

Original Paper

Research on Film Title Translation from the Perspective of Polysystem Theory

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Abstract

From the film, we can have access to the customs and cultures of all over the world, and the film title is playing a pioneering role. The more successful the title is, the more attractive it is to the audience. The translation of film titles is more dependent on by audiences in different language and in different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the translation of film titles. This paper intends to study the translation of film titles (Chinese translation of English titles and English translation Chinese titles) through Polysystem theory, and find that culture is an important factor affecting the translation of film titles, in addition to political and patron factors.

Keywords

movie title, English-Chinese translation, polysystems theory, cultural differences

1. Introduction

As an art form, film is also an entertainment product of new demand from the public, and it is becoming more and more popular. Film has a huge influence and is a creative industry consisting of politics, economy and culture. In today's era, film is an important form of cross-cultural communication, and the cultures of various countries have spread along with the release of films in different countries. The title is the window, is the eyes of the film, through it audience can have an insight into the inner world of the film. Despite only a few words, it is the guide and soul of the whole film (Mao, 2012). The titles of Chinese films and English films have their own characteristics and forms, but no matter what type of film titles, they have rich connotations and are the epitome of culture. At present, China advocates "going out" and advocating cultural confidence. Film culture also belongs to a kind of culture, so the export of Chinese films is also an important part. Translation has undoubtedly played a huge role in the promotion

and introduction of Chinese films. Similarly, absorbing “new nutrients” from English films is also inseparable from translation, and the translation of film titles is also very important. The film title involves cultural, linguistic and social factors, and its translation is not separate from these factors. Therefore, studying the translation of film titles from the perspective of Polysystem theory can understand the characteristics of Chinese and English film titles, reveal the factors affecting the translation of film titles, and provide some new research perspectives for the translation of film titles.

2. Previous Studies of the Translation of Film Titles

For the translation of film names, previous studies mainly include the following topics: the use of various theories and perspectives to explain the translation phenomenon of film names, discuss the translation standards of film names, the translation strategies and methods of film names, etc.

Many studies have discussed the translation of film titles using various theories and perspectives, such as He (2001), Li (2002) and Wang (2019). Some scholars have studied the translation standards and principles of film titles. Such as Long (2003). In terms of the research on the translation strategies and methods of film titles, scholars have also made great achievements. Such as Lin (1996), Mao (2012) and Xiao (2019).

According to the literature collection, the author found that the research on film titles mostly focuses on the above three themes. In addition, there are also some scattered studies, such as Jose Santaemilia and Pardo (1994), which pays attention to the program of English film translation. The research perspectives are gradually diversified, and the research methods are mostly deduction to illustrate their own views, and few use Polysystem theory to study the translation of film titles. What is more noteworthy is that scholars pay more attention to the Chinese translation of English film titles and ignore the English translation of Chinese film titles. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the embodiment and role of Polysystem theory in film title translation (English translation of Chinese film titles and Chinese translation of English film title) to enrich the research in this field.

3. The Influence of Multivariate System Theory on Film Titles

3.1 Polysystem Theory

Polysystem theory was proposed by Itamar Even-Zohar, who first proposed the “Polysystem theory”, which combines translation and translation with the cultural context, social conditions, politics and many other factors that arise and are read (Li, 2007). Zohar believes that “system” is to reveal a fact, language, literature, culture, society, “human communication dominated by symbols”, “systems rather than a mixture of unrelated elements to fully understand and study”; “pluralism” is to abandon Saussure’s static structural view and advocate “regard symbol system as a heterogeneous and open structure” (Itamar, 2002). Introduce Polysystem theory into translation research helps to better understanding of translation, “Polysystem theory breakthrough to a single text static, isolated temporal research method to measure the limitations of the early translation research school, and the translation research in a larger cultural

environment to dynamic, systematic research, to broaden the vision of translation research” (Zhang, 2005). Translation involves many factors, such as language, culture, politics and society, and the translation of film title is also a kind of translation. Therefore, this paper intends to use the Polysystem theory to study the translation of film title.

3.2 Characteristics of the Chinese and English Film Titles

Chinese film titles mostly use idioms or four-character words, and some even directly borrow historical allusions, such as 《霸王别姬》, 《卧虎藏龙》, 《洞房花烛》, 《马路天使》, 《万家灯火》. Four-word phrase is the accumulation of people’s long-term social and cultural life, which is a conventional form of language. It has a concise and comprehensive rhetorical effect, rich in the charm of traditional Chinese culture (Feng, 2010). Therefore, when the English movie name is translated into Chinese, translating it into four-character words can reflect the traditional Chinese culture and attract the attention of Chinese audiences. For example, *Gone with the wind* (《乱世佳人》), *Random Harvest* (《鸳梦重温》), *Flipped* (《怦然心动》) and so on. These translations are simple and clear, and full of charm. The title of Chinese films also has a feature, that is, the beauty of artistic conception, which refers to the aesthetic realm of meaning and environment, feeling and scene, heart and things blend, and can make the audience have a certain association, such as 《桃李劫》, 《大红灯笼高高挂》, 《花样年华》 and so on. Such a traditional Chinese aesthetics, Chinese audiences under the influence of five thousand years of culture will always be attracted by, so the translation of English title also highlights the artistic beauty. For example, *Waterloo Bridge* (《魂断蓝桥》), *Hilary and Jackie* (《她比烟花更寂寞》), *Ghost* (《人鬼情未了》), *Lolita* (《一树梨花压海棠》) and so on.

One of the major features of the English film title is it usually uses the name of the protagonist of the film story, which is simple and convenient, such as *Rebecca*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Malena*, *Shane*, *Patton*, etc., and the name of the male/heroine is directly used as the name of the film, which can show the hero of the film to the audience to the fastest limit. The translation of these titles into Chinese often adds Chinese romanticism, such as *Rebecca* into 《蝴蝶梦》 and *Thelma and Louise* into 《末路狂花》. Like Chinese titles, English titles use idioms and allusions with the brand of British and American culture. In terms of religion, people in British and American countries mostly believe in Christianity, which has a great influence on the title of English films. A large number of English allusions come from the Bible, Christianity and myths, which play a considerable role in the formation of English titles (Feng, 2010). For example, in the 1995 thriller *Seven*, the plot revolves around the seven original sin of Catholic doctrine. The number “seven” is very mysterious in religion, which is the most common number in the Bible. For example, God used seven days to make Adam and removed Adam’s seventh rib to make Eve. In this film, the “seven” is also everywhere: seven crimes, seven penalties, seven rain and so on. Therefore, just translating “seven” into “七” cannot reflect the specific information of the film, and the Chinese audiences cannot understand the implied cultural factors. Another film *Adam’s Rib*, this word which is actually derived from the Bible Genesis, where God created Eve with his seventh rib and married

them. The film tells the story of a couple, a prosecutor and a defense lawyer, and Adam's rib actually refers to a man's wife.

3.3 Factors That Influence the Translation of Film Titles

3.3.1 The English Translation of the Chinese Film Titles

One of the major factors that affects the English translation of Chinese film names is the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Because of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, this factor needs to be considered in translation to make the western audience not confused. As mentioned above, some titles of Chinese films use four-character words, some contain Chinese allusions, and some create a kind of artistic conception. However, when translating them, we should also take into account whether western audiences can understand these titles containing traditional Chinese culture. 《梅兰芳》, directed by Chen Kaige, tells the legendary life of Mei Lanfang, a Peking Opera master. The Chinese title is titled 《梅兰芳》. Because most of the Chinese audiences have heard of Mei and feature the main characters of the film, most Chinese audiences can know what story the film is about to tell. However, the English version title is not so, it highlights the main idea of the film rather than the main characters, *Forever enthralled* reflects Mei Lanfang's exquisite acting and personality charm, but also vaguely contains the audience's obsession with him. The film 《东邪西毒》 is adapted from Jin Yong's famous novel "Legend of the Condor Heroes". In the novel, "Dongxie" refers to Huang Yaoshi and "Xidu" refers to Ouyang Feng. The film tells the story of these people. Chinese audiences view the title, most can know what the content of the film is involved, so the "Dongxie Xidu" highlights the main characters of the film. However, the title of the English translation does not directly translate it, because foreigners do not understand. *Ashes of the times* actually shows the connotation that the film wants to express, suggesting that everything will pass with time. When the title 《唐山大地震》 comes, Chinese audiences will be drawn into the fear and grief of the 7.8-magnitude earthquake in Tangshan in 1976. The title describes the location of the story and recalls the pain of the disaster. The short five characters contain too much. If its English name is translated as Tangshan Earthquake, first of all, foreign audiences may not know Tangshan, second, because the core of the film is not only to show people's vulnerability in the face of disaster, but also pay attention to how people let go and get rid of the shackles of the soul after the disaster. The word "aftershock" highlights the core of the film well, because "shock" is a pun, both referring to an earthquake and a heavy blow and shock people suffered. Look at the film 《刮痧》, with the misunderstanding of traditional Chinese medicine scraping therapy as the main line, tells the story of Chinese people in foreign countries due to the conflict between the Eastern and Western cultures, and finally because of people's sincerity and love, the dilemma was broken through. Its English translation is called *The Treatment*, and many treatment techniques actually belong to the category of "treatment", and scraping therapy is certainly no exception. While foreigners do not understand this treatment, this purpose-oriented translation also helps the audience to grasp the core and essence of the word.

In addition to the connotation of the film title, the English translation of the Chinese film title can sometimes quote or imitate the sayings that have appeared in British and American culture, such as the

title of a famous book, the name of an English film, or a certain allusion. For example, in the film 《大话西游之月光宝盒》 and 《大话西游之仙履奇缘》, the former English translation is called *A Chinese Odyssey Part One: Pandoras Box*, while the latter continues in form: *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella*. The English translation of both films treats “大话西游” into “Chinese odyssey”. Because of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, Western audiences cannot understand the meaning of a Chinese Odyssey, and the word is difficult to handle. Compared with direct translation, borrowing “odyssey” can make western audiences “empathy” to some extent, because the Odyssey from Homeric epic now refers to major works of fantasy and adventure. For example, in the English translation of Wang Jing’s 《有情饮水饱》, *Love My, Love My Money* firstly makes people think of the English proverb “Love me, love my dog”, which is quite comic. The English translation of 《黄飞鸿》 by Tsui Hark *Once upon a Time in China* uses the English film title *Once Upon a Time in America* (Feng, 2015).

Chinese film titles are also influenced by their sponsors when translated in English. For example, the film *Farewell My Concubine*, directed by Chen Kaige, centering on the joys and sorrows of two Peking Opera singers for half a century, shows the thinking and understanding of traditional culture, people’s living state and human nature. The Chinese title is taken from the soul plot of the film—《霸王别姬》 by the main character, which is also an allusion in ancient China. The English translation is *Farewell my concubine*, which to some extent is the meaning, but the beauty and artistic conception are greatly reduced. Australian translator and Sinologist Linda Jaivin mentioned the title translation of *Farewell My Concubine* in an interview. She mentioned that “the translation of the title was not done by me”, but the English title “Farewell, My Concubine” was decided before I started translating. When I received the translation work, the first question was to ask the director if I could change the translation name. The director said no. I just talked about that when translating, excepting text, translators are often limited in film directors (Jin, 2013). This is actually a typical example of a patron’s influence and manipulation of translation.

3.3.2 Chinese Translation of the English Film Title

In the process of translating English film titles into Chinese, cultural factors should not be underestimated. Chinese expression is implicit and graceful, with obvious ideology, with a unique charm of Chinese culture. The film *Waterloo Bridge* was translated into 《魂断蓝桥》, which was once named the best Chinese title in a foreign film. If the original title is directly translated, it is the “滑铁卢桥”. In reality, this is a bridge across the River Thames in London, and the place of the hero and heroine in the film. And two words “魂断” are not difficult to understand, which is obviously to say a love story of sad feelings. The wonderful thing is “蓝”(blue), which describes the night when they met, fell in love and broke up, while “Blue” is more meaning “sad” in English. The translator’s translation of the title not only suits the content of the film, but also reflects the tragic color of the original film, which is appropriate (Long, 2003). On the cultural level, “the translator flexibly borrowed the legend of the ‘blue Bridge meeting’ with Chinese national cultural characteristics” (Bao, 2001), which makes it easier to be accepted and understood by the Chinese audience. The Chinese translation of the film *Lolita* is 《一树梨花压海棠》,

the original title is named after the main character of the film. This film describes the secret love between the university professor Humbert and the 12-year-old girl Lolita. And “a tree pear pressure begonia” is a poem by Su Shi, he used the poem “十八新娘八十郎，苍苍白发对红妆。鸳鸯被里成双夜，一树梨花压海棠” to ridicule his good friend and poet Zhang Xian in the Northern Song Dynasty, he married an 18-year-old concubine when 80 years old. Pear, is old; Begonia is delicate and charming. The word “梨花” and “海棠” refers to “old people” and “beauty”, and the word “压” connects the two realms, which points out the theme of incest (Wen, 2007). It has to admit that this poem is really in line with *Lolita*'s plot. This highly naturalized translation method allows language to naturally follow the common world and be more acceptable to the local people.

When English films are introduced to China, there will also be a number of translated titles, especially in Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Both Taiwan and Hong Kong have been part of China since ancient times, although due to historical reasons, there are little cultural exchange across the Taiwan Straits, including films, for quite a long time. However, the translation of the English titles of the two sides, with the same way of thinking and cultural basis, the two sides and regions are mostly the same (Mao, 2002). However, there are still differences, some of which are even huge, including political and cultural factors and patron factors that affect the translation of films.

After the return of Hong Kong, although Chinese was defined as one of the official languages of Hong Kong, Cantonese was still widely used, so the pronunciation of transliteration of human names and place names, Chinese and Cantonese are not the same. The Taiwan region has been separated from the mainland for a long time, and the cultural differences are increasing, which also causes the differences in transliteration. For example, film *American Beauty*'s translation in mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan are 《美国丽人》, 《美丽有罪》 and 《美国心玫瑰情》; film *JFK* translated into 《肯尼迪》, 《惊天大刺杀》 and 《谁杀了甘乃迪》 respectively. It can be seen that the translation of Hong Kong is more colloquial, the Taiwan translation is more literary and the mainland translation is more inclined to adopt literal translation.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, for a long time, western films failed to enter the mainland market, and the titles of mainland translated English films were influenced by political decisions. Under Lenin's guidance of “of all the arts, film is the most important to us,” film was not a profitable tool, or merely an entertainment, but rather a tool to “unite the people, educate the people, fight and destroy the enemy”. In this case, the translator's personal preferences are suppressed, and the translation of the film titles is also controlled by the dominant political ideology (Sun, 2012). However, some classic films have moved to Hong Kong, and the previous ancient translation school, such as the school of mandarin duck and butterfly. Most of these films are from the 1930s to the 1990s, focusing on touching love or stirring stories, and the old translations are both implicit and imaginative. Some like seven words, 《春花秋月不了情》 of 1965 (film *Darling*), 《仙乐飘飘处处闻》 of 1980 (film *The Sound Of Music*), 《风流剑客走天涯》 of 1963 (film *Tom Jones*), etc. After the Cultural Revolution, the mainland's restrictions on foreign films were loosened, but films containing violence, pornography,

religion and politics were excluded, which to some extent led to different names in the three places. In the mainland, due to policy reasons, film distribution companies are still more or less ideologically constrained in the translation, and the translation of film titles should conform to the politics, morality and culture of the mainland. In Hong Kong, film is a tool to make money, and film companies are sponsors of film and are more concerned about financial interests. In Taiwan, the film regulator is the government information office. It is responsible for film production, imported films, etc., and is the patron of films, serving the society, but due to Taiwan's social system, film companies are also sponsors. This phenomenon makes Taiwan's translated film titles sometimes focus on politics and sometimes on economic interests (Sun, 2012). The influence of the patron has also led to the different translation of English film titles between the mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

4. Conclusion

The film title is an important line of defense to attract the audience, and the audience can know something from the title, and the more successful the title is, the more audience it can attract. For a medium quality film, the translation itself is aesthetic and serves as a "guide" (He, 1997). Nowadays, all parts of the world are in a situation of mutual influence and common development. We can understand western culture from many aspects, such as film, and if Chinese culture wants to go out, if Chinese films want to go out, translation is impossible not to involve.

This paper tries to explain the factors affecting the translation of film titles (the Chinese translation of English film titles and the English translation of Chinese films) according to the Polysystem theory. Through the analysis of the translated names of multiple film titles, this paper finds that the English film titles are concise, mostly using the names of the protagonist, and some have the color of religious culture. Chinese film titles mostly use idioms or four words, which is full of artistic conception. Among the many factors, culture is the most influential factor in the translation of film titles, as well as the political and patron factors.

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