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Narratives in film title translation

A study of films by Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke

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This study sets out to investigate whether and to what extent the narratives contained in film titles and their translations can differ from each other. Ten dramas selected from the work of two internationally renowned film directors, Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke, were analysed using narrative theory. The findings suggest that films targeted at the international market tend to employ selective appropriation, causal emplotment and relationality, and demonstrate variations in title translation. Apart from linguistic and commercial factors, narratives can vary in Chinese film titles and their translations according to cultural and social considerations, including political censorship.

Keywords: film title, translation, narrative, Zhang Yimou, Jia Zhangke

1. Introduction

Despite its conciseness, a film title usually attempts to capture the attention of its potential audience through portraying the essence of a film, addressing its theme and plot, etc. In addition to its informative function, it also contains aesthetic value that contributes to appreciation of the film as a whole. Therefore, as an essential communication tool to represent the gist of the film for viewers, a film title can “evoke curiosity, encouraging potential viewers to seek more information and ultimately affecting consumer choice” (Bae and Kim 2019, 100). The functions of film titles and the strategies employed to translate them have been studied by Chung and Eoh (2019), Ding (2016), Fakharzadeh (2022) and Wang and Ji (2021).

The current study is at the frontier of film title research in asking the question: what narrative does a film title attempt to evoke to its potential audience? Through this broad question, the study attempts to understand whether and to what extent the narratives in a film title and its translation can differ from each other. Based on ten films in the same genre by two internationally renowned film

directors, Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke, it examines the differences and similarities in the narratives of Chinese film titles and their English translations. Situated in narrative theory proposed by Mona Baker (2005, 2007), it aims to scrutinise the discursive translational choices involved in film title translation that may be influenced by cultural, social or even political factors.

2. Film title translation

While a film title usually consists of just a few words, it is the first piece of information about a film that the potential audience encounters (Fakharzadeh 2022). According to Haidegger (2015, 436), a film title should “allow the spectator to differentiate one film from another, it should comment on the film and provide guidelines for its reception, and ultimately the title should function as a means to market a film successfully”. Because of its importance, film title translation has attracted the attention of researchers in translation studies, intercultural communication and marketing (Bae and Kim 2019; Chung and Eoh 2019; Peña-Cervel 2016; Wang and Ji 2021). In translation studies, most research into film title translation focuses on in-depth analysis of the functions of film titles and accordingly compiles key translation strategies for various types of film title (Ding 2016; Fakharzadeh 2022; Wang and Ji 2021). Business-oriented studies, meanwhile, tend to examine the relationship between title and success – especially in terms of box office – through scrutiny of film genres and factors influencing consumer behaviour (Bae and Kim 2019; Chung and Eoh 2019). Neither strand of research looks into the potential differences between a film title and its translation, and the possible reasons for such variations in narrative. As Bordwell and Thompson (2008, 74) maintain, audiences often approach a film with “definite expectations” of its narrative. A film title is on the front line of communication with potential viewers in terms of what they anticipate from the film. While this study is broadly situated in the area of translation, it also draws on findings from disciplines such as film studies and business research, to examine whether and to what extent the narrative of a film title can differ from that of its translation.

Various theories have been adopted to investigate film title translation. For instance, Ding (2016) applies the communicative translation theory proposed by Newmark (1988) to scrutinise a range of film titles translated from English to Chinese. She puts forward three criteria for translators to follow in order to guide them on film title translation: the translation should be target-language-oriented,

aesthetic and consistent with the content of the film. Eco-translatology,¹ a theory building upon Cronin's (2003) translation ecology and brought forward by Hu (2001; 2020), is used in an analysis of the translation of 43 Chinese-to-English and 94 English-to-Chinese animated film titles (Wang and Ji 2021). From the limited research devoted to variations in translation of the same film title, Fakharzadeh (2022) uses Bourdieu's field theory (1991) to compare English-to-Persian film titles translated by official translators with those translated by non-official translators, in order to gain an understanding of the subjectivity involved in the two groups.

Although prior studies provide valuable insights into translation strategies and translational behaviour, no research has been carried out to scrutinise the subtle variations in narrative between a film title and its translation. Against this backdrop, this study applies narrative theory proposed by Baker (2007; 2018) to examine ten Chinese film titles and their English translations.

3. Narrative theory

Baker defines narratives as “public and personal ‘stories’ that we subscribe to and that guide our behaviour” (Baker 2018, 19). Narratives can be divided into four types: personal, public, disciplinary and meta-narrative (Baker 2010; 2014). In contrast to *personal narratives* centring on individual experience, *public narratives* are stories elaborated by and circulated “among social and institutional formations [...] such as the family, religious or educational institution, the media, and the nation” (Baker 2018, 33). *Disciplinary narratives* refer to the stories and explanations of an object of inquiry in a scholarly field. *Meta-narratives* are differentiated from public narratives from the perspective of their resilience across geographical reach and persistence over long periods. Baker points out that “the interplay between personal and public narratives is particularly interesting in the context of translation and interpreting” (Baker 2014, 177), at the same time acknowledging that the boundaries between personal and public narratives are porous (Baker 2010). Especially for the current study, the personal preference of a filmmaker for a particular title may later evolve as a public narrative through elab-

1. Borrowed from the Darwinian principle of natural selection, eco-translatology perceives the central role of the translator in the translation process by virtue of their deciding the degree of the adaptation and selection of the final target text in order to fit the specific translational eco-environment (Hu 2020; 2004). It defines translation as “selective activities of the translator when adapting to the translational eco-environment and transplanting texts, with the translator acting in the leading role, the text as its basis, and cross-cultural information transmission as its ultimate purpose” (Hu 2020, 277).

oration and circulation in the media. On the other hand, institutionalised public narratives can influence an individual's choice. The reciprocity of these two types will be discussed with reference to any consistency or discrepancy between narratives in a film title and its translation.

Narrative theory can draw our attention to the political and social conditions of translation behaviour that norm theory (Toury 1995) pays little attention to (Baker 2010). Instead of squeezing into the dichotomy of foreignising and domesticating translation strategies (Venuti 1993; 1995), narrative theory moves away from the static, simplified generalisation of the foreignisation-domestication opposition (Myskja 2013) to recognise the varied, dynamic “complexity of being embedded in crisscrossing, even competing, narratives” (Baker 2007, 154). In this way, the framework entails an in-depth exploration of the agentive potential of translators and interpreters, to examine how the translated texts and utterances engage in “creating, negotiating and contesting social reality” (Baker 2018, 105).

As part of a film, a film title is also a cultural product (Chung and Eoh 2019). This means its translation involves discursive choices that may be dictated by a range of socio-economic factors, such as marketing strategies, commercial objectives and even political considerations. Narrative theory is an appropriate analytical framework to study these discursive choices, since it allows us to move away from abstract and repeated patterned translational behaviours (e.g., foreignisation and domestication) towards the “ongoingly negotiable nature of our positioning in relation to social and political reality” (Baker 2007, 152).

Building upon the work of Somers and Gibson (1994), Baker identifies four features of how narratives function in meaning-making (Baker 2007; 2018). First, temporality indicates that narratives are constructed in time and space. While a narrative usually needs to be construed according to the “temporal moment and physical site of the narration” (Baker 2007, 155), relationality emphasises that a narrative cannot make sense as an isolated event. Individual events or elements within an event depend on each other for an overall interpretation (Baker 2010, 353). The configuration of these elements, including events, characters, linguistic items, layout and imagery, can frame or reframe the meaning of a particular narrative (Baker 2014, 168).

Because of the rich details of human experience, narratives are “necessarily constructed according to evaluative criteria that enable and guide selective appropriation of a set of events or elements from the vast array of open-ended and overlapping events” (Baker 2007, 71). Selective appropriation involves decision-making with regard to including or excluding, foregrounding or backgrounding, underplaying or downplaying of narrative elements (Baker 2014). Through selective appropriation, causal emplotment “gives significance to independent instances” (Baker 2010, 352). Instead of listing a set of propositions, events can

be emplotted in an intelligible order to form opinions and attitudes. Therefore, causal emplotment “allows us to make moral sense of events, because it enables us to account for why things happened the way a given narrative suggests they happened” (Baker 2005, 8).

In relation to film studies, a narrative can be interpreted as “a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space” (Bordwell and Thompson 2008, 75). Therefore, causality, time (including temporal order, temporal duration and temporal frequency) and space are important elements in a film’s narrative (Bordwell and Thompson 2008, 76–82). The overlap between translation studies and film studies in terms of narrative conceptualisation further suggests narrative theory as an appropriate analytical framework for delineating the different narratives manifested in a film title and its translation.

The current study dissects how narratives of selected film titles are devised through temporality, relationality, selective appropriation, causal emplotment, or some combination of these factors. Instead of identifying the semantic accuracy or translation norms, the study focuses on the ways the narratives are configured through these four key devices and provides plausible explanations for such meaning-building.

4. Data selection

This study chose five films each by two internationally renowned film directors, Zhang Yimou (henceforth Zhang) and Jia Zhangke (henceforth Jia), to examine the differences and similarities in the narratives of the Chinese film titles and their English translations. A brief introduction to these two filmmakers and the rationale behind selecting their films follow below.

4.1 Choice of film directors

Zhang is a leading member of the fifth generation of Chinese film directors – this refers to 1982 graduates of the Beijing Film Academy who worked in the state-owned studio system in the 1980s and early 1990s (Lin 2002; Zhang 2004, 235–38). Their films tend to show the melodrama of Chinese history and traditional culture in order to re-examine Chinese history and enhance cultural reflection through images in the weakened narratives (Cao 2018).

In contrast, the sixth-generation filmmakers, a group of which Jia is a representative, were born in the 1960s and usually started their career in the 1990s (Zhang 2004, 289–91). They experienced the massive transformation that resulted from China’s opening-up policy in the 1980s (Wang 2015). They are the cohort

that experienced rapid urbanisation in China and the commercialisation of the film industry resulting from social and economic change, which means they usually independently raised the funding to make films reflecting contemporary Chinese city life. They are therefore also known as the urban generation (Lin 2002).

Table 1. A comparison of 5th and 6th generation

	5th generation (Zhang Yimou)	6th generation (Jia Zhangke)
Profile	1982 graduates of the Beijing Film Academy	Born in the 1960s and started career in the 1990s
Experience	Primarily worked within the state-run studio system in the late 1980s and early 1990s	Experienced the massive transformation – social and economic changes, as well as cultural shifts – that resulted from the ‘Reform and Opening Up’ policy initiated in the 1980s
Theme	The melodrama of Chinese history and traditional culture, to re-examine Chinese history and enhance cultural reflection	The everyday reality of contemporary Chinese city life, with a preference for non-professional actors
Style	Little attention paid to constructing a well-conceived narrative line; instead, ideas tend to be expressed by means of images under thematic control	While they cannot be identified by a unified style, common themes include youth attachment, urban space and choice of free personal narratives

Sources. Cao (2018), Lin (2002), Tang (2019), Wang (2015)

As seen from the comparison in Table 1, each generation of filmmakers demonstrates unique characteristics in their work. While the sixth generation put their emphasis on urban narratives, the reflective narratives of Chinese traditions and culture tend to make way for visual aesthetics in the products of the fifth generation. Because of the distinct features of these two generations, it is worth examining how their different narratives are communicated through their film title translation. As a result, the works of these two representative filmmakers from each generation were chosen for the study. There are of course other internationally renowned filmmakers from each generation, such as Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine* 1993) and Wang Xiaoshuai (*Beijing Bicycle* 2001). The primary goal of the study is not to offer a systematic comparison between these two generations. Rather, filmmakers with distinct characteristics have been chosen as fitting objects of study for an examination of narratives in film titles and their translations.

4.2 Choice of films

The five most recent films (as of 2021) directed solely by either Zhang or Jia were chosen. A further criterion was that the films had to be categorised as drama according to Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com, 2022).

Genre classification can be a contentious topic because of the lack of a clear boundary between genres (Bordwell and Thompson 2008). However, genre is still a simple and straightforward way to characterise and market a film for the general public. Categorising films to a certain genre at least ensures that “most members of a society share at least some general notions about the types of films that compete for our attention” (Bordwell and Thompson 2008, 320). The films selected for this study are dramas, defined as “serious, plot-driven presentations, portraying realistic characters, settings, life situations, and stories involving intense character development and interactions” (Dirks 2023). Therefore, all ten films chosen are expected to share these features. Table 2 lists the ten films selected.

In addition, the focus of the study is the variation in narrative between Source Text (hereafter ST, i.e., Chinese film title) and Target Text (henceforth TT, i.e., English translation). When the ST and TT are semantically identical, they are excluded from the next section of data analysis. In this case, only films highlighted in grey in Table 2 are included in the later comparison of narratives of ST and TT. However, the non-highlighted films are sometimes referred to as a supplement of a filmmaker’s latest works, to provide granular analysis of the variations in film title narratives. The primary focus on the linguistic aspects does indeed restrict the analysis of the multimodal manifestations of film title narratives, which the study recognises as a limitation.

Table 2. Five films by Zhang Yimou and five by Jia Zhangke

Zhang Yimou			Jia Zhangke		
Year	ST (CN title)	TT (EN title)	Year	ST (CN title)	TT (EN title)
2022	狙击手	Sharpshooter/Snipers	2018	江湖儿女	Ash is Purest White
2021	悬崖之上	Cliff Walker	2015	山河故人	Mountains May Depart
2020	一秒钟	One Second	2013	天注定	A Touch of Sin
2018	影	Shadow	2008	24城记	Twenty-four City
2014	归来	Coming Home	2006	三峡好人	Still Life

Source. IMDb (www.imdb.com)

As mentioned earlier, the sixth-generation directors tend to independently raise funds for film making, which consequently makes their productions low-

budget. Probably due to their previous experience in the state-run studio system, the fifth-generation filmmakers usually manage to obtain reasonably good financial support for their projects. Film budgets are generally not available for public scrutiny (Bae and Kim 2019). However, information revealed in the media is a good indicator that Zhang’s films are high-budget and Jia’s are low-budget. Table 3 outlines the available budgetary information of four films from these two filmmakers.

Table 3. Estimated film budgets

Zhang Yimou			Jia Zhangke		
Estimated budget (USD)	CN title	EN title	Estimated budget (USD)	CN title	EN title
43 million (1)	影	Shadow	13 million (3)	江湖儿女	Ash is Purest White
135 million (2)	归来	Coming Home	4 million (4)	天注定	A Touch of Sin

Sources:

1. Geng 2018.
2. Qin and Davis 2014.
3. Daily Economic News [Meiri Jingji Xinwen] 2018.
4. Mtime 2013.

As shown in Table 3, two films made by Zhang had a budget of over USD 40 million. In fact, since the success of *Hero* (2002), Zhang has become known for top-grossing films in China and his works belong in the ‘big-budget films’ (Cao 2018) category. On the other hand, Jia is known for low-budget productions which tend to use non-professional actors and have a documentary style. Any profits are then used to finance his subsequent work (Liu 2006).

Bae and Kim (2019) point out that low-budget films are unlikely to invest in promotion to influence consumer choice during the distribution stage. Consequently, film titles are among the very few promotional channels for these films. In other words, the title plays a much more significant role for low-budget films than for high-budget films (Bae and Kim 2019). In these circumstances, title translation for low-budget films becomes a crucial factor for box office success. It is inevitable that more attention is thus given to title translation for low-budget films. Therefore, the inclusion of film title translation of Zhang and Jia also allows us to investigate the narratives of translated titles of two types of film – with the low-budget ones probably giving much more thought to title translation than the high-budget ones.

5. Data analysis

This section analyses the narratives of Chinese film titles (ST) from Zhang and Jia and the narratives reconfigured in English translations (TT). The ST narratives of each film title are first examined, followed by an in-depth investigation of the TT narratives. The narrative of the ST is then compared with its TT reconfiguration against each of the four key devices in narrative theory – temporality, relationality, causal emplotment and selective appropriation – to outline the consistency and deviations between the Chinese film titles and their translations.

5.1 Zhang's film titles and translations

As a sixth-generation film director who has been in the industry since the late 1990s, Jia has understandably produced fewer films than Zhang, who started his career back in the 1980s. Since the selection was narrowed down to their five most recent dramas (as of 2021), Jia's productions include early works such as *Still Life* in 2006. In contrast, all of Zhang's films included in this study were released after 2010.

For the film *Coming Home* (Zhang 2014), the ST, 归来, refers to the action of 'returning' or 'going back', without explicitly mentioning who is going where. The TT removes the latter vagueness by adding the word 'home'. The ST is formed by two lexemes, 归 and 来. The former lexeme 归 means to return and the latter one 来 conveys the meaning of coming round. When 来 is used after a verb such as 归 it can denote the direction of the action, which is moving towards the speaker. In this case, the film title implies that the direction of the action is towards the audience. Who the agent of the moving action is, and what they are moving towards, remain unspecified, however.

The film ends with a scene where old and weary Lu – years after coming home – accompanies his wife, Feng Wanyu, who has been diagnosed with amnesia, as she waits at the train station for his return. In other words, in Feng's mind her husband never returned home. This may lead to a question for the audience: did the return to social normality, especially in terms of healing on an individual and familial level, actually happen? Morag (2020, 562) suggests that the film gives a negative answer to the question, as it refuses "to reduce the political to the personal". The question is implied through the narrative strategy of *liubai* (留白, literally 'leaving blank'), as mentioned by Zhang in a 2014 interview (Bao 2018). This refers to a traditional painting technique that intentionally "leaves empty space to prompt affective contemplation" (Bao 2018, 2), which is an example of selective appropriation.

While the vagueness in the Chinese film title is an aesthetic choice to pass government censorship, it is probably unnecessary for its TT. The deliberate ‘blank’ or ambiguity in the Chinese title that challenges viewers to question the political upheaval during that historical period is no longer articulated in the English translation, which instead clarifies the action of returning by adding the word ‘home’.

While this selective appropriation allows the audience to immediately understand the film’s theme, the potential of questioning or being questioned in the ST’s narrative is much weakened. That is to say, the haziness of the temporality in the ST is cleared in the specification of ‘Home’ in the TT. In addition, the film “tells a melancholic love story” between Feng Wanyu and her husband, Lu Yanshi, during the Cultural Revolution in mainland China. Lu Yanshi, “a counter-revolutionary, runs away from the re-education farm where he is serving his sentence, in order to return home to visit his family members” (Cai 2015, 277). Adding the spatial element, the TT, ‘Coming Home’, attentively relates to the film’s plot. Considering the fact that the apolitical nature of Zhang’s recent films has made them less controversial and more commercially successful (Cai 2015),² it is indeed possible for the ST to suggest the movement of China from political unrest to social normality, a tone that makes the film politically safe. The explicitness of the TT emplots the outcome of the Cultural Revolution as a return ‘home’, which suggests a manifestation of the return of social normality.

Regarding *Cliff Walker* (Zhang 2021), the ST, 悬崖之上, literally means ‘on a cliff’ and indicates the danger and risk that the protagonists face. In terms of the temporality, the TT, ‘Cliff Walker’, shifts the spatial narrative towards that of a protagonist – the term ‘cliff walker’ usually has connotations of fearlessness, even for those unaware of the film’s plot. The ST also contains a level of ambiguity in its lack of specificity – who is on the cliff, what is happening on the cliff – which opens it up to different interpretations. According to the synopsis, the ST potentially relates the title to both ‘who’ – four Communist party special agents portrayed as gallant fighters – and ‘what’ – they are on a secret mission during the hazardous social situation of the Sino-Japanese War and the political conflict between the Communist Party and the KMT (Kuomintang, also known as the Chinese Nationalist Party).

2. Zhang’s early works (e.g., *Red Sorghum*) tend to implicitly outline political statements such as the independent initiative of Chinese people without the intervention of the political party (Berry 1992; Larson 2017). In contrast, the films he has made since the millennium are considered to be apolitical and oriented towards commercial success (Cai 2015; Macnab 2004).

However, the relationality attributable to the opacity of the ST is partially eschewed in the TT. Through selective appropriation of the temporality operationalised in the English film title, the TT downplays the possible narratives of both the protagonist and the social context in the ST, to become entirely about the protagonist. Therefore, the Communist soldiers are under the spotlight in the English title's narrative, emplotted to prioritise their bravery in walking along the cliff.

In fact, Zhang's two most recent films in the study, *Sharpshooter* and *Cliff Walker*, put the protagonists – the valiant Communist soldiers – in the foreground.³ This is in line with the promotion of government-sponsored 'main melody' films, which will be discussed later.

5.2 Jia's film titles and translations

The film 天注定 (*A Touch of Sin*) (Jia 2013) might be the best example to demonstrate the difference in narratives between the ST and TT through relationality. People familiar with Chinese cinema may recall *A Touch of Zen*, a 1971 *wuxia* (martial arts) masterpiece by King Hu. The film portrays a female warrior in the 14th-century Ming dynasty, a master of martial arts, whereas Jia's film presents four protagonists based on real-life events in contemporary Chinese society. Jia adopted a similar English title to King Hu's because "he sees parallels between present-day violent incidents and those dramatized in *wuxia* films by Chang Cheh or King Hu" (Wang 2015, 159).

Despite the different temporality of *A Touch of Zen* and *A Touch of Sin*, martial arts in the old days, like violence nowadays, was resorted to when social injustice prevailed and the rule of law was undermined. The film, *A Touch of Sin*, brings together four stories adapted from real-life incidents reported on Chinese social media, with four poor and marginalised individuals driven to violent acts because of injustice, corruption and abuses of power. With violence becoming the last resort for the poor and the oppressed to defend themselves, the English translation makes a reference to martial arts films to reconfigure the four characters from violent perpetrators to "xia – knights-errant" (Wang 2015, 160).

Figure 1 presents parallel images from both films. The shot on the left is Xiaoyu from *A Touch of Sin*, who kills an official who assaults her when she refuses

3. The film, 影 (*Shadow*), indeed suggests one of the protagonists, Jingzhou, who is trained from childhood to be Ziyu's double. However, the title interpretation is not restricted to the protagonist – the shadow of Ziyu. It can indicate the plot of complicated intrigues (Lyu 2020) or even the narrative of dualities interwoven in a yin-yang paradigm, including a quasi-black-and-white visual palette, and thematically the contingency of harmony between two opposing sides in a battle (Goi 2018; Lyu 2020).

to give in to his demand for sex. *A Touch of Sin* portrays Xiaoyu as a female knight-errant, and its cinematic language relates her to the heroic knight of *A Touch of Zen*.

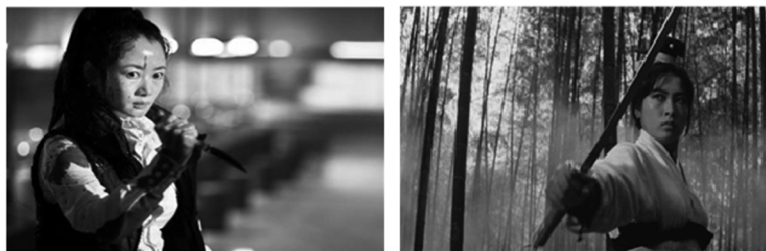


Figure 1. Images from *A Touch of Sin* (McKiernan 2023) and *A Touch of Zen* (Carr 2016)

The Chinese film title is rather ambiguous. It remains unclear if the film is taking a passive view of the four protagonists destined to resort to violence, or a critical perspective to show that rapid urbanisation damages people and violently restructures society (Schultz 2016). However, through selective appropriation, the English title foregrounds a certain level of appreciation of these protagonists in modern society by envisioning them as knights-errant rather than criminals or perpetrators. In this case, the TT narrative subtly clarifies the intention of Jia's film, whereas the ST remains a question for audiences to explore.

In addition to the cinematic influence of *A Touch of Zen*, the TT actually suggests that the film touches on the idea of sin (Xiao 2015). While the Chinese film title, 天注定, literally meaning 'destiny' or 'it is destined', appears unrelated to the TT, the inclusion of 'sin' in the TT tends to inspire a relationality with Christianity, especially the inheritance of original sin (Blocher 1997; Wiley 2002). Despite different appropriations in the ST and TT, the inherent nature of sin therefore manifests a similar narrative of the ST, namely being condemned to some fate. In other words, both the ST and TT emplot the idea that there is no escape for anyone, due to "a capital sin" attributable to "China's runaway capitalism", or "collective sin" attributable to "China's dysfunctional belief system" (Xiao 2015, 30).

The connection between martial arts and Jia's films can also be found in a later production, 江湖儿女 (Hu 2022). The term 江湖, literally meaning 'rivers and lakes', is a typical martial arts term referring to an imaginary cultural space where *xia* (knights-errant) practise martial arts (Zhang and Lu 2016). This imaginary filmic world follows "a social order quite distinct from those of the ordinary world found at home" and therefore can be distinguished perhaps most usefully from 'home' (Chan 2001, 491).

The term 江湖 is still extensively used in contemporary China, which indicates that it is “an integral part of Chinese culture”, as Jia mentions in an interview (Taubin 2018). In the same interview (Taubin 2018) and in an Internet post (Jia 2018), he points out the influence of the Hong Kong martial arts genre and transfers it into a contemporary context (Hu 2022). In addition to the exploration of outlaws dwelling beyond the ordinary social periphery (Hu 2022), the adoption of martial arts narratives also serves as a metaphor for independent filmmakers like Jia: “I take a risk in challenging the existing film order and the censorship laws. People joke that my role in independent filmmaking is almost like that of an assassin” (Taubin 2018, 10).

However, in contrast with the film *A Touch of Sin*, the TT of 江湖儿女 (Jia 2018) no longer exhibits any relationality between the martial arts genre and the film. In Jia’s Internet post (2018), he acknowledges that the English title is related to a line from the film: “经过高温燃烧，火山灰是最干净的。” [Volcanic ash formed by high-temperature combustion is the cleanest.] (our translation). While the martial arts narratives have been removed from the TT, this does highlight another aspect of the film: changing interpersonal relationships in a Chinese society going through a significant transformation (Gao 2021).

因为我觉得人这一生经过很多的情感、生活的历练，就好像高温燃烧一样，最后烟飞云散，挺悲哀，但同时也非常珍贵，因为人再有多少的毛病、缺点，最终还是非常珍贵，这样就改成了英文片名 《Ash is Purest White》。

[Because I think a person goes through a lot of emotions and experiences in his/her life. It is like burning at a high temperature. In the end, everything turns into dust, which is very sad. But at the same time, it is very precious, because no matter how many faults and shortcomings a person has, they are still very precious in the end. In this way, the English title was changed to ‘Ash is Purest White’.]

(Jia 2018) (own translation)

As mentioned earlier, Jia and other sixth-generation filmmakers grew up in a period when China was going through dramatic socio-economic reforms. The theme of change consequently became essential in Jia’s films. Instead of emphasising the martial arts narrative, the theme of change is chosen to be in the foreground, and so ‘Ash is Purest White’ is adopted as the TT through selective appropriation. Through this title, Jia manages to emplot his opinion about the passage of time, which contributes to his effort to configure a public narrative of socio-economic transformations.

Another Jia film that concentrates on the theme of change is 山河故人 (literally ‘mountains rivers acquaintance’) (Jia 2015). The changing landscape across time accentuates “the changes of the city and of course, the life of humans them-

selves”, while only the mountains and rivers remain the same (Yang 2019, 269). The TT, ‘Mountain May Depart’, however, seems to suggest the opposite temporality. Rather than prioritising mountains as static witnesses of the passage of time, the English title is related to the Bible: “For the mountains may depart, and the hills be moved; but my loving kindness shall not depart from thee” (Isa. 54:10 ASV). The TT therefore chooses to put the spotlight on human experience and memories. While the essence of both the ST and TT is concerned with what remains unchanged and focuses on the relationship between the present and the past and memory, this selective appropriation emplots the significance of narratives from natural to human, from physical to spiritual.

In the last film included for analysis, 三峡好人 (literally ‘Three Gorges good people’) (Jia 2006), the two protagonists travel to the Three Gorges region in search of their missing spouses. While the ST outlines the main characters and the temporality of the story, it clearly demonstrates a moral perception with the word 好人 (‘good people’). As seen through the eyes of two outsiders in an area going through large-scale demolition in order to build the Three Gorges Dam, the film presents the apathy and alienation of local residents experiencing the demolition of the place where they live, and more importantly the demolition of their lives (Zhu 2011). The selective appropriation of the moral critique in the Chinese film title poses a question to viewers regarding the submission and conformity demanded by those in political power.

In fact, Jia skilfully emplots a contrast between one of the protagonists of this film – Han Sanming – and the character Zhou San’er from 天注定 (*A Touch of Sin*). There is a shot in 三峡好人 that moves from Han Sanming – the ‘good guy’ – to the face of Zhou San’er, a serial killer, the ‘bad guy’. Xiao (2015, 25) corroborates that this visual focus shift “in an otherwise identical frame” denotes a change of moral focus in 三峡好人.

三峡好人 was translated into ‘Still Life’, eliminating the spatial narrative. The still life genre has a long tradition in Western art history. Originating in Greek antiquity, it portrays ordinary, insignificant objects that tend to be “overlooked, perhaps even sordid, represented realistically to make sense of, or confirm our existence in the world [...as] a reminder to us of our mortality” (Cleary 2014, 31–32). While ‘Still Life’ seems to have no connection with the ST, relationality between the English title and the still life genre can be observed in the perspective of apathetic spectators witnessing the irresistible demolition demanded for the grand future of the nation (Zhu 2011). In this case, the English title also encourages viewers to seek a narrative that challenges their understanding of the significance of the object – which could be the Three Gorges Dam – in people’s lives.

The word ‘still’ in still life can be interpreted as ‘motionless’, describing inanimate objects (Cleary 2014). In the film title, ‘still’ suggests that the emotion of life endures despite the place where one’s home once was becoming permanently inaccessible. Indeed, for marginalised individuals like migrant workers, grand projects like the Three Gorges Dam can be seen as a step towards constructing “a ‘new’ China, but not one that they can inhabit; instead, they are rootless and will move on after their job is done, in search of other employment prospects in strange lands” (Schultz 2016, 450). The TT therefore indicates the causal emplotment between the outcome – the emotional state (‘still’) – and the cause, the moral perception manifested in 好人 (‘good people’) in the ST. In comparison with the implicit message in the ST, the English translation relates to an art genre familiar to Western viewers to manifest people’s submission and conformity in a time of great socio-economic change in China.

6. Discussion

A clear difference in the film title translations of Zhang and Jia is that Zhang’s tend to be rigorously consistent with the ST, whereas shifting narratives can be observed in those of Jia. One plausible explanation for this difference is that Zhang is a more globally renowned director than Jia. His films brand themselves without much marketing effort in terms of title translation.

As a leading fifth-generation filmmaker, Zhang’s *Red Sorghum* (1988) was the first film “from the Chinese speaking world [namely, including Hong Kong and Taiwan] to receive the highest recognition at a major international film festival in the West” (Wang and Rawnsley 2010, 91). Subsequent works such as *Ju Dou* (Zhang and Feng 1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang 1991) and *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Zhang 1992) also achieved great international acclaim, winning awards in Cannes, Hong Kong, Berlin and Australia (Tu 2005). To some extent, Zhang’s films are “identified as a symbol representing ‘Chinese cinema’ as a whole in the Western cultural realm” (Wang and Rawnsley 2010, 93–94) and “representative of the Chinese national cinema from the 1980s to the present day” (Gong 2010, 434).

Despite being the best-known Chinese film director internationally, Zhang’s pre-2000 films were commercially successful in neither the West nor China, due to their arthouse tendencies. In fact, he was criticised in China for self-Orientalism – that is, caricaturing ‘the Orient’, including Chinese society, culture and people, to cater to Western tastes (Gong 2010; Tu 2005). Nevertheless, Zhang himself is conscious of not adjusting his filmmaking to please either the Western imagination or Chinese officials (Wang and Rawnsley 2010). Although early films including *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *To Live* (1994) were banned in

China (Lu 2010), he has no objection to censorship (Tempest 1995). On the contrary, Zhang has commented on the simplicity of most Western critics (Wang and Rawnsley 2010, 92):

For them, Chinese films must fall under two categories: they are either government propaganda or anti-government. By this logic, whatever films the Chinese government approves must be bad, and whatever films are banned in China must be good and worth seeing.

The 2000s saw Zhang's filmmaking shift from arthouse aesthetics to commercial blockbusters, as he honed his directorial skills. In this way, his products can compete with Hollywood films in both domestic and international markets (Lan 2019), while obtaining support from the authorities. Since the beginning of this century, especially since the tremendous success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee 2000), Zhang's focus has been on the market value of films (Gong 2010; Wang and Rawnsley 2010). Films such as *Hero* (Zhang 2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang 2004) and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Zhang 2006) all feature a martial arts genre which is familiar to Chinese viewers and recognised as 'Chineseness' in the West. Also, like the semantic translation of the title 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon', the English titles of Zhang's martial arts films tend to use the technique of conserving lexemes (Cross 2007) to offer literal translations of their Chinese titles.

Staying close to the ST might be a strategy to highlight the public narratives of Chineseness in a film. These films usually follow the *Crouching Tiger* model, which consists of the following characteristics: "the adoption of the martial arts genre and the portrayal of elements of Chineseness, a pan-Asian cast with film stars from different Asian countries or areas, a global makeup in the film production team, international sources of funding and planning for marketing worldwide" (Zhang and Lu 2016, 135). One of the films included in this study, *Shadow*, can be considered part of Zhang's continuous trajectory through the martial arts genre.

As Iordanova, Martin-Jones and Vidal (2010, 106) indicate, Zhang has been an unofficial 'official (*guanfang*) director' of China since he was chosen by the government to direct the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. His recent films have tended to be "politically conformist with high entertainment values" (Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010, 106). The different narratives of the ST and TT for *Coming Home* can be seen as an example of his "ingenuity in negotiating with both the global commercial market and domestic political censorship" (Gong 2010, 434).

In line with the opening-up policies of the 1980s, the Chinese film industry also began to reform, changing from relying on state financial aid to a "self-

responsibility system”, which means producing films that attract Chinese viewers and make a profit (Aranburu 2017, 5). However, a consequence of marketisation has been the rapid commercialisation of film production, which seems to have led to a drift away from the didactic and pedagogical functions of films (Yu 2022).

In this case, ‘main melody’ (主旋律 *zhǔxuánlǜ*) films have been promoted with financial aid from the government (Aranburu 2017) to counter the commercialised ecology of the film industry. These are also described as “propaganda films” in the West, as they initially depicted socialist heroes and model communist cadres, and later extended to the glorious achievements of the post-Mao era (Aranburu 2017; Nakajima 2022; Yu 2022). Zhang’s most recent films, *Sharpshooter* and *Cliff Walker*, are seen as main melody films portraying selfless socialist heroes. Both take the protagonist as the English title. Through narrowing the narrative of the film title to only the protagonists, the courage of Communist soldiers can be used to highlight the socialist grand narrative implied in the main melody films, which is consistent with the political effort to reinforce the legitimacy of the Communist Party’s rule (Yu 2022). These films mainly target the domestic market for the construction of a public narrative evident in most main melody films; consequently, a well-thought-through English translation of the title for its international audience is not a priority.

On the other hand, Jia continues to work in the independent or arthouse cinema genre, especially in terms of seeking funding from private sources rather than the government, with a disparity between his films’ marginal status in China and their high recognition in global film festivals (Lu 2010). Indeed, most independent arthouse films are produced without obtaining government-approved “public exhibition permits” (Nakajima 2022, 66). The distribution and exhibition of each film therefore mainly entails building a profile on the international film festival circuit and then being released in digital formats (Nakajima 2022).

In these circumstances, the English translation of Jia’s film titles becomes vital for marketing purposes. Take *Mountains May Depart* and *A Touch of Sin*, for example. Like Jia’s other films, they sought funding from private sources rather than the government, making the director responsible for its profit. The title became an important marketing tool for the international audience. As mentioned earlier, the TT has biblical connotations which may be evocative for Westerners but not Chinese viewers.

The discrepancy between ST and TT in Jia’s films also demonstrates discretion in carefully naming a film to avoid political censorship. In the case of the title ‘A Touch of Sin’, the relevance of the martial arts genre, especially in terms of violence as a last resort, can be found in the English title but not the Chinese one. The dramatic socio-economic changes in China and their impact on people’s lives are subtly indicated in the Chinese title, 三峡好人, whereas the English

translation, 'Still Life', more explicitly presents the submissive emotions of people facing the destruction of their way of life.

The manifestation of a genre representing Chineseness – the martial arts – in 'A Touch of Sin' and 江湖儿女 is downplayed in 'Ash is Purest White'. Although a line in the film can be interpreted as providing the meaning behind 'Ash is Purest White', the opacity and vagueness still leave the title rather incomprehensible. The hidden meaning of this TT only unfolds through Jia's explanatory Internet post. Therefore, the switch from the public narrative of martial arts to a personal narrative can be observed at the micro level when looking at 江湖儿女 and its TT 'Ash is Purest White'. However, at the macro level, the theme of change is integral to the narratives of Jia and other sixth-generation filmmakers (Gao 2021; Wang 2015; Zhang 2004). The construction of a coherent public narrative of the impacts of socio-economic transformations on personal lives and interpersonal relationships is therefore evident in the ST (such as 山河故人) and the TT (such as 'Ash is Purest White' and 'Mountain May Depart').

7. Limitations

This study is an in-depth analysis of ten film titles from two world-renowned Chinese filmmakers. The relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of the results. Future research is recommended to analyse a more diverse pool of films, including films in different genres and from other filmmakers. A large pool of film titles would make statistical analysis or modelling possible, which would compensate to some extent for the inevitable level of subjectivity involved in a qualitative approach such as narrative theory.

The scope of the study is limited by featuring English-language research only, with the result that valuable contributions provided by research published in Chinese may have been overlooked. For instance, Zhou (2019) is one of very few scholars to apply narrative theory to identify strategies for translating film titles with personal names. Situated in theories other than narrative theory (e.g., norms theory or relevance theory), other researchers (Zhao and Wu 2017; Zhou and Dong 2020) have also investigated consistencies and deviations in Chinese film titles and their English translations. However, this study goes beyond semantic accuracy or inaccuracy to recognise the narrative mechanisms operationalised through features of narrativity (temporality, relationality, selective appropriation and causal emplotment). Instead of translation behaviours and choices, it employs narrative theory to delineate the cultural, social and political conditions that might dictate translation behaviours.

Another limitation is the sole focus on linguistic aspects of film titles and their translations. Multimodality is indeed essential in human communication (Kusters et al. 2017), and thus both linguistic and paralinguistic resources should be drawn on “to set up an interpretive context for the reader or hearer” (Baker 2010, 360). In particular, for a study with reference to film as an art involving multimodal semiotics, the narratives of a film title can be enriched through visual devices. In fact, this project was initiated with a collection of film posters – 31 from Zhang and 26 from Jia. While this article pinpoints the linguistic transformation between film titles and their translations, further studies are planned, particularly involving multimodal discourse analysis (MDA; see Constantinou 2005; Jones 2012; O’Halloran 2011). Especially for film titles semantically identical in the ST and TT but with different narratives embedded in visual elements, MDA will be able to assist us to further the analysis of narratives in the subtle processes of (re)configuring meaning-making.

8. Conclusion

Through the devices of temporality, relationality, selective appropriation and causal emplotment, the English translations of film titles can be differentiated from their Chinese film titles, as exemplified in the films of both Zhang and Jia. Apart from linguistic and commercial factors, narratives can vary – or remain the same – in Chinese film titles and their English translations, according to cultural and social considerations including political censorship. The deliberate variations in film title translation suggest ingenuity in negotiating a niche market for domestic and international audiences. Future research is recommended to include Chinese-language publications for a comprehensive review of film title translation research, which could offer insights into the diverse contexts and potential challenges in the application of narrative theory. The next step of the project is to delve into narrative manifestations of multimodal semiotics, using linguistic and paralinguistic resources.

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