



# A Study of the Translation of English and Chinese Film Titles From the Perspective of Culture and the Beauty of Language

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## Abstract

In recent years, with the fast development of our material and spiritual life, film is becoming an important way of our entertainment and relaxation. Chinese films emerge unceasingly, at the same time, foreign films are pouring into our Chinese film market unceasingly, especially the Hollywood films, which bring us infinite enjoyment. What's more, Chinese excellent films are introduced to foreign countries as well, praised and loved by foreign audience, which makes Chinese very proud of that. Film, which occurs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, is now loved and highly praised by people all over the whole world. A good film can not only make us enjoyable mentally, but also stimulate and guide our behaviors to some extent. While a film title, being a symbol of a film, becomes the key to catch the eyeballs of the audience. Furthermore, it is the key to make audience remember the film. Therefore, the translation of film title has aroused great interests of translators. How to translate a film title from English to Chinese or Chinese to English well, and keep the originality maximally becomes the major research project of translators. Although being studied all the time, and having made a great achievement, there are no systematic translating methods and principle yet. Our research is far from enough. Verchueren thought that culture is an important element in social world. It has a great influence on both our behaviors and languages. While the aesthetic and vocative function of language proposed by Newmark has a great influence on our mental world. Therefore, a good film title translation is based on the study of the culture and the beauty of language. The thesis studies how the film title translation is influenced by the culture

and beauty of language through plentiful examples. The combination of the two elements that influence film title translation will make the translation more remarkable. Thus to catch the eyeballs of audience, which has some practical values.

**Key words:** Culture; The beauty of language; The English and Chinese film title translation

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## INTRODUCTION

Film, as a new form of art and first emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century, is becoming more and more popular among people. With its unique visual and auditory effects, film makes our boring lives more colorful. A good film can instruct us, inspire us, and contribute the cultural exchange among people in different countries.

In recent years, with the fast development of movie industry, more and more excellent films are pouring into Chinese movie market, not only entertaining us and enriching our daily lives, but also broadening our visions and making us get access to the world more easily. Among these movies, there are domestic films, Hollywood blockbusters, and European films. Everybody has his or her favorite movies and certain amount of movies can be remembered by people, though with time passing by. Except for a good plot, beautiful background music, and other elements, a good film title is especially important to enhance the film and enable people to remember it. Therefore, film title is an indispensable part of film. That's why film title translation is becoming more and more important.

In my paper, I want to mainly focus my study on the translation of Chinese and English film titles from the perspective of culture and the beauty of language. In chapter one, I will make a brief film title introduction, film genres and its translation methods. In chapter two, I will introduce two ways of cultural translation, foreignization and domestication, and then compare different versions of English and Chinese film title translations from the perspective of culture. In chapter three, I will introduce the beauty of both Chinese and English language. And then compare different versions of English and Chinese film title translations from the perspective of the beauty of language. In chapter four, I will show some of my own film title translations. Last chapter is the conclusion.

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## 1. FILM AND FILM GENRES

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In a film, except for its theme and content, the most important element should be the film title, which acts like a trademark of a film and possesses informative and expressive functions. Newmark (2002, p.40) explains that “the informative function of language is featured with the external situation as its core.” Therefore, to translate a film title from English to Chinese or Chinese to English better, one has to consider a lot of factors, among which, the culture and the beauty of language should be paid more attention. Before starting my main research, I will first introduce the genres of film and some common film title translating methods.

### 1.1 Film Introduction

Film, or motion picture, is the “the most completely explicit of the media of communication that address the eye, primary organ of perception”. (Gorlier, 1997) Modern people cannot live without it since it becomes an indispensable part of our lives. She (He, 2001, p.57) holds that in her article Theory and Method Guiding Film Title Translation, “films are usually divided into three categories involving documentary film, science and educational film and feature film. “The first two films are mainly for information transmission and popularization of science, while the third ones serve the purpose of entertaining audiences.

### 1.2 Film Genres

According to the different theme and complexity, films can be divided into several genres, including the Western film, the Musical, Comedy, Science fiction, War film, Detective and Gangster, Horror film, Film Noir, Social-Political Drama, Adventures, lyric films and so on. Here, I will mainly focus on four genres of films mentioned above. The first genre—Comedy films, a kind of feature film, which aims at producing laughter and then making people relaxed and happy. They usually entertain us with their humorous story, exaggerating behaviors and dialogues. We are most familiar with this type of movies,

such as, Freaky Friday (辣妈辣妹), Home Alone (小鬼当家), 《唐伯虎点秋香》(Flirting Scholar), 《家有喜事》(All’s well, End’s well). The second genre—Adventure Films, is a kind of films that attracts our eyeballs with their breathtaking actions and violent scenes and plots. This genre of films includes action films, horror films, westerns films, gangster films, war films, Kong Fu films, and so on. Here are some examples, Die Hard (虎胆龙威), From Beyond (活魔人), 《墨攻》(Battle of Wits), 《英雄》(Hero). Science fictions are another genre of film, being scientific, visionary, and imaginative, can always draw our attention. Some classic and famous ones are remembered by people easily, like Batman (蝙蝠侠), Journey to the Center of the Earth (地心游记), The Matrix (黑客帝国), I, Robot (机械公敌). The last genre of films is lyric film, which is perhaps the most popular one, because this kind of movies is the closest to our daily life. Love story films, family films, and musical films all belong to this genre, such as, Ghost (人鬼情未了), Sleepless in Seattle (西雅图夜未眠), 《花样年华》(In The Mood for Love), 《天若有情》(To Love with No Regret).

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## 2. FILM TITLE TRANSLATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURE

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### 2.1 Two Ways of Cultural Translation, Foreignization and Domestication

Foreignization and domestication are put out by Lawrence Venuti. Domestication refers to the target-culture-oriented translation, where we often use familiar expressions to replace unusual ones to make the translated text easier for the target readers to understand. Foreignization is a source-culture-oriented translation, where we ought to keep the foreign flavor as much as possible.

### 2.2 Film Title Translating Methods

Generally, there are five film title translating methods, which are literal translation, free translation, transliteration, the combination of free translation and transliteration and the combination of literal translation and free translation.

Literal translation—according to the features of the source language and target language, is to keep the contents and form of the original film best. Sometimes, the film titles can be translated word by word, such as America’s Sweethearts (美国甜心), Six Days Seven Nights(六天七夜), Scent of Women (女人香), Water World (水世界). Free translation—is actually a kind of advertising translation when it is applied to film title translation. That is to say we should endow the original film a new title according to its actual meaning in order to appeal to the audience. Chinese film titles are usually free translated into English. For example, 《大圣娶亲》Cinderella, 《花样年华》(In The Mood For Love)

Transliteration—as it suggests, means to translate the film title according to its original pronunciation, such as, Jane Eyre (简爱), Hamlet (哈姆雷特), Macbeth (麦克白), Casablanca (卡萨布兰卡). The combination of free translation and transliteration is for a better understanding of the original meaning of the film. Such as, Elizabeth (伊莉莎白女王), Tarzan (人猿泰山), Philadelphia (费城故事). The combination of literal translation and free translation is also for a good generalization of the film. Such as, A Walk in the Clouds (云中漫步), Waterloo Bridge (魂断蓝桥), Madison County Bridge 《廊桥遗梦》.

### 2.3 Culture Influence on English and Chinese Film Title Translation

According to Peter Newmark (2001, p.94), culture is defined as the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression. Nida (2002, p.11) explains in his book Contexts in Translating that “a language is always a part of a culture and the meaning of any text refers directly or indirectly to the corresponding to the culture.” As a result, when translating film titles, culture is a major element that should be taken account of.

#### 2.3.1 Culture Influence on English Film Title Translations

Culture, as an important element in social life, it bears significant role in our attitudes and behaviors. Also it plays an indispensable role in entertainment. Bassnett and Lefevere (2011, p.123) hold that “culture may include the total pattern of beliefs, customs, institutions, objects, and techniques that characterize the life of a human community”. When it comes to film title translation, it becomes especially significant. When a translator translates an English film, what he faces is how to put the English title into Chinese, with Chinese culture being taken into account seriously. Otherwise, misunderstanding will occur when a film title is translated. For example, Cleopatra (《埃及艳后》), if it is literally translated into “克里奥佩托拉” in Chinese according to the transliteration method, it is difficult to understand the meaning of translated version for Chinese audience. With a close study on this film, one could get to know that it is actually about the story of the famous and beautiful queen of Egypt in ancient Rome. Thus the original title that implies the identity, position and status may be hardly explained with the simple translation. Therefore, when facing this kind of film titles, one should consider not only the transliteration method, but free translation.

Sometimes, the different connotation meanings of the same word exist because of different culture influence. When it comes to film titles, translators should pay more attention to it when translating to prevent unnecessary misunderstandings. For example, Salt of the Earth (社会中坚), if it is literally translated into “地球的盐”, Chinese audience may be confused that whether the film

is all about salt. However, with a close study on this title, it actually originates from the Bible. According to the fifth chapter in Matthew, Jesus told his followers, “Ye are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted?” Here, the word earth has its transferred meaning---flavor. With time passing by, this sentence has turned to a classical idiom after being quoted many times. The figurative meaning of this sentence now is the most valuable members of society; the finest type of humanity; a person or a group of people having the best character.

Furthermore, a word in America can be a verb, while at the same time be a common name. Take the film Hitch (全民情敌) for an example, if it is literally translated into “希什” according to the transliteration method, it can hardly convey its main story that is about a man who is a dating doctor. He teaches men how to pursue a girlfriend for a living. Hitch here is not only a common name, but more importantly, it is a verb, which functions as a pun here. Get hitched means get married. Therefore, this English film title is implying that the hero named Hitch is also good at hitching.

Some more examples are given below:

English film title	Literal translation	Improved translation
Home alone	独自在家	小鬼当家
Spider Man	蜘蛛人	蜘蛛侠
Tarzan	泰山	人猿泰山

Therefore, translators should take the culture element seriously into account.

#### 2.3.2 Culture Influence on Chinese Film Title Translation

Chinese culture is extensive and profound, which can be embodied in Chinese films. Therefore, when translating to English, translators should take the Western audiences into account. It is better to translate a film title which contains some profound Chinese culture using free translation method, which is good for the western audiences to better understand what the film is all about.

Take 《大话西游》 for an example. When translating, translators shouldn't focus the key point on the level of Chinese culture, translating it as A Journey to the West. However, they should look for another appropriate name that is correspondent to the original film title on the level of the Western culture. Thus, the two parts of the film are translated into Pandora's Box (月光宝盒) and Cinderella (大圣娶亲). Apparently, the Western people are more familiar with Pandora and Cinderella, who are deeply remembered and talked about in daily life rather than our Chinese ancient classic work which they barely hear of. Therefore, this kind of film translation is more acceptable in Western countries.

Another example, 《无间道》, a classical Hong Kong crime and gangster film, is about two men, a police and a criminal, who work in the other one's working place as a spy. Every day, they deal with difficult situations which

supposed to not happen if they work as a common person. Therefore, both of the two men endure unusual pressure and panic everyday. The Chinese title stems from the nineteenth volume of Chinese Mahaparinirvana Sutra--- --a kind of Buddhist sutra, “the hell of the most is called the infernal hell”, which means that what pain and torment the two heroes of the film bear is just like being in the infernal hell. Thus, in order to best convey the theme of the film, translators should pay attention to the Buddhism culture contained in the film and then express it in the translated film title. Here, the method of the combination of literal and free translation is used to name it as *Infernal Affairs*, which is not only embodied the Buddhism culture, but also easy to be accepted by the Western audiences.

Furthermore, films like 《倩女幽魂》 and 《天若有情》 are also examples that should be translated with the culture being taken into account. The former one is about a romantic love story happened between a human and a beautiful female ghost. The Chinese title is no doubt a classical one. However, it is difficult to find a correspondent English title because there is no related ghost story in Western culture. Therefore, A Chinese Ghost Story is simple and easy to be understood by the Western audiences. While the latter one is a modern love story between a gang and a rich girl. The Chinese name originates from poetry of Tang Dynasty Song of the Han Bronze Immortal Words written by Li He, “Failure sees jorum Xian yang road and romance day also old”. The Western audiences barely hear of this poetry, and they can never understand why how can the sky have sentiments. Thus, a free translation is needed here to explain what the film is all about. To Love with No Regret best conveys the film content that the rich girl loves the gang with no regret, although their being together is so short.

### 3. INTRODUCTION OF THE BEAUTY OF BOTH CHINESE AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN FILM TITLES

Generally speaking, film titles are usually simple and concise in language, both in Chinese and English, which is easy for audiences to remember and understand. According to Newmark (2001), all titles are either descriptive or allusive. So does film title. English film titles tend to be more straightforward while Chinese film titles are more allusive. As for the beauty of language function, Newmark (2001, p.42) explains that “language is designed to please the senses, firstly through its actual or imagined sound and secondly through its metaphors.

#### 3.1 The Beauty of Language

The beauty of language lies in its sound, form, and sense. Firstly, the beauty in sound means the tone in Chinese and the rhymes in English. According to Chomsky’s universal grammar, Jackendoff brings out the musical grammar

of language. He thinks that the musicality, same as the common grammars, is born to have. From the perspective of linguistics, prosodic word is the product of word-formation. While from the perspective of aesthetics, it is the tool of balance. Therefore, language can be beautiful with its music-like rhythms and harmonious timbre. Then, the beauty in form is mainly focused on the four-character structure in Chinese. Lastly, the beauty in sense is referred as beauty in idea and meaning. G .Leech (1974, p.23) in a more moderate tone recognizes 7 types meanings in his *Semantics* first published in 1974: (1) Conceptual meaning; (2) Connotative meaning; (3)Reflected meaning; (4) Social meaning; (5)Affective meaning; (6) Collective meaning; (7) Thematic meaning, among which, the thesis focuses on the type of meaning—connotative meaning.

#### 3.2 Beauty of Chinese in Film Title Translation

##### 3.2.1 Beauty in Sound

Chinese is beautiful in sound, form, and sense. Firstly, Chinese emphasizes tone language. The four tones make the cadence possible, from which we can feel a sense of music features.

For example, the film *The Rock*, it has two Chinese translation versions 《勇闯夺命岛》 and 《石破天惊》. In my opinion, the second is better, because the two characters “破” and “惊” make the film filled with a sense of tension and excitement. Another example, *Mission Impossible*, if literally translated into 《不可能的任务》, the contents of the film can be conveyed well, however, it sounds not as well as 《碟中谍》, in which the two characters “碟” and “谍” have the same pronunciation and it sounds rhyming. Besides, it implies the plot of this film: the first episode of the film series is unfolded around a diskette which contains a list of secret spies.

##### 3.2.2 Beauty in Form

Then, it is beautiful in form. According to Fang (2004), four-character phrase refers to phrases containing four characters, which are deep in meaning, concise and symmetry in structure and powerful in feeling and emotional expression. Many classic Chinese films usually tend to use the four-character structure title to make them better remembered by audiences. Such as 《花样年华》 and 《霸王别姬》. Therefore, when translating English film titles, translators often use the four-character structures because it is better to be accepted by Chinese audiences.

Take *Bandits* as an example, if literally translated, it would be “盗贼”, however, in order to tally with Chinese language habits, it is translated into 《完美盗贼》, making it four characters which not only sounds smoothly, but neat and complete in form. Another example, *Speed*, with its literal meaning “速度” is translated into 《生死时速》, which immediately adds to the film a sense of tension and nervousness. Furthermore, the two characters “生” and “死”, as an attributive, describe the speed

perfectly, showing us a picture of exciting arresting about life and death. The two examples above all have used the literal translation method. Here is another example using the free translation in four-character structure Taken. It is a film about an American girl taken by a group of criminals in Paris and his father rescues her in 96 hours. Translators haven't taken the literal meaning of the title, but the plot of rescuing the girl in a short time of 96 hours. Thus, the title is translated into 《飓风营救》, in which, “飓风” here, an attributive, implying the action of rescuing is very urgent and pressing. More examples are given below, such as The Fugitive (《亡命天涯》), The Net (《网络情缘》), First Knight (《剑侠风流》), The Piano (《钢琴别恋》), Blood and Sand (《碧血黄沙》).

### 3.2.3 Beauty in Sense

Lastly, it is beautiful in sense. How is Chinese beautiful in sense? There is another conception---hazy beauty, which is expressed through some related artistic conception. Then what is artistic conception? Scholars in China describe it as an artistic description containing both the scene and sentiments, and through which readers can be brought into another imaginary space. Sometimes, English films are plain and easy to understand. However, when translated into Chinese, the title always needs to be tasted over and over to comprehend the meaning of it. For example, the film A Walk in the Cloud, the English title is simple and clear. However its Chinese version 《云中漫步》 is filled with hazy beauty. The character “漫” makes people reverie and wonder about the beautiful scene in the cloud. Another example, My Fair Lady is translated into 《窈窕淑女》, which is a poetic phrase from the first ancient poetry collection The Book of Songs. Later, people always quote this phrase to express the love for a sweetheart. Therefore, this version of translation is a successful one that makes Chinese audiences wonder and imagine about the fair lady in the film and her love story. There are many excellent translations which are beautiful in sense. Such as Gone 《乱世佳人》, Waterloo Bridge 《魂断蓝桥》 and the like.

## 3.3 Beauty of English in Film Title Translation

### 3.3.1 Beauty in Sound

English is quite different from Chinese. However, its beauty is also manifested in sound, form and sense. Firstly, the beauty in sound is embodied in its alliteration, assonance, rhyme and other rhythms. Take 《家有喜事》 for an example, it is a famous Hong Kong comedy, mainly tells us a series of family affairs happened among three brothers of a family. If it is literally translated into Family Happiness, the film contents can be conveyed, but the title is not attractive enough while the translation All's Well, End's Well is a better one. On one hand, it is a western idiom, meaning everything is ok in the end, which can be easily and better accepted by Western audiences. On

the other hand, it contains the same rhyme, which sounds smoother.

### 3.3.2 Beauty in Form

Then, the beauty in form of English mainly lies in its unique grammar structure. For example, 《花样年华》, it is hard to translate it literally. Therefore, it is free translated into In the Mood for Love, which is a typical English preposition phrase, using the structure “in the mood for something” neat and clear. Another example, 《天下无贼》 is literally translated into A World without Thieves, which uses the structure “none+prep phrase”, is also very simple but clear. More examples are given below, such as 《云水谣》 (the Knot), 《愈快乐愈堕落》 (Hold You Tight)

### 3.3.3 Beauty in Sense

Lastly, the beauty of English in sense of English film title refers to the meaning the title expresses. Chinese tend to be more implicit. However, English can have the same effect with appropriate words. Take Gone with the Wind for an example, from the title we can understand what it conveys: with the end of the American Civil War, the epoch is gone with the wind. Therefore, if a Chinese film title can be translated into English implicitly, it can also be a good translation version. Take the film 《东邪西毒》 for an example, the literal meaning of the film is about two swordsman created in Jin Yong's novel. However, it can be translated using the transliteration method as Dong Xie and Xi Du. With a further study of the film, it is not a film simply telling swordsman's story, it is actually like a conscious stream work with a complicated artistic conception. The psychological activities are presented through the passing of time. Therefore, the title is translated into Ashes of Time in English, which is worthy of being tasted and chewed.

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## CONCLUSION

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The thesis makes a systematic study on the translation of English and Chinese film titles from the perspective of culture and the beauty of language. As it is, film titles, no matter English or Chinese, should be translated in consider of both the culture influence and the beauty of language influence, which together play a very important role in translation practice. The author believes that a good film title translation is not only a symbol of a film, but also a good expression of its inherent theme. More importantly, it should be an enjoyment of beauty for the audiences. Thus, culture, as an indispensable element in social life, should be paid great attention. And so is the beauty of language.

The thesis is started with the introduction of the film title translation method and then mainly focused on the two elements that influence film title translation with a large number of examples. Through comparing different versions of one film from the perspective of culture and

the beauty of language respectively, the author gives a clear statement that a good translation work of film title is deemed to take the two elements into account.

In summary, the thesis is a good explanation of why it is better to translate a film title from the perspective of culture and the beauty of language.

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