

A Comparative Study of the Chinese Translations of English Film Titles from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Zhuoqi Kuang^{1,a,*}

¹*Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 2 Baiyun Avenue North, Baiyun District, China*

a.jillkuang@outlook.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The title of a film is an important factor in attracting audiences and markets. The same film in English is often released in different Chinese translations in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. According to the skopos theory, the purpose of translation determines the whole process and result of translation; the specific purpose of translation of a film title determines the uniqueness of its translation. Starting from skopos theory perspective, the paper compares and analyses the differences and the reasons behind the translations of specific film titles from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. It is found that mainland China tends to translate English titles in a more direct and conservative manner, while Hong Kong and Taiwan tend to translate them in a more paraphrased manner and with local language characteristics. The possible reasons for these differences lie in the different attitudes towards film, social mechanisms and linguistic and cultural differences between the three places.

Keywords: film title, translation, skopos theory

1. Introduction

“Movie is so important that it has become the first arts of the human world,” stated by Mona, who is a French novelist [1]. As a product of culture and art, cinema has not only provided mankind with the means to record and reproduce reality in the form of moving images, but also, in the context of accelerating globalization, it has become a form of commerce that plays an essential role in cultural and economic exchange[2]. A film with a distinctive and memorable image can influence the attitudes, perceptions and even values of its audience, extending to all aspects of life with its unique charm and even influencing the cultural construction of society. The title of a film is a window into the content of the film and has a direct effect on the audience. The translation of film titles is therefore particularly important. The translation of a film title must not only be faithful to the content of the title, but also reflect the language characteristics of the title and achieve artistic re-creation. Therefore, the translation of film titles is a crucial part of film translation. It is interesting that there are different translations of the same foreign film title in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and this phenomenon has attracted a lot of attention in academia recently. This paper selects eleven translations of film titles from mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong in recent years for comparison, and uses the theory of Skopos Theory to compare and analyse them.

2. Background

This section will introduce the theoretical framework, which is Skopos theory, and then the purposes of film title translation, and thus provide a theoretical background for the purpose-oriented analysis on the film titles that follows this section.

2.1. Skopos Theory

The German translator Vermeer developed the Skopos theory of translation in 1978. According to this view, the product's function dictates the translation process. The addressee specifies this function. [3]. Skopos theory includes three principal rules: namely, the Skopos rule, the coherence rule (intratextual coherence) and fidelity rule (intertextual coherence) [4]. Skopos is a Greek word for 'purpose'. The translation strategy is decided by the purpose of the translation, in accordance with Nord's translation theory, which holds that "the purpose defines the means" when it comes to the act of translation [5]. According to this view, the translator needs to decide the translation strategy to be adopted in the process of translation based on the intended communicative function of the translated text, taking into account the sociocultural background of the audience, their expectations of the target language, their Sensitivity or World Knowledge, and their Communicative Needs. It is not necessary to restrict the translation strategy to affect the communicative function of the target language in the translated culture in order to "equate" with the original language [6].

Therefore, the theory of translation purpose has great theoretical significance for the translation of English film titles. Due to the differences in various aspects between Mainland China and Hong Kong and Taiwan, the differences arising in the translation of film titles can also be well explained by skopos theory.

2.2. The Purposes of Translating Film Names

The translation of movie titles is more complicated than merely transferring words from one language to another and searching for the closest equivalent. The use of translation methods other than literal translation is justified by other reasons, such as the cultural element and the need to capture the audience's attention [7].

Under the direction of the skopos theory, the translator should consider the function of the film title and the goal of the translation in order to improve the translation's ability to capture the original film title's meaning.

A direct translation is faithful to the original title, can restore the style and artistic charm of the original title. Lin Yutang once pointed out in his essay "On Translation" that it is the translator's first responsibility to be faithful to the original text or the original work [8]. The original title is usually the soul of the film, it has a rich cultural connotation and can highly summarise the content of the film, reflecting the theme and profound meaning of the film. Therefore, when translating the title of a film, the translator should try to make it faithful to the original title and to restore its artistic charm and appeal.

Free translation summarizes the content of the film and revealing its theme. Further information must be added to some titles in order to make them more obvious, especially to allusive ones whose literal translation cannot perfectly represent the tale and hence fails to enlighten and draw in the audience. These particulars have to be centered on the narrative rather than being arbitrarily selected in order to enhance the titles [9]. The translator should not stick to the linguistic form of the English title, but should fully understand the content, style and connotation of the original work, to make sure that the translated title can summarize the content of the film and reflect the theme of the film. It will help the audience have a general understanding of the plot of the film through the title, and thus attract the audience and increase the box office.

The use of dialect takes into account cultural factors and adapts to the needs of different regions. The title of a film often carries a wealth of cultural information, so a film should be based on the culture of the audience, according to the local needs of the film title for cultural conversion. As a result, the translated title can have a stronger attraction and infectious effect and enable the audience from all over the world to feel the "equal effect" of the original title of from the translation of the title. In this way, the translated title can be more attractive and compelling to the audience and increase commercial profits[8].

3. The Comparison of the Chinese Translations

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
1)	The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent	天才不能承受之重	丧尽癫才	超吉任务

The translation method used in mainland is direct translation, which retains the characteristics of the original title and is easy to understand. The Taiwan translation of the title incorporates the "mission" aspect of the plot and uses the homophone of "吉" (which means lucky in Chinese) and "级" to make the translation sound like "super mission", which is interesting and appealing. The Hong Kong translation combines the original title with a summary of the plot. “癫才” sounds similar with “天才”, which means an insane talent, echoing the original title of the film. Also, this translation invokes the Chinese idiom “丧尽天良”, adding an ironic color.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
2)	The Menu	菜单	五腥级盛宴	五星飨魔

The translation is still direct in the mainland version, which summarizes the plot but does not reflect the style of the film. The Hong Kong translation uses the pun of "腥" and "星" to make the title sound like a "five-star feast", which is creative and reflects the film's gory style. The Taiwanese translation uses two unusual characters, which also have their own unique meaning. “飨魔” is based on the homophonic word “飨宴”, which means banquet for guests. Also, “魔” has a meaning of screaming in the dream, adding to the horror of the title and drawing the viewer's attention.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
3)	Triangle of Sadness	悲情三角	上流落水狗	疯狂富作用

The same direct translation method is used in mainland, which is a bit confusing. Both the Taiwan and Hong Kong translations summarize the theme of the film and distil it from the plot, but each has its own characteristics. “落水狗” is a common saying in Cantonese, owning means both to fall into the water and to be unlucky, and fits well with the film's plot of a crew of upper-class people in distress at sea. In Taiwan version, “富” indicates the tycoon on the ship, meanwhile, “富作用” is homophonic with “副作用” (side effects), ironically implying that the wealthy men in the film are useless in surviving on an isolated island and could not be as arrogant and domineering as before.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
4)	Free Guy	失控玩家	爆机自由仁	脱稿玩家

The free translation of the title is used in all three places based on the plot, but each has its own distinctive character. The mainland translation is similar to that of Taiwan. The mainland translation follows the original title more closely, translating “free” into “losing control”. However, 'free' here may also refer to the freedom to love someone, which fails to be conveyed in the translation. The Taiwanese translation is more in keeping with the game setting of the film, where the film's protagonist as a game character defies the setting to have his own emotions. In Hongkong version, “爆机” is a very Cantonese saying, owning meanings of craziness and game-pass. “仁” is a homophone of “人”, indicates that the main character isn't a real person. This is thus considered an excellent translation.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
5)	The outfit	套装	集团	致命装备

The mainland translation of the film's title is still a direct translation, taking the most common meaning of “outfit”, suggesting the identity of the protagonist as a tailor. The Hong Kong translation uses another meaning of “outfit”, which is a group of people working together as an business. This translation is more relevant to the plot later in the film and theme of the film and is more ambitious. Taiwan versions use another meaning of “outfit” --- a set of equipment that you need for a particular purpose. In addition, “致命”(fatal) suggests the suggests the style of the film's crime thriller. The English title outfit has three meanings at the same time, and all three meanings are reflected in the film, making it a very deep and interesting title. It is difficult to translate all three meanings at the same time, and only one can be taken. On the one hand, it is interesting that different regional translations have taken different parts of the meaning, and on the other hand, it shows the difficulty of translating titles and the inevitable loss of semantics.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
6)	The banker	银行家	逆权庄家	幕后大亨

Mainland uses direct translation of the Banker, which hardly reflects the film's dangers-drawn and sabre-rattling atmosphere. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan have adopted the paraphrase method, writing translations through the content of the plot. The Hong Kong translation focuses more on the film's setting - the story of black people's unequal rights and eventual comeback. The Taiwan translation, on the other hand, focuses more on the development process of the film and reflects the behind-the-scenes manipulation of the protagonist to achieve success. Both translations have their own focus and give the audience different feelings.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
7)	Everything Everywhere All at Once	瞬息全宇宙	奇异女侠玩救宇宙	妈的多重宇宙

For this film, the translations of the title in all three places have been done in a paraphrased way. In mainland version “宇宙” represents “everything and everywhere”, which has a little bit of paraphrase, also in consideration of the Chinese expression and the theme of the play. This translation is more of a straightforward one. The Hong Kong translation is a summary of the content, while “玩救” is a homophonic of “挽救”, which is a play on language and a reference to the meaning of “玩” in this film. This translation also has a Cantonese style, sounding more smoothly in Cantonese.

Taiwan version is also a sort of summary of the plot, while creating a pun, both as "Mom's Multiverse", echoing the content of the film, and as "DAMN Multiverse", an expletive suggesting some of the more “DAMN” content of the multiverse experienced by the protagonist, while at the same time being rather curious and attracting the audience's attention. Interestingly, a translated version has been provided at the end of the film, which is “天马行空”, but none of the three translations have adopted it.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
8)	Smile	危笑	魅笑	微笑

This movie is a thriller. Both mainland and Hong Kong translations use a combination of direct and homophonic paraphrasing “危”is a homophone of “微”, indicating that the heroine was in a dangerous situation, which is very appropriate to the film. “微笑”’s Cantonese pronunciation sounds like “魅笑”. Using this method of translation is more likely to be acceptable to and attract the attention of Hong Kong audiences. Also, “魅” implies an eerie aura, which is in keeping with the style of the film. The Taiwan version is a direct translation of the original title, which in turn is not as appealing.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
9)	The Matrix Resurrections	黑客帝国：矩阵重启	22 世纪杀人网络：复活次元	骇客任务：复活

“The Matrix” film had been translated differently in all three places, with all the translations reflect the theme of the film's virtual network. Both mainland China and Taiwan use the word “hacker”, which is strongly related to the plot, and the Taiwan version of the word “骇” is actually equivalent to “黑” in mainland due to the difference in language habits between the two places. The word “帝国” shows the grandeur of the film, and it hints at cyberpunk. The translated name of Hong Kong is more general. “杀人” embodies the power of the Internet that cannot be underestimated and its separation from reality. As for the word “Resurrections”, both Taiwan and Hong Kong have adopted the method of direct translation. Mainland version cleverly combines “matrix” with “resurrections”.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
10)	Where the Crawdads Sing	沼泽深处的女孩	荒野谜尸	沼泽谋杀案

For this film, the translations in the three places all adopted the method of free translation, and all of them summarized the plot theme. The mainland version is more reserved---“沼泽深处” indicates the girl was deep in the ill will of the villagers. The Hong Kong and Taiwan translation focuses on the dead body mystery, showing the film's main line, Nevertheless, considering the development of the plots, the importance of the sub-line of the girl's growth in this movie should not be ignored. From this perspective, the Hong Kong version and the Taiwan version has some flaws, since they have concentrated on the murder case only.

	Original	Mainland	Hong Kong	Taiwan
11)	Untraceable	网络杀机	Live 杀人网站	网路杀机

All three places have adopted a translation method that summarizes the theme, which fully demonstrates the suspenseful style of this movie. Among them, due to the differences in word usages in different areas, the translation varies from "网络" to "网路". Hong Kong seems to like to use the direct and eye-catching translation method of "杀人", which did quite well in attracting the audience's attention and reflecting the plot.

4. Possible Reasons Behind the Differences

In mainland China, where films are used as an educational tool to influence national values, translators are careful and rigorous in their translations of film titles [10]. As a result, mainland translators tend to adopt the direct translation method. The film industry in Hong Kong is relatively more mature, and films are considered a mean of leisure and entertainment for the public. People who run the industry focus more on serving a visual and auditory feast and pay much less attention to the educational or aesthetic functions of films. Hong Kong is more concerned with the commercial value of films, so Hong Kong translators rarely use direct translations, but choose to paraphrase the original title and sometimes apply homophonic puns, so that the titles can be translated creatively and more eye-catchingly. Taiwan shares similarities with Hong Kong in the consumer cultures, which also leads to the similar tendency for Taiwan translators on the preferences on paraphrases and puns. This contrast is represented clearly in the analysis above. For example, the mainland translated "The Banker" directly as "银行家", while Hongkong translated it into "逆权庄家", and Taiwan into "幕后大亨". For "Where the Crawdads Sing", the mainland translator avoided the subject of the murders, translating it as "沼泽深处的女孩", while Hongkong's translation as "荒野迷尸" and Taiwan's version as "沼泽谋杀案".

Another possible reason behind the contrast may lie in social ideology. Mainland China is more conservative and stricter in its censorship of films, with controls on elements such as gore and eye-catching. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, there are much fewer restrictions and regulations, and translators are free to play around with their translations, often using new and refreshing translations of film titles to attract audiences in order to achieve better publicity and commercial value. For example, the film "The Menu" is translated as "菜单" in mainland China, "五星级盛宴" in Hong Kong, and "五星飨魔" in Taiwan, which are more vivid, more imaginative and more attractive than the translations in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The linguistic differences between Mandarin in mainland China, Cantonese in Hong Kong and Mandarin in Taiwan have also led to differences in the translations of films from the three regions. Hong Kong is part of the Guangdong region and Cantonese is the most commonly spoken language, which is also reflected in the translation of the title of the film. Like mentioned above, Hongkong's version translated "Smile" into "魅笑", and "Triangle of Sadness" into "上流落水狗". These translations are idiomatic in the Cantonese language. And as a former British colonial power, English is widely used in Hong Kong and many everyday words contain elements of English. When translating film titles, Hong Kong translators sometimes retain the English language, especially for English names. For example, "John Wick: Chapter 4" was translated into "杀神 John Wick 4" in Hongkong, but in mainland and Taiwan, the name "John Wick" was simply omitted---"疾速追杀 4" in mainland and "捍卫任务 4" in Taiwan. Although the official language is Mandarin Chinese in both mainland China and Taiwan, the two regions show contrasts in some word usages, especially the loan words such as "黑客/骇客" (hacker) and "网络/网路" (Internet). This is reflected in the examples above, namely "网络杀机/网路杀机" and "黑客帝国/骇客任务".

5. Conclusion

This paper compares the different translations of several English film titles in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, analysing them from several angles using the Skopos theory. It is found that the translations are handled with considerations of the peculiarities of their language habits and are more in line with the local market. These differences and reasons all reflect the principle of Skopos theory, which allows films to achieve both commercial and artistic value in different regions.

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