



# A Study on English Translation Strategies and Methods of Chinese Film Titles from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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## Abstract

With the development and changes of the times, contemporary films are no longer just a plain way of entertainment, but also have gradually become a carrier of a country's culture. Nowadays, China's film industry has been developing in a rapid way. At the same time, more and more Chinese filming works are beginning to stand on the world film stage. In a movie, the title is an indispensable part, the essence and concentration of the whole movie. Without a valuable title, it is difficult for a movie to be successful. According to functional Skopos Theory, translation should be able to function in the way that is expected by the recipients of the target language in context and culture. Therefore, under the influence of Skopos Theory, the English translation of Chinese film titles will better meet the contemporary needs. This paper makes a comparison between the translation of film titles in the past and present, highlighting the significance of functional Skopos Theory in the process of translation. At the same time, it analyzes the methods and strategies of English translation of Chinese film titles through some specific cases from the perspective of Skopos Theory. Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, translators should follow the principles of it, change the traditional translation, and translate according to specific purposes. Depending on different purposes, translators should adopt different translation strategies and methods to achieve the optimal translation effect. In this way, people around the world can better appreciate Chinese movies and feel the profoundness of Chinese culture.

## Keywords

Skopos Theory; Chinese film titles; film title translation; translation strategies

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary background, China's development relies not only on political and economic construction but also on the development of spiritual civilization, especially culture. As an essential part of China's cultural industry, the film industry is not only of great commercial value, but also serves as an excellent platform for the integration, packaging and promotion of Chinese culture. Nowadays, more and more people are exploring the profound and extensive Chinese culture through Chinese films. In a film, the title is the essence and concentration of the whole film. However, in recent years, there have been many instances of mistranslations and even chaotic translations in the English titles of domestic movies. As a result, many translations failed to meet the required standards. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the Skopos Theory can better guide translators in translating film titles, thus they can better promote Chinese films to the world stage and better spread Chinese culture to the world.

This paper analyzes the application of the Skopos Theory in the English translation of Chinese film titles through some specific examples, highlighting the significance of the Skopos Theory in the translation process. It demonstrates that under the guidance of the Skopos Theory, if translators can abandon the traditional translation methods, follow the principle of Skopos Theory to select translation strategies and methods according to specific purposes, the translation of film titles can achieve the best effect, thereby better realizing the cultural and commercial value of the film titles. In the meanwhile, the author hopes to provide inspiration and some references for the future translation of Chinese film titles.

This paper consists of three major parts. The first part is literature review, which introduces the types and functions of film title translation, as well as the past and current situation of Chinese film title translation, and some arguments that arise. This section provides an understanding of the context of this paper's topic and explains why the topic is studied. The second part of the paper is the theoretical framework, which introduces the relevant elements of Skopos Theory. Since this paper is based on Skopos Theory, the theoretical framework is constructed by introducing the origin development and theoretical principles of Skopos Theory. The third part of the paper is the application of Skopos Theory to the translation of Chinese film titles. It includes the characteristics of Chinese film title translation under Skopos Theory and the methods of translation. By writing this part, the author demonstrates that the translation of film titles can achieve better results under Skopos Theory, which is also the significance of this study.

## **2. An Overview of the Chinese Film Titles Translation**

### **2.1 The Basic Functions and Types of Film Titles Translation**

Just as in the introduction, a movie is not only a popular form of entertainment but also an important medium in intercultural communication. With the advancement of globalization, there is more and more communication between Chinese and English movies. As a result, movie translation has become increasingly significant, especially the title translation. So why can title translation play an such important role in film translation? It can be analyzed from the types and functions of film titles.

#### **2.1.1 The Basic Functions of Film Title**

Newmark divides text functions into four main categories, which are expressive function, informative function, vocative function, and aesthetic function.

The expressive function highlights the author and the text itself. Texts with this function are mainly purely literary texts or highly artistic literary works, such as autobiographies, letters, novels, poems, and so on. The so-called informative function means that the film title should provide the audience with as much information as possible about the film so that the audience can generally understand the genre and theme of the film from the title alone before watching the film. The vocative function means that the film title should reflect the requirements and characteristics of the film market, play its marketing and promotional role, and maximize box office revenues. The aesthetic function means that the title should take the audience's psychological reaction into account, evoke their curiosity with a unique form of language, attract them to watch the film, and give them a sense of enjoying beauty at the same time.

#### **2.1.2 The Basic Types of Film Titles Translation**

Nord classifies translation types into two major categories: documentary translation and instrumental translation (Newmark, P., 2001). Documentary translation emphasizes the interaction between the author of the source text and the recipient of the source text. The translator introduces the source culture to the readers of the translated text, placing them in the context of the source culture and making them feel that what they are reading really exists in another culture. Instrumental translation, on the other hand, emphasizes that the readers of the translated language can receive the information conveyed by the source text without obstacles. The information received has the same function as that of the source text, which achieved functional equivalence between the translated and source texts.

### **2.2 Comparison Between the Past and the Present in Film Titles Translation**

Films have a history of 110 years, and for more than 100 years, films have been an indispensable spiritual meal for people from all over the world. The exchange of films from all over the world has not only broadened the viewers' horizons but also brought them the joy of exoticism and culture. The translation of film titles is undoubtedly an integral part of these contributions.

However, for the initial Chinese film industry, export was not the primary concern, so the Skopos theory was not

commonly used in the translation of Chinese film titles at that time. Nevertheless, as China's film industry continues to open up to the world, more and more foreign films are also entering China. Coupled with the impact of television and other entertainment media, the Chinese film industry started to pay increasing attention to the translation of film titles.

Unlike books and newspapers, film is a visual art that needs to greatly satisfy the audience's viewing demands. When watching a foreign film, the first thing that catches the audience's attention is the title. A good title can attract more viewers. However, at present, the phenomenon of confusion and irregularity in translation often occurs during the process of film title translation in China, and the quality of translation cannot meet the requirements. Some translations of movie titles, on the other hand, are considered irregular or even "disloyal" due to their detachment from the original content and excessive pursuit of box office profits, and are not recognized by theories. But they are accepted by audiences and sell well in the market.

In recent years, a great deal of research has been conducted in China in the process of translating film titles. Many researchers believe that the translation of film titles, which is an important part of literary translation, should be practiced by using traditional translation theoretical approaches. They insist that it should be handled through literal translation, free translation, and a combination of literal translation and free translation. In addition, it also should be carried out by using harmonic translation, interpretative translation, and adaptation translation. Some researchers have also begun to re-characterize the translation of film titles, arguing that it belongs to advertising translation and should take commercial aspects into account. The translation methods currently used, although not inadequate from a theoretical point of view, are still unable to meet the needs of the audience. And this is still a translation problem that needs to be solved.

### **3. The Skopos Theory**

#### **3.1 The Stages of Functionalist Skopos Theory**

As mentioned in the Introduction, in the past, Nida's translation theory has been highly respected by Chinese translation field. However, with the development of the times, the functionalist Skopos theory can better meet the requirements in the translation of the times, especially the translation of film titles.

In the 1970s, functional translation theory emerged in Germany. Its development has gone through four stages. Katharina Reiss first introduced functional categories into translation criticism, and connected language functions, discourse types and translation strategies. Besides, she developed a translation criticism model based on the functional relationship between source text and target text, so as to put forward the new-born form of functionalist theory (Xie, T., 2008).

Hans Vermeer put forward Skopos Theory, which freed translation studies from the shackles of source-centered theory. According to the theory, translation is a purposeful and productive act based on the original text, which must be completed through negotiation. The translation must follow a series of rules, among which the Skopos Rule is the first. In other words, the translation depends on the purpose of the translation. Vermeer also put forward the concept of translation commission, that is, the translator should decide whether, when, and how to complete the translation task. In other words, translators should adopt corresponding translation strategies according to different translation purposes, and have the right to decide which contents of the original text can be retained and which need to be adjusted or modified according to the purpose of translation.

Justa Holz Manttari, drawing on the theory of communication and behavior, proposes the theory of translation behavior, which further develops the functionalist translation theory, which regards translation as a purpose-driven, result-oriented interaction between people.

Christiane Nord summarizes and refines functionalist theory in a comprehensive way. For the first time, Christiane Nord has systematically elaborated the internal and external factors that need to be considered for text analysis in translation. She refined the functionalist theory by sorting it out and proposing that translators should follow the guiding principle of "function and fidelity".

#### **3.2 The Principles**

The Skopos Theory consists of three important principles: Skopos rule, the Coherence rule, and the Fidelity rule. The Skopos rule is the primary principle, the coherence rule and fidelity rule are subordinate to the Skopos rule, and the fidelity rule is subordinate to the coherence rule.

### 3.2.1 Skopos Rule

According to the Skopos Theory, the primary principle that all translation activities should follow is the “Skopos rule”. That is, the translation should be able to function in the way that the recipient of the translation expects in the context and culture of the translator’s language. The so-called Skopos rule means that the purpose to be achieved by the act of translation determines the whole process of the act of translation. In other words, the result determines the method. From this viewpoint, the translator can decide the concrete translation strategies and methods in a specific translation context according to the expected communicative function of the translation, combined with factors such as the readers' "socio-cultural background" knowledge and their "expectations" of the translation, and so on. This is more convenient for translators to utilize their own ability in the process of translation, to take advantage of the target language, and to make the translation achieve a more desirable effect.

The movie *Mr. Nice Guy* is a typical example. This version of translation is very native to the United States and will better interest the English-speaking audience. However, if we do not adopt the Skopos rule, then domestic translators can easily translate it as *A Good Man*, which is much inferior and mediocre compared to the version of *Mr. Nice Guy*. In addition, it will reduce the interest of the audience to watch the movie.

### 3.2.2 Coherence Rule

The coherence rule means that the translation must meet the criterion of intra-textual coherence. That is, the translation must be readable and acceptable, not a patchwork of illogical language. So that it can be understood by the recipient and make sense in the culture of the translated language and the communicative context in which it is used.

### 3.2.3 Fidelity Rule

The fidelity rule means that the translation should be faithful to the content and subject of the original text. Although guided by the Skopos rule, the translation will not be a successful one if it departs from the original text.

Nord proposed the loyalty principle to address cultural differences and the relationship between participants in the act of translation. According to Nord, the translator has a moral responsibility to the recipients of the translation and must explain to them what he or she has done and the reasons for doing so, which is one aspect of the loyalty principle. The other aspect of the principle requires the translator to be faithful to the author of the original text. The translator should respect the original author and reconcile the target language of the translation with the author’s intentions. In the translation of film titles, if a translator only pursues commercial value while ignoring the content of the film itself or the original film title, it violates the principle of fidelity. Such a translation is absolutely not up to standard.

In a word, these three principles constitute the basic principles of Skopos Theory. However, the principles of coherence and fidelity must be subordinated to the principle of purpose, which is the first principle of Skopos Theory.

## 4. The Application of Skopos Theory in the English Translation of Chinese Film Titles

### 4.1 The Characteristics of Chinese Film Titles' Translation in Skopos Theory

According to Skopos Theory, there are several characteristics of Chinese film titles’ translation. They are flexibility, mainstream, and contemporaneity.

#### 4.1.1 Flexibility

The translation of film titles is different from other translations, requiring the most important information to be conveyed by the shortest title, which has a high flexibility. The translation of film titles is a non-programmed translation, which is difficult to be done by machines. Because it belongs to emotion-based texts. If the intention of the translation is different, the usage of the translated language will be different, and it may even differ from the original author’s understanding. This intention is not given by the author but by the translator’s interpretation. Different translators have different perspectives. And the different experiences and cultural levels behind them will make them have various understandings of the film. For example, when *Lust, Caution* was released, it caused great controversy. Many people believe that the last character of the Chinese title may also refer to the story of the pigeon egg diamond ring. Therefore, the simple direct translation may lose the meaning of the story itself. Thus, if the title is translated as *Lust or Love*, it perhaps will be better.

#### 4.1.2 Mainstream

Whether the translated film title is attractive depends on whether it can be accepted by the target language public and whether it conforms to the mainstream cultural thought. Some eccentric translations will not only fail to resonate

with the audience but even achieve half the results with double the effort, often ending in failure. The Chinese movie *Farewell My Concubine* is a reference to Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms*. Since foreign readers are very familiar with Hemingway, so this translation was easy to resonate with the audience. However, the word "concubine" in Chinese means home wrecker, which is totally different from the original meaning of the film. And it is hard for Chinese people to accept. Nevertheless, it did make a difference.

#### 4.1.3 Contemporaneity

In order to deeply impress the audience, the Chinese film title translation should conform to the characteristics of a certain era, with a certain period label, so that the audience can associate the certain name with a story in the specific historical context. For example, the film *The Founding of a Republic*, makes it clear at a glance that the film is about the history of the founding of the People's Republic of China around 1949, with a strong sense of the times. And the film *The Naval Battle of 1894* is also a visual representation of the Sino-Japanese War. The year "1894" will make the audience associate with it in time and space, and they will be immediately pulled to the end of the Qing Dynasty.

## 4.2 Translation Strategies and Methods of Chinese Film Titles

In the process of translation, translators can determine their translation strategy under the guidance of Skopos Theory. It is known that the concept of translation methods refers to the specific approaches, steps, and means adopted in translation activities, based on a certain translation strategy to achieve specific translation purposes. Therefore, once the translation strategy is determined, translators can adopt corresponding translation methods to fulfill their objectives. This paper will delve into several of the most practical methods used in translating Chinese film titles into English.

### 4.2.1 Literal Translation

The literal translation means that when the source language and the target language are functionally identical, both the content and the form of the original language are maintained in the translation. When translating film titles into English, if the literal translation method can make the target language readers understand the translation correctly from a cultural and linguistic point of view, and make them feel similar to the original language readers, then it should be the first choice, so as to effectively spread Chinese culture.

The movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which was directed by director Ang Lee, is a typical example. The film won four awards at the 2001 Oscar ceremony and was regarded as a breakthrough in Chinese film. Obviously, this is inseparable from the promotional role played by successful film title translation. However, some people believe that there are differences between Chinese and Western cultures. As a symbol of the Chinese nation, the dragon is a symbol of power and dignity, and Chinese people are proud to be the "heir of the dragon". In English culture, the dragon is a horrible monster with a pair of wings and a mouth full of fire and is the embodiment of evil. So the translation of "Hidden Dragon" will inevitably make the English-speaking audience feel resistant to it. Therefore, some people believe that the translation should be "Roaring Lion" because the lion is not only a symbol of strength but also a symbol of power and majesty in English so that the English-speaking audience can better understand the meaning of the film. However, it is undeniable that there is also a deficiency in such a translation, which will prevent them from understanding the connotation and symbolism of "dragon" in Chinese culture. In other words, this translation may deprive foreign audiences of the opportunity to experience exoticism and Chinese culture.

In fact, through literal translation, the translation of titles can achieve its informative and vocative functions to attract the audience's attention. For example, similar to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the films *A World without Thieves*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Curiosity Kills the Cat*, *The Banquet*, *Painted Skin*. From the above translations, it is obvious that if the Chinese film title and its translation have similar denotative and pragmatic meanings and the translation can achieve its intended function in the new cultural environment, then a literal translation can be used.

### 4.2.2 Free Translation

Due to the difference between Chinese and English cultures, when the ideological content of the original text is contradicted by the expression form of the translation, the language form of the source language has to be changed in order to keep the original content. If translators only emphasize on keeping the form of the title, it will affect the accurate transmission of the meaning and make it difficult for the audience to truly understand the connotation of the original title. In order to enable English-speaking audiences to truly understand the real connotation of Chinese titles



and to realize the informative and aesthetic functions of movie titles in the English cultural environment, it is necessary to adopt the free translation when translating film titles. In the specific translation process, the translator should use the free translation to rewrite the original film title based on the original film title, using techniques such as adding, deleting, summarizing, and so on.

Here is an example. The movie *American Dreams in China*, which is a story about three young people who are frustrated with the reality of the “American dream” and eventually found an English training school called “New Dreams” in China, achieving unprecedented success and realizing the “Chinese dream”. Because of the great social mobility in the United States, anyone can make their way to the top through their own efforts. Over the years, the “American dream” has inspired countless young people around the world with dreams to create their own value in this land. *American Dreams in China* is based on the “American dreams”, and uses the concept of “dreams” through the whole story. The English title can be considered both relevant and highly summarizing the plot. At the same time, this translation will also arouse strong interest from foreign audiences, thus achieving the commercial value of the film.

#### 4.2.3 Transliteration

Transliteration is a method of directly converting the phonetic form of the source language into the phonetic form of the target language. A number of Chinese movies are named directly after the names of people, places or other specific names in the drama. This is not unfamiliar to audiences in the target language. Not only does direct transliteration not cause ambiguity or misunderstanding, but it can also arouse the interest of audiences in the target language to understand the foreign culture and attract them to watch the movie (Liang, J., 2010). In this way, the informative and vocative functions of the transliteration are realized. The principle of transliteration should be adopted as much as possible in such cases. For example, the films *Zhou Enlai*, *Lin Zexu* and *Cenghis Khan*, clearly indicate the content of the film. And the characters in these titles are either people revered by the Chinese people or national heroes in Chinese history. Therefore, the transliteration of the film titles into English will help foreigners understand Chinese history and Chinese historical figures better.

### 5. Conclusion

According to this paper, it can be concluded that, under the guidance of Skopos Theory, translators should change the traditional method of film title translation, follow the principles of Skopos Theory, and translate according to the specific purpose. According to different purposes, translators are supposed to employ diverse methods to achieve optimal translation effects.

To sum up, the film title translation strategies under the guidance of Skopos Theory need more translator’s creative thinking, which requires translators to give full consideration to the cultural differences between the two languages, and the background differences between two languages. In addition, it advocates to use of flexible translation methods, without distorting the content of the film, and more attention should be paid to the first experience brought by the translation to the audience, as well as its commercial value and literary functions.

Despite presenting a theoretical framework for the translation of Chinese film titles, this paper has limitations in terms of the depth and breadth of its research. In terms of research methods, the author primarily employed analytical methods and seldom offered personal judgments on the effectiveness of certain translated titles. Undoubtedly, some readers may have differing evaluations of some of the viewpoints presented in the paper. Due to limited time and energy, the author was unable to conduct a survey on the effectiveness of the versions discussed in the paper.

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