

# ***A Skopos Approach to the Factors Influencing English Film Title Translation and Current Situation***

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**Abstract:** With the increasing development and progress of society, the communication between China and foreign countries has become closer and closer, among which film translation is a concrete manifestation of the cultural exchange between China and foreign countries. In movies, movie titles play a decisive role in increasing box office, attracting audiences and promoting movies. In recent years, people have been paying more and more attention to the translation of movie titles. This paper summarizes the characteristics of movie titles and analyzes the factors influencing the translation of movie titles and the current situation in China according to Skopos theory with the utilization of case study and comparison. From research, it is found that translators are affected by some factors to form a particular goal which influences the translation result. Therefore, translators are supposed to strike a balance between these factors that may serve as a guide during the translating process and the original meaning of the film title. This paper focuses on how English film title translation is influenced and enlightens translators in this field in some way. In the meantime, this paper lacks relevant evidence to back up some claims. To improve the objectivity of related research findings, systematic surveys on this subject should be used in future studies.

**Keywords:** Skopos, movie titles, translation

## **1. Introduction**

The film is a delightful art form, both artistic and commercial. The title of a film is the first source of information for the audience, and its guiding function and role cannot be ignored. Successful translation of film titles not only helps to enhance the commercial value of films but also achieves the purpose of effectively spreading culture, which has the effect of highlighting the dragon. In other words, when translating movie titles, if the cultural differences between the source language and the target language are not accurately understood, it is easy to cause mistranslation. As American translation theorist Eugene A Nida says: “Translation is an exchange between two

cultures. For a successful translation, knowing two cultures is more important than grasping two languages because words become meaningful only in their effective cultural background[1].”

### **1.1. Research Review**

Translation of movie titles has always been a hot topic in translation. The earliest research on the film title and subtitle translation began in the 1980s. Although film title translation is an essential part of film culture communication, it did not receive enough attention in the early days. Only a few papers and books based on film titles appeared. In 1984, Min Lei pointed out in “A Compendium of Chinese Translations of Foreign Film Titles” that the translation of film titles should choose either direct or Italian translation, and the adapted translation should be used when forced to do so [2]. In 1985, Zheng Qiwu proposed in “A Brief Discussion of Taiwan’s Translation of Foreign Film Titles” that no matter the direct or Italian translation, the interpretation of film titles should not be detached from their contents and themes. These two early treatises are also often used as important guidelines for translators of English film titles [3].

It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, with China’s accession to the WTO and the reconstruction, marketization as well as internalization of China’s film market industry, that studies on film title translation sprang up.

### **1.2. Research Creativity**

The translation of English movie titles has been the subject of extensive study. However, research on the variables that will affect the results of translation is still insufficient while the majority of studies focus on translation strategies. Additionally, the Skopos Theory is rarely used in the field of translating English film titles, while more scholars have chosen to combine film titles with semiotics and cultural theory. This paper innovatively investigates how different factors affect translation results and determine the relationship between those factors and the current state of English film title translation in China by using some English film title translation cases as its research subject. And it does this by creatively combining Skopos Theory and film title translation. Moreover, a few hotspots and potential problems are mentioned. This paper will analyze various aspects involving culture, market, region, religion, and aesthetics with the help of a case study in general and the use of comparison while illuminating the region factor. Specifically, comparison will be utilized to compare different translations of the same film title in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. The ultimate goal of this paper is to provide some inspiration to the translators as well as to encourage more translators attach value to relative possible problems in order to improve the development of English film title translation in the hope of further facilitating cultural exchange.

## **2. Factors Influencing English Film Title Translation**

### **2.1. Cultural Factor**

Translation is a social phenomenon of communication between two cultures as well as a process of interlingual conversion[4]. With frequent cultural interactions between China and the West, more English films are being released in China, appealing to more people paying attention to translating English film titles into Mandarin. To some extent, the disparities between Chinese and Western cultures make translating film titles into Mandarin more challenging.

Some of the existing Chinese translations of film titles blend traditional Chinese culture (such as poetry, idioms, and so on) with the substance of the film to translate English film titles into Chinese, allowing the audience to comprehend the subject of the film and achieve the purpose of conveying

Chinese aesthetics and promoting cultural exchange. At the same time, there is also a phenomenon of excessive cultural alienation in translating film titles into Chinese.

## **2.2. The Market Factor**

The market will almost certainly have an impact on how English picture titles are translated into Chinese. Films are typically produced with the hope of doing well at the ticket office. The title is the most prominent element that can draw attention to itself, especially for films that are imported from overseas. As a result of the market's interference, the translator is encouraged to develop a particular translation goal that can reflect the translator's perspective on the state of the market and his predictions of the tastes of the target audience. And the translation result guided by the translator's goal has centrifugal and centripetal effects. The original film title will be lost in some ways, which could increase the market competitiveness of the movie.

## **2.3. Regional Factor**

Account for the different historical, political, and cultural backgrounds of the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, there are significant differences between the versions in the three regions. Mainland China has stricter restrictions on translation, so the mainland versions are more traditional, whereas the arrangements in Hong Kong and Taiwan are more flexible and livelier. Each of these three regions has its style of translation. Generally speaking, translation versions in the Chinese mainland are relatively traditional and are more relevant to the contents of movies [5]; translation versions in Hong Kong have unique local language styles and characteristics, which keep the common touch with local people; translation versions in Taiwan usually contain exaggerated words to attract the audience's attention.

## **2.4. Religious Factor**

The differences in religious culture between China and the West significantly affect the translation of film titles. The Chinese nation has a variety of religions. Most believers believe in Chinese folk religions, while a few belief in Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and other religions. Compared with China, Christianity is a significant part of Western culture. Therefore, when some English film titles with religious meanings are translated into Chinese, the religious-related words will be explained, omitted, or paraphrased.

## **2.5. Aesthetics Factor**

Aesthetics is the result of the long-term development of human civilization which determine the differences in aesthetic interests and these differences determine the translator to grasp the ideological and aesthetic content of the source language film works and to transmit the aesthetic experience of the source work to the audience of the film art in the translated language.

In contrast, Westerners prefer realistic beauty, while Easterners prefer contextual beauty. Based on this difference, translators should try to break the fixed mindset of Westerners in the process of translating English movie titles and show the distinctive cultural atmosphere and value power of China in the language. For example, many translations of four-character movie titles and typical translations with Chinese characteristics also reflect the traditional cultural flavor of Chinese people.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. Cultural Factor

In translating film titles into Chinese, the use of images familiar to the culture of the target language country when doing transformation can reduce the viewing barriers brought by cultural differences to the audience to a certain extent.

Example 1: in “Ah Gan Zheng Zhuan” (*Forrest Gump*), Forrest Gump represents the main character in the film, and the plot revolves around the main character’s life experiences. The “Ah Q Zheng Zhuan” is a literary work by modern Chinese writer Lu Xun, which is also an autobiographical work centering on the protagonist’s name as the title of the article. Connecting the equivalent parts of Chinese and Western culture to assist the audience to watch and promote cultural exchange. The translation which uses classical Chinese literature works to show the film’s content achieves the purpose principle of assisting the audience to watch and promoting cultural exchange. And “Ren Gui Qing Wei Liao”(*Ghost*), uses allusions and mythic stories in the Chinese culture to build a bond of understanding between cultures so that the audience can immediately comprehend the content and plot of the film through the titles containing Chinese cultural images.

Example 2: While “Yi Shu Li Hua Ya Hai Tang”(*Lolita*), is restricted by reserved and closed Oriental culture itself, leading to the popularity of the translation using classical poetry as a metaphor. The transferred title “Yi Shu Li Hua Ya Hai Tang” comes from a poem written by Su Shi, a Chinese poet in the Northern Song Dynasty. The original intention of this poem was to make fun of his old friend who was over 80 years old and married an 18 years old young girl. The corruption of feudal marriage in China was hidden behind the poem, which expresses the system’s characteristics in ancient China, and the film *Lolita* depicts ethical issues. The corresponding core in the two literary works is not the same, which could not convey the main idea of the original film [6]. At the same time, in 1997, the domestic film industry avoided the theme of “sex”, and the Oriental culture itself is reserved and closed, which is one of the factors that lead to the popularity of the translation using classical poetry as a metaphor.

#### 3.2. Market Factor

When the translator takes into account the attraction of the film audience and the meaning conveyed by the film itself during the translation process, the result of the film title translation will have a “centripetal” effect on the film.

Example 3: *Inception*-*Dao Meng Kong Jian*

The translation outcome can be inferred to be guided by the translator’s intention in accordance with the Skopos Rule in the Skopos Theory. “Dao Meng” is a lively way to describe the statement inception. The act of “Dao” makes the title of the movie more intriguing and creative, which increases its ability to draw viewers [7]. The goal title must abide by the coherence rule in Skopos Theory, meaning it must be readable and acceptable. It appears that the target title effectively communicates the major ideas and philosophical foundation of this movie.

While translators overestimate the market and box office, the results of title translation may have a “centrifugal” effect on the film

Example 4: *Triangle*- “Kong Bu You Lun”

The film’s central idea is closely associated with the initial title *Triangle*. Triangle patterns are closed loops by nature, symbolizing the tragedy of the endless cycle experienced by the protagonist Jess<sup>[8]</sup>.

Triangle also recalls fatalism from the standpoint of geometric beauty. One notable example of triangle stability is used in the movie as a symbol for predetermined destiny, and some triangle structures are metaphorical [9].

According to the Skopos Rule of the Skopos Theory, the translator's intention is at the heart of the translation's outcome. By saying "Kong Bu", a thriller stunt can be developed to attract the film's target audiences and to make the picture stand out; by mentioning "You Lun", the translator is successful in maintaining the connection between the title and the movie. The translator's fidelity to the original title relies on his purpose and comprehension, according to the Skopos Theory's Fidelity Rule. The translator emphasizes the terror element in the target title while eschewing the aesthetic significance of the original title—likely because the aesthetic value is not as important to be considered in light of film box office rivalry.

The phenomenon of many major film studios, including Hollywood and Pixar, always giving their films the same suffix to appeal to audiences and optimize market benefits is influenced by the market.

### 3.3. Regional Factor

It is because of the differences in culture and translation strategies in inland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan that there are inevitably multiple translated versions of a film.

Example 5: The translation of *The Shawshank Redemption* is "Xiao Shen Ke De Jiu Shu" in the Chinese mainland, "Yue Hei Gao Fei" in Hong Kong, and "Ci Ji 1995" in Taiwan. The film mainly tells the story of a man who, after being wrongly imprisoned, redeems himself and finally succeeds in breaking out of prison and gaining freedom. From the perspective of Skopos Theory, the mainland version uses the strategy of "literal translation", which achieves the Skopos and fidelity to the original. Compared with the mainland version, the Hong Kong version has a solid creative nature and gives a sense of mystery and horror. However, the Taiwan version is confusing because the translation is far from the movie's content. To maximize box office profits, Taiwan often uses more eye-catching words in film titles, such as "Mo Gui", "Sheng Si", and "Ci Ji", which deviates from the rules of Skopos Theory.

Example 6: The translation of *Brave Heart* is "Yong Gan De Xin" in the Chinese mainland, "Ying Xiong Ben Se" in Hong Kong, and "Jing Shi Wei Liao Yuan" in Taiwan. The film tells the story of a man who fought indefatigably against the rulers of England and finally liberated his homeland from the tyranny of King Edward I. Regarding the translation of this film title, the Chinese mainland adopts the translation strategy of the "literal translation" strategy, while Hong Kong and Taiwan use a "free translation" strategy. Based on the Skopos Theory, both the mainland and Hong Kong versions convey the film's core well, enabling the audience to associate the film's content with the title. Of the two versions, the name "Ying Xiong Ben Se" fits well with the Hong Kong description style of a person with a chivalrous spirit. Compared with the two versions, the Taiwan version focuses on the film's love story, and the exaggerated word "Jing" can trigger the audience's curiosity to watch the film.

On the one hand, the emergence of multiple translations of one film allows translators from different regions to learn from translators from different regions, but on the other hand, it also leads to the viewers' unfamiliarity with the translations existing in regions other than their own and creates an information gap in the exchange of information. Therefore, how to deal with this situation is also a problem that needs to be solved in the future.

### 3.4. Religious Factor

As the significant cultural differences between China and abroad, religious factors often appear in the translation of film titles.

Example 7: *Seven* is a crime and suspense film with religious overtones. The “Seven” in the title refers to the Catholic concept of “seven deadly sins”. The Chinese translation of the film is “Qi Zong Zui”, which explains the meaning of “Seven” very well and avoids the misunderstandings caused by cultural differences. This translation follows the three rules of the Skopos Theory very well. Firstly, through Amplification, the Chinese audience can better understand the religious connotations of the film [10]. Secondly, it retains the meaning of “seven” in the title, which is faithful to the original title, making it understood similarly by Chinese and Western audiences.

Example 8: The translation of *Terminator Salvation* is “Zhong Jie Zhe” in the Chinese mainland version, which omits the translation of “Salvation”. Since the mainland does not allow religion to be preached in cultural media, some sensitive religious terms are usually avoided in translating film titles in the Chinese mainland. However, in Hong Kong and Taiwan versions, the word is translated literally because the two regions have no laws restricting the spread of religion in the cultural media.

Therefore, the film title translation is influenced by religion, which is inseparable from a country’s politics and ideology.

### 3.5. Aesthetic Factor

Due to aesthetic influences, translators are often indeed able to retell the excitement of a film through its title, but often translations that push too hard do backfire.

Example 9: One of the most popular musicals in the history of cinema, *Sound of Music*, translated directly as “Yin Yue Zhi Sheng” is very concise and elegant, but the Hong Kong and Taiwan version is translated as “Xian Yue Piao Piao Chu Chu Wen”, which is far from the lively and warm comedy atmosphere of the film. Its origin is the great poet of the Tang Dynasty, Bai Juyi’s *The Everlasting Longing*, the original text is as follows: “The lofty palace towered high into the cloud; With divine music borne on the breeze the air ” [11].

Example 10: Another is that the movie of the same name, based on Hemingway’s masterpiece *The Sun Also Rises*, is translated as “Qie Si Jiao Yang You Zhao Jun”, which is too pretentious.

Long Qianhong proposes that translators should have a correct translation mentality, that is, “they should work with the attitude of being responsible for the art of film and the audience [12].” It can be seen that the pursuit of beauty to grasp a degree.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. Findings

From the perspective of the Skopos Theory, this paper summarizes several major factors affecting the translation of English film titles, including culture, region, religion, market, and artistic aesthetic factors. In addition, it also analyzes the results of these factors in combination with specific film cases to summarize the current situation of the Chinese translation of English films. The paper shows that the Chinese translation of film titles is affected by the above factors and forms a mutually restrictive relationship with the above factors. In other words, combining Chinese traditional aesthetics, multi-translation, emphasis on the beauty of Chinese form structure, euphemism of strong words, formatting of film titles, etc., this paper provides a reference for the Chinese translation of English films in the future.

The Skopos Theory proposed by Hans Vermeer holds that the process of translation should



respect the culture of the target language country, and at the same time match the core meaning of the original text with the target text so that the audience of the target language country can understand the meaning of the translated text.

Translation of film titles is a special category in translation, because it is an important responsibility for cultural exchange of films. A good translation of a film title is a testimony of the translator's ability and quality.

## 4.2. Limitations and Prospects

There are two major limitations in this study that could be addressed in the future research. First, the analysis of the paper lacks related data to support some views. Most of the reviews of film title translations come from the Internet and social media, and no systematic surveys of different people have been conducted, so they are somewhat subjective. Second, due to different cultural backgrounds, when we study the current situation of different versions of film titles in the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, we stand in the position of mainland China, which may lead to a certain degree of bias.

In future research, a certain amount of data can be obtained by investigating different people's reviews of Chinese translations of English film titles, and using these data to analyze what should be noted in Chinese translations of English film titles in the future.

Translation of film titles is a special category in translation because it bears the important responsibility of film culture communication. A good translation of a film title is a testimony of the translator's ability and quality [13]. This also reminds us that we should have a robust aesthetic appreciation of films, good literary skills and a correct translation mentality to face the translation of film titles in the future.

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