

# Research on Methods for Translating Chinese Film Titles into English

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## Abstract:

Under the wave of multi-cultural exchange, a large number of movies are introduced to China from overseas, and Chinese movies are in urgent need of going to the global market. A good movie title can quickly catch the audience's attention so the company can seize more market share. However, in the process of translating Chinese film titles, the factors of cultural differences between China and the West are easily ignored, resulting in the failure to accurately convey the message and connotation of the film to the audience. By the method of literature research, this paper finds that there are cultural differences between China and the West in terms of values, expressions, religions and communication, which will cause difficulties in translation. This paper researches how to use the methods of literal translation, transliteration, free translation and creative translation to translate Chinese film titles into English from a cross-cultural communication perspective.

## Keywords:

Chinese Film Title, English Translation, Translation Methods, Implications

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, with film industry developing rapidly, films deeply fascinate people worldwide who can conduct cultural exchanges across time and space through the wonderful content of movies. The title, as the equivalent of the "postcard" of a film, helps people learn about the genre or plot of the movie [1]. A good title not only conveys information and cultural implications to the audience, but also sublimates the intrinsic value and the embodiment of art, so as to promote the film to occupy a larger market and directly hit the mind of fans [2]. Film title translation is not just a simple conversion of different words, but an exchange and promotion of multiple cultures [3]. When translating Chinese film titles into English, translators should not ignore important factors of cultural differences between Chinese and English so as to avoid any deviation in translation. For example, as Sai Shang Feng Yun (《塞上风云》), "The Wind and Clouds in the Frontiers") and Yang Zi Jiang Feng Yun (《扬子江风云》), "Storm Over the Yangtze River") belong to war movies, the former is translated as "Storm on the Border", and the latter as "Storm Over the Yangtze River" [4]. "Fengyun" in both films refers to turbulent situation, but "Storm" is far from

conveying its inherent cultural meaning. Translators should not only accurately complete the words conversion, but also precisely convey the culture, which requires translators to go beyond the plot of the film and to understand the culture implications of the film [5]. At present, as there are few studies on translation methods of Chinese film titles from a cross-cultural perspective in China, it is an urgent need to study the translation of Chinese film titles, which is conducive to the promotion of Chinese films to the world [6]. For this paper, it first analyzes the cultural differences between China and the West, and then explores the translation methods of Chinese film titles from a cross-cultural perspective.

## **2. Cultural Differences Between China and the West**

American translation theorist, Eugene Nida, once said that “Translation is the communication between two cultures and being familiar with two kinds of culture is more vital than mastering two languages for a real successful translation, because words become meaningful only when they work in cultural background.” [7] Disparate linguistic features, representing the historical and cultural accumulation of different countries, refer to the thinking mode, belief attitude, emotional cognition, moral accomplishment and traditional culture formed in a specific region, instead of the literary model of a certain country [8]. Western culture represented by Britain and the United States embodies different connotations from Chinese culture, which causes great difficulties in translating film titles into English. Therefore, this paper mainly analyzes the differences from four dimensions: values, expression, belief culture and communication culture.

### ***2.1. Differences Between China and West Values***

As a part of social ideology, differences of values will cause difficulties in cross-cultural understanding. As a famous western saying goes, “Heaven is where the police are English, the cooks are French, the mechanics are German, and the lovers are Italian and everything is organized by the Swiss.” Different nationalities with various history, geography, traditional customs and other aspects will perform great differences in the judgment of the same thing. As for the differences in values, this paper mainly analyzes the concepts of collectivism and individualism between China and the west. For example, collectivism and individualism respectively represent two kinds of social concepts, specifically referring to the closeness of the relationship between individuals and groups. Due to the various degrees of social closeness, they embody significant differences in social concepts, which is highlighted by the different relationship between individual interests and national interests. Collectivism emphasizes that the national interest is above the individual one. As Chinese culture put high emphasis on the great unity, Chinese deeply feel the spirit of collectivism rooted in the heart of the Chinese nation, from the traditional Chinese idea of “family-governed” and the consciousness of “everyone should be concerned about the rise and fall of the world” or the “collectivism” education advocated today [9]. In a society where individualism is prevalent, the social structure is looser and individual interests are more emphasized, which is represented by the superheroes portrayed in Western movies. Taking the two representative American superhero movie “Spider-Man” as an example, this movie takes spider-man as the title that tells the story of an ordinary student who becomes a warrior to protect New York City by chance, demonstrating the classic western dream of heroes and the idea of personality worship. However, Chinese films, not only portray the spirit of the protagonist, but also highlight the

shaping of the supporting characters, striving to make each character full and vivid, and more concerning the overall effect of the film. In terms of individualism and collectivism, when translating the titles of Chinese biography films, translators need to think carefully to adopt naturalization or alienation. For instance, there are two ways that one is absorbing the western concept of individualism to translate the name of protagonist as the title by utilizing domestication and another is adopting foreignization so that the translation of the title can express the original context.

## ***2.2. Differences Between China and West Expression Modes***

Every country and nation in the world is featured with its own unique historical background. The advance direction of history is that of culture. Thus, people living in the same historical and cultural background tend to form similar expression modes. According to Mr. Fu Lei [6], “There are several diversities on the ways of thinking between the East and the West: The East emphasizes synthesis, induction, implication, and subtlety, while the West pay attention to analysis, subtle twists and turns, mining and description”. Americans has been endowed with a naturally optimistic and adventurous spirit for its arduous process of funding history and the complex ethnic composition has enhanced their acceptance of diverse cultures, which determines that westerners are more direct, flamboyant and aggressive in their expressions. However, Chinese are deeply influenced by “Confucianism” and Taoism, advocating the idea of “harmony”, “harmony between man and nature” and pursuing that “harmony is the most valuable”, which promotes that most Chinese express euphemistically and implicitly. On certain occasions, Chinese are reluctant to express themselves, fearing that they might influence the atmosphere of collective harmony and coexistence or violate collective interests. Moreover, the difference in expression between the East and the West is also reflected in films. For example, McMurphy in the classic film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and Cheng Dieyi in *Ba Wang Bie Ji* (《霸王别姬》, “Farewell My Concubine”) share similar fates of oppression, resistance, struggle and destruction, but the two characters take completely disparate attitudes towards their fates. McMurphy is bold and unrestrained, who takes the insane asylum patients away from the hospital for fun and bravely resists and even chokes the nurse’s neck to vent his anger when he is dissatisfied with the extreme management. He does not hide his inner feelings, not afraid to do anything, and always full of enthusiasm for embracing new things. Nevertheless, reserved and introverted, Cheng Dieyi was completely different, as he silently endures the pain of his senior fellow apprentice Xiao Lou’s marriage with another person and the loneliness behind the scenes. Simultaneously, he takes the blame not belonging to him during the persecution of the Cultural Revolution, finally ending his life on the stage under the loneliness and desolation. From these two films, we can briefly learn the extroversion of western culture and the introversion of eastern culture. There are many other differences between Chinese and western expression modes. When translating Chinese film titles, translators should carefully consider the use of words in order to achieve consistency with the original name and tone of the film, pursue the balance of culture between the source language and the target language, and stimulate emotional resonance, so as to realize the transmission of information and aesthetic value.

## ***2.3. Differences Between China and West Religious Culture***

Religions rooting in different growing soils, reflect various national characteristics and styles. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are the three major religions

espoused by the Chinese people. For Chinese, they attach more importance to religious beliefs that can provide for their real interests, which make their religion, especially Buddhism, highly utilitarian. For example, in Buddhism, the followers of Guanyin who governs offsprings are mostly for the purpose of being pregnant and the followers of “Manjusri bodhisattva” hope for greater wisdom and academic success for themselves or their families. The pursuit of realistic benefits promote that most Chinese people practice their religion, which helps form such expressions as “burning incense and worshiping Buddha” and “present Buddha with borrowed flowers”. For westerners, they are greatly devout to their religious beliefs. Christianity stipulates that there is only one God as the absolute authority in the hearts of the people, which firms that God is the source of everything and superior to man. However, Chinese religions highlight the equality between man and God and their transformation. For instance, Cheng Yong, the hero of the Chinese film *Wo Bu Shi Yao Shen* (《我不是药神》, “Dying to Survive”) is known as the “God of medicine” because the generic drugs he brings back from India save the lives of countless leukemia patients. The English translation of the film title is *Dying to Survive* that avoids adopting the literal translation of “I’m Not a God of Medicine”, averting any disrespect caused by religious and cultural differences. Therefore, when translating religion-related words or films, translators should have a deeper understanding of western religious knowledge and develop cultural sensitivity to prevent cultural conflicts.

#### ***2.4. Difference Between China and West Communicative Culture***

For this part, this paper mainly analyzes the communication differences between Chinese and the West in terms of appellations. There are many appellations in Chinese culture, but fewer in English, which sometimes leads to unclear referential problems. For example, it’s ambiguous for the appellation of brother that refers to elder one or the younger one, and the appellation of uncle is also not clear. In English, in order to distinguish between them better, these words must be specified by adding modifiers. For example, *Sister Carrie*, an American classic novel and film, can be translated either as “嘉莉小姐” (Miss Carrie) or as “嘉莉姐姐” (elder sister Carrie), etc., but the Chinese translation chose a more appropriate one “嘉莉妹妹” (younger sister Carrie), because the heroine Carrie has an older sister so “嘉莉妹妹” is called by her family. Therefore, when translating titles of Chinese films, it is difficult to understand the meaning of appellations and find corresponding ones in the translated language.

### **3. Translation Methods for Chinese Film Titles**

Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory is of great significance to contemporary Chinese film title translation. Among four principles of functional equivalence, Nida believes that meaning is more important than form. In order to accurately extend the culture of the source language in film titles and eliminate cultural differences as much as possible, the translator needs to make efforts to make a translation that conforms to the idiom of the target language and reflects the source language characteristics. If the meaning and form cannot be balanced at the same time, the form should be abandoned [7]. Therefore, the translation of film title is not necessarily faithful to the original one, because only changing the form is not enough to express the original cultural connotation, and translators can create a translation according to the content of the film without considering the original title. In order to effectively translate Chinese

film titles in a cross-cultural context, the following translation methods can be used for reference:

### 3.1. *Literal Translation*

Literal translation is a translation method that is faithful to both the meaning and form of the original text. Faithfulness to the original text is the most basic principle under any translation theory, thus literal translation is the most basic and universal translation method. Literal translation is not word-for-word translation, but preserving the cultural spirit of the original text while maintaining the form as far as possible. For example, when major events are used as movie titles, such as Nanjing Massacre and The Battle at Lake Changjin, there will be little cultural gap for western people who are familiar with them. In such case, literal translation can not only conform to the original film title to convey the connotation but also ensure the consistency of the form. Table 1 shows the names of Chinese films that adopt the literal translation method.

*Table 1. Some Film titles and their literal translations.*

| Chinese Film Title | English Translation        |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| 英雄                 | Hero                       |
| 画皮                 | Painted Skin               |
| 神话                 | The Myth                   |
| 红河谷                | The Red River Valley       |
| 黄土地                | Yellow Earth               |
| 让子弹飞               | Let the Bullet Fly         |
| 建国大业               | The Founding of a Republic |

### 3.2. *Transliteration*

Transliteration is a method of transforming the phonetic form of the source language into the phonetic form of the target language [10]. In the translation of Chinese movie titles, transliteration means translating Chinese characters into English phrases with the same or similar pronunciation, which is usually adopted for films titles using the name of people or place and these names should be familiar to the west so as to prevent misunderstandings. For example, Cheng Ji Si Han (《成吉思汗》, “Genghis Khan”) is translated suitably in Genghis Khan. As an outstanding military strategist and politician in China, Genghis Khan is “a superb military commander with great talent and bold vision”, who unified all ethnic groups in Mobei and founded Mongolia, later expanding to a huge empire stretching across Europe and Asia. The Washington Post and The New York Times, two of the most influential media outlets in the United States, called Genghis Khan “the first man of the millennium” and “the great man of the millennium.” respectively, which proves that that Genghis Khan is a great personage for westerners. Table 2 shows the names of Chinese films that adopt transliteration methods.

*Table 2. Some Film Titles and their transliterations.*

| Chinese Film Title | English Translation |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| 可可西里               | Ke Ke Xi Li         |
| 天安门                | Tian An Men         |
| 花木兰                | Mulan               |
| 周恩来                | Zhou Enlai          |

### 3.3. Free Translation

Due to the great difference in expression between eastern and western languages, most phrases have unequal meanings. In order to keep the connotation of the film title as far as possible, free translation is recommended. Free translation in film title translation attaches great importance to convey the theme and meanings to the maximum extent, even at the expense of changing the language form of the title [10]. From the perspective of cross-cultural language and cultural communication, free translation emphasizes the independence of each cultural system. Therefore, before translating a film title, it is supposed to make a general understanding of the relevant background, and then think about how to make up for cultural differences to avoid a strange translation. In the process of translation, film titles usually employ various translation skills, such as word addition, word saving, conversion and extension [11]. The film *Jin Ling Shi San Chai* (《金陵十三钗》, “The Flowers of War”) is translated into *The Flowers of War* by extension skill. This film tells the fate of 13 prostitutes in Qinhuai River under the chaos of Nanjing Massacre in 1937, showing the amorous feelings of Qinhuai River which was mentioned in countless poems and heroic feats made by those prostitutes who seem to “know nothing about the bitterness of a conquered kingdom”. *Jin Ling Shi San Chai* cites the allusion of “the twelve beauties of Jinling” in *Dream of Red Chamber*, implying that the thirteen women in the film cannot escape the same tragedy as the twelve beauties. Therefore, if we use transliteration or literal translation, those implied allusions and meanings would be very strange to westerners. The translation of *The Flowers of War* introduces the social background of the film and compares these glamorous and brave women to “Flowers”, implying that it is a story about a group of women in the war, which achieves the effect of conveying the theme and connotation of the film. *Xuan Ya Zhi Shang* (《悬崖之上》, “Cliff Walkers”), for example, is translated into *Cliff Walkers* by using addition skill. As the Chinese title focuses on constructing artistic conception, the English translation *Cliff Walkers* highlights the core of the story and preserves the artistic conception of the original title -- the underground Communist party members are at the risk of death in the film, and the tense atmosphere is vivid. Table 3 shows the Names of Chinese films that adopt the free translation method.

*Table 3. Some Film titles and their free translations.*

| Chinese Film Title | English Translation        |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| 夺冠                 | Leap                       |
| 大腕                 | A Big Shot's Funeral       |
| 赤橙黄绿青蓝紫            | All Colors of the Rainbow  |
| 明月几时有              | Our Time Will Come         |
| 满城尽带黄金甲            | Curse of the Golden Flower |
| 我不是潘金莲             | I'm not Madame Bovary      |
| 你好，李焕英             | Hi, Mom                    |

### 3.4. Creative Translation

Creative translation is known as a special translation method. Creative translation is renaming the film based on the plot rather than the original film title [10]. When literal translation, transliteration and free translation cannot accurately convey the connotation of the film, it is necessary to use creative translation to select new words to summarize the content, enhance the attraction of the translated name and realize the information transmission, cultural exchange and commercial value simultaneously

[12]. For example, the movie *Jin Gang Chuan* (《金刚川》, “The Sacrifice”), based on the battle in Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea, shows the heroic deeds of Chinese People’s Volunteers who fought to the death despite the fact their weapons were much lower quality than those of the US forces. Therefore, it is not advisable to adopt former three translation methods for translating the movie, since even Chinese people who are not familiar with the modern history may not understand the theme. As the film itself is about sacrifice, the name is finally translated into *The Sacrifice* with a strong sense of tragedy. Based on the individual case that anti-aircraft artillery platoon leader Zhang Fei and anti-aircraft artillery squad leader Guan Lei both want to sacrifice for each other, it can be realized that there are countless similar cases taking place in that war, as the line in China’s national anthem says, “using our flesh and blood to build the Great Wall”. Another example is the movie *Bei Jing Yu Shang Xi Ya Tu* (《北京遇上西雅图》, “Finding Mr. Right”), which tells a story about a money-oriented Chinese girl who is expecting a baby in Seattle and finally finds whom she wants to be and falls in love with Mr.Right. If the film title is translated literally, it is difficult for westerners to perceive the romance of love between the two persons representing two cities; If the title is translated freely, there are too much information that need to be added and expanded, because audience can only infer the place of the story from the title. Therefore, *Bei Jing Yu Shang Xi Ya Tu* is finally translated as *Finding Mr. Right* through creative translation, which reflects the theme of romantic love, and the heroine’s journey to find her true love. Table 4 shows the names of Chinese films with creative translation method.

*Table 4. Some Film titles and their creative translations.*

| Chinese Film Title | English Translation         |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| 花样年华               | In the Mood for Love        |
| 非诚勿扰               | If You are the One          |
| 大城小事               | Leaving Me, Loving You      |
| 那些年，我们一起追的女孩       | You are the Apple of My Eye |
| 岁月神偷               | Echoes of the Rainbow       |

#### 4. Discussion and Implications

As mentioned above, many examples are given to analyze the possible deviation of Chinese film title translation caused by the cultural differences between China and the west, and discuss the English translation methods of Chinese film titles. Improper selection of translation methods will lead to translation errors. For example, the literal translation that translates *Wo Hu Cang Long* (《卧虎藏龙》, “Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon”) into *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* has always been controversial, because Dragon and tiger has great differences in the symbolic meanings between the East and the West. Such translation ignores the impact of the value differences mentioned above, which is a typical improper literal translation that only focuses on form regardless of meaning. However, the use of free translation also has excessive imitation of foreign film titles so as to cater to foreign audiences. For example, Chinese *Odyssey 1: Pandora’s Box* is the English title of *Da Hua Xi You Zhi Yue Guang Bao He* (《大话西游之月光宝盒》, “Chinese Odyssey 1: Pandora’s Box”) , starring comedian Stephen Chow. In order to get closer to Western culture, “Xi You” and “Yue Guang Bao He” is compared to “Odyssey” and “Pandora’s Box” respectively. In the translation of Chinese film titles, great attention is paid to the background knowledge of the audience in target language countries. However, many

cultural allusions mixed together lead to the result that both Chinese people and foreign audiences cannot understand. Moreover, creative translation reconstructs the original film title, and is more likely to cause problems during the process. For example, the English translation of Huang Fei Hong (《黄飞鸿》, “Once Upon a Time in China”) follows apparently the example of an American film named “Once Upon a Time in America” but disconnects with the content of the film itself. Therefore, the translator must sum up the content based on the theme of the film so as to convey the cultural connotation to the maximum extent. In addition to the selection of translation methods, the quality of film title translation is directly related to the translator’s translation ability and quality. Therefore, translators are required to cultivate the following qualities: First, translators should possess a breadth of knowledge and translation theory. They should realize that the Chinese and Western culture should be widely combined with correct translation strategies, methods and skills, using words accurately to avoid wrong translation and cultural allusions. The second point is that the translator should have language aesthetics. Translators should create English titles on the basis of the original film, combine English rhetoric device, rhythm and other means in language, and choose idiomatic English phrases to express, as well as conform to the aesthetic taste of western audiences. Thirdly, the translator should have a strict and harsh attitude, holding the comprehensive understanding of film on hand, considering every detail and word expression.

## 5. Conclusions

The translation of film title is different from other translations because of its abundant information and more flexible translation methods. This paper discusses the translation methods of Chinese film titles from a cross-cultural perspective, analyzing the differences in values, expressions, religions and communicative cultures, and exploring methods for translating Chinese film titles from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. With the progress of modernization, the film culture had the special track to pursue the modernity. Only by recognizing all kinds of differences between Chinese and western cultures and using appropriate translation methods, can we attract western audiences, arouse emotional resonance, and highlight the cultural connotation as well as the infinite language charm of Chinese films.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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