characters.

Finally, translated movie titles also need to have commercial value. A translated title with low
commercial value will be more likely to fail, even if the title is informative, culturally sensitive, and aesthetically sound [14]. Some of the more successful commercially oriented titles include Charlie’s Angel (Pi Li Jiao Wa), Sister Act (Xiu Nv Ye Feng Kuang), and Home Alone (Xiao Gui Dang Jia). However, the importance of commercial value in translated titles has been overestimated by many movie studios. English movie title translations, such as The Soldiers (Xie Bao Qun Long), Made in America (Jing Zi Ye Feng Kuang), and You Are a Big Boy Now (Yan Lv Mi Chun) are all examples of overly commercialization. A successful and effective movie title requires a balance of all four values.

Conclusion

The translation of foreign movie titles is an interesting topic. Movies are an important part of the cultural communication between countries. This article discusses many methods of movie title translation used in Chinese cinema industry. Based on a detailed analysis, it also presents my view on what it takes to successfully translate English movie titles into Chinese. Translating an English movie titles to Chinese is not a very easy task, as some of the examples from this article can show. It is not the simple and mechanic replication of the form and content of the original movie. It cannot be done without the deep understanding of the movie plot, the source of the movie title, linguistic characteristics and movie genres. While translating, translators can obey the deletion rule, the generalization rule and the construction rule and conform to informative value, cultural value, aesthetic value and commercial value. They can also use methods such as transliteration, literal translation, literal translation with notes, free translation and the combination of literal and free translation. In a word, a successful translated title is like a work of art, requiring the proper understanding and usage of rules, values, requirements, and methods of movie title translation.

References

University, 1999 (4).


