

# Analysis of Principles and Techniques of English Film Titles Translation

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**Abstract:** The titles of the films are the punch lines of the films, for they are not only the most exquisite parts of the film language and but also the key elements of the film to attract the audience of the target language. Therefore, the film title translation plays an important role in attracting the audience. The appropriate translation of the film titles is not only related to the feelings of the audience, but also affects the reputation and the box office of the films. This essay focuses on the translation process of English film titles by collecting examples. It examines translation principles that the translators should follow. Then this thesis sums up a series of possible translation methods for English film titles.

## 1. Introduction

Since the advent of the film, it has been popular and enjoyed by the public. The film can directly reflect the times, history, life, and almost all other aspects of real life. At the same time, it can greatly affect people's senses and psychology, making people understand others in different regions, different cultural backgrounds, different knowledge, different belief, different art, different laws, different customs and different social habits. Therefore, the film promotes cultural transmission.

Through the title of film, the audience can understand the film precisely. The title of the film is like the brand of the film trademark. It is the interpretation of the main content of the film. A good film translation can attract the audience. In other words, the translation of the film title directly affects the art of the show, and it relates to the film attendance, even the film's box office revenue, which are more likely to influence cultural exchange and cooperation between China and the West.

The purpose of the translation of English film titles tries to convey the language and cultural information of the film, realize the aesthetic and commercial value of the film, and attract the audience to the greatest extent. Its purpose is to meet the needs of the audience. At the same time, in the macroscopic sense, this purpose also promotes cultural exchanges between different languages and cultures.

## 2. Overview of English Film Titles

The title of film is similar to a mark of trade and exists in the film which it represents. Titles are equal to trademarks and have the function of promoting the film, attracting the attention of potential customers, and stimulating their desire to watch.

### 2.1. Naming Approaches of English Films

The film title itself is the punch line of the film and plays a strong guiding role. It is also the most exquisite part of the film language and a key element of the film to attract the audience. Therefore, film titles translation plays an important role in attracting the audience. The appropriate translation of film title is not only related to the feelings of the audience, but affects the reputation and the box office of the film. Familiarizing the common rules of naming English films titles, it is very helpful for translators to correctly understand and translate film titles.

Generally speaking, English film titles are named in five ways: 1) naming by main characters'

name such as *The Godfather* (jiaofu in Chinese), *Harry Potter* (hali bote in Chinese); 2) naming by place such as *Pearl Harbo* (zhenzhugang in Chinese), *Casablaca* (kasabulanka in Chinese); 3) naming by time or historical background such as *Modern Times* (modeng shidai in Chinese), *Late Autumn* (wanqiu in Chinese); 4) naming by plot such as *Death on the Nile* (niluohe shang de canan in Chinese), *Saving Private Ryan* (zhengjiudabing Xiaoen in Chinese); and 5) naming by main theme such as *Indecent Proposal* (bu daode de jiaoyi in Chinese) <sup>[1]</sup>.

## 2.2. Features of Film Titles

The film title has to reflect the art of the film and the commercial value of its box office. Therefore, it has some unique features: linguistic features, aesthetic features, and cultural features.

### 2.2.1. Linguistic Features

Generally speaking, an English film title is concise, simple in the structure, but rich in meaning, so it has following two features. One is concise, easy to remember, such as *Evil* (xie e in Chinese), *True Lies* (zhenshi de huangyan in Chinese), *Lion King* (shiziwang in Chinese), etc. The other is easy to understand, such as *Pearl Harbor* (zhenzhugang in Chinese), *Beauty and the Beast* (meinv yu yeshou) <sup>[2]</sup>.

### 2.2.2. Aesthetic Feature

It is generally known that a film is a typical form of modern art with its own aesthetic value and characteristics. As the first part of the audience's eyes, the title of the film reflects the aesthetic. In general, the aesthetic characteristics of film titles are closely related to the use of rhetorical devices. That means using the language to create an atmosphere that enrich the feelings of the original language audience, and passes it to the target audience. Some examples are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Samples of the film titles

English Film titles ((in Chinese phonetic alphabet))	Rhetoric devices
<i>The Science of the Lambs</i> (chenmo de aoyang)	allusion
<i>True Lies</i> (zhenshi de huangyan)	oxymoron
<i>New York, New York</i> (niuyue, niuyue)	repetition
<i>Good Night, and Good Luck</i> (wanan, haoyun)	alliteration
<i>What Price Glory?</i> (guangrong hejia?)	rhetoric question

### 2.2.3. Cultural Feature

The British anthropologist Edward Taylor in the book *PRIMITIVE CULTURE* put forward “the culture” at first. He expressed it as “cultural includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws and customs and social habits” <sup>[3]</sup>. The cultural coverage is a wide and complex system. As an integral part of culture, language reflects a nation colourful cultural phenomenon. The movie title is the first information that the audience receives from the film, and it will carry rich cultural information. Some examples are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Samples of the film titles

English titles	Chinese titles (in Chinese phonetic alphabet)
<i>The Silence of the Lambs</i>	chenmo de gaoyang
<i>Seven Virtues</i>	qi da meide
<i>Seven Gifts of the Spirit</i>	shen de qi da liwu
<i>Easter Parade</i>	fuhuojie youxing
<i>The Gold Rush</i>	taojinji

## 3. Translation Principles of English Film Titles

Title translation should be faithful to the original film, so the translation of the title form and the original film content should be unified. However, in the process of translation, the impact of film title translation on the economic benefits must be considered.

### 3.1. Economic Equivalence

Due to market economy and commercial interests, the translation of English film titles has special requirements. Firstly, it asked the translator to master the target language and cultural characteristics, to create a film title that the target language audience loved. Secondly, achieving the economic equivalence asks that the title should be good at making novel suspense and rendering atmosphere. For example, *It Happens One Night* and *Sister Act* are translated to “yiye fengliuand” and “xiunv ye fengkuang” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet). Finally, achieving the economic equivalence should combine the art and commercial successfully.

The translation of the film should be as concise as possible to outline the content of the film, but also to reflect the style of the film -- elegant or relaxed, lively or suspense. When translating an art film, it asked the translator to be elegant <sup>[4]</sup>. Liu Miqing pointed out that “Social benefits are the scale to test the meaning of translation, the quality of translation and the value of translation” <sup>[5]</sup>. The economic benefits of movies often influence the attraction of ownership by the audience. At the same time, the titles are directly related to income levels at the box office.

### 3.2. Information Equivalence

The translation text must agree with the title of the target language and the content of the original film and faithfully convey the content of the original film related information. Film title translation should be consistent with the original title of content, culture, or style. The title of film contains a wealth of information. For example, *Pulp Fiction* has translated as “heise zuijiling” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet), from which the audience can easily to know it is a film about crime.

### 3.3. Cultural Value

Nida points out, “Language is a part of culture. The purpose of any text directly or insight to reflect a corresponding culture, and the meaning of words can only be found in the corresponding culture.” <sup>[6]</sup> Because of the differences between cultures, sometimes the translator cannot find exactly same corresponding words in the language, so they must understand the meaning. Translation is not only a process of language conversion, but also a social phenomenon of two cultural exchanges. Achieving the cultural value in the title translation, it is respectively reflected in the macro and micro two aspects. The main performance of the cultural value is to fully understand the original film, and convey the cultural information and emotions to avoid misinterpretation.

Because there are many differences between the English and Chinese peoples, such as the social development process, geographical climate, history and politics, values, customs, ethics and other aspects, it results the differences between the vocabularies. This is the so-called “semantic vacancy”, which is very difficult for the title translation. In addition, the two similar forms of Chinese and English about vocabularies may refer to the different contents, resulting in misinterpretation. For example, the film of *First Wives Club* was translated as “dalaopo julebu” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet), but the “first wife” in English refers to the first lady to the man. It is quite different from the Chinese. Now, it is translated as “yuanpei furen julebu” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet). It is more close to the original intention.

Idioms and allusions load a lot of cultural information, which can't be understood from the literal meaning. If the translator lacks of culture and he or she is sloop, he or she will make mistakes. For example, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* was translated as “feiyue dujuanwo” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) in Taiwan; however, it was translated as “feiyue fengrenyuan” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) in China Mainland, which is more accurate.

At the same time, the translator who realize the values in cultural should realize that translation is a dynamic process of cultural exchange. Therefore, evaluating and dealing with the translation, the translator should measure it in a historical way. The translation which is considered a good in some areas, are not necessarily good in other areas. For example, *Up in the Air* was translated as “zai yunduan” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) in the China Mainland, but it was translated as “gualao feixin riji” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) in Hong Kong.

### 3.4. Artistic Aesthetics

Translation itself has artistic aesthetics, so the translation itself should also have artistic aesthetics. Steiner thinks that “Translation is the art of folding”, and it is the same that the translation of the film title. Because it is a creative activity that translator translated according to the film, a good film title translation can transfer the information of “beauty”, causing the audience reverie and having a strong desire to watch the film. For example, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, *Life of Pi*, and *Hachi* are translated as “dang xinfu lai qiaomen”, “shaonianpai de qimiao piaoliu” and “zhongquan Bagong de gushi” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet). To achieve aesthetic value, the translator should pay attention to the words and choose the good meaning. When stressing the words, first of all, it is emphasizing on vivid.

Chinese is a kind of language which has tone, which expresses the rich and delicate feelings according to the level, length, speed of the tone. For instance, *Outland* was translated as “tian wai tian” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) (iambic and rhyme); *Singing in the Rain* was translated as “yu zhong yu” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) (rhyme). All of them fully reflect the beauty of Chinese phonology<sup>[7]</sup>.

As an intonation language, English with its own arrangement of the tone, stress, light tone, and sub-accent melody beauty constitute its unique melody beauty. For example, “fangcao bi liantian” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) was translated as *Green Grass of Home*; “dalunhui” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) was translated as *The Wheel of Life*. These films have successfully embodied the beauty of English melody.

In the English title to achieve the language beautiful, the most commonly method is using head rhyme and rhyme. It is very common in film title. For example, *Picture Perfect* was translated as “wanmei zhaopian” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet); *Rock and Rule* was translated as “wanshi moxing” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet); *Limelight* was translated as “wutai shengya” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet).

As the four-word phrase is often concise, full of expressive, it is used frequently in the title of the Chinese translation, accounting for more than 60%. For example, *The Skeleton Key* was translated as “wanneng yaoshi” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet); and *The Bridge of Madison County* was translated as “langqiao yimeng” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) and so on.

## 4. Translation Methods of English Film Titles

The title of the film is concise and absorbs most of the content of the film, so most titles are expressed in terms of nouns or simple sentences. For the English film titles translation, first of all, the translator should be proficient in English and Chinese, with strong conversion capabilities between English and Chinese culture, converting the information content of the original title. Secondly, the translator should master and flexibly use the necessary methods about the translation. The common English film titles translation methods include: literal translation, free translation, Transliteration and combination of free translation and literal translation<sup>[8]</sup>.

**Table 3.** Samples of the film titles

English titles	Chinese titles (in Chinese phonetic alphabet)
<i>Snow White and Seven Dwarfs</i>	baixue gongzhu he qige xiaairen
<i>Dances with Wolves</i>	yu lang gongwu
<i>The Godfather</i>	jiaofu
<i>The Silence of the Lambs</i>	chenmo de gaoyang
<i>Schindler's List</i>	xindele mingdan
<i>Four Wedding and a Funeral</i>	zhuluoji gongyuan

### 4.1. Literal Translation

Literal translation is based on the source language and characteristics of the target language and persists the retention of the original title of the content form to the utmost. When the source

language is coincident with the function, it is the simplest and most effective translation method, which is a typical method when translating English film titles. As for the translation of the film title, its literal and language structure of the reciprocal should be equivalence. It cannot not only deviate from the content of the English title but also cause the misunderstanding of the title in the Chinese culture. Some examples are shown in Table 3.

#### 4.2. Free Translation

Many English titles themselves carry a lot of cultural information. If the translator uses literal translation, it is bound to cause that loss something of the film, like the mood of English title, content information and cultural information, which may make the audience misunderstand. In order to make the target audience understand the connotation of the original title, the translator need have creativity, to understand the deep meaning of the English film tile, and integrate into Chinese culture. Thus, free translation is adopted.

Free translation emphasizes the meaning, and maximizes the content of the original title. In the specific operation, the translator often use the word, minus words, transitions, expansion and other methods of translation, which play a thorough understanding of the original film content, enhance the role of film title appeal. For example, *Blood and Sand* was translated as “bixue huangsha” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) using adding words; *Piano* was translated as “gongqin bielian” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) using adding words; *She Is So Lovely* was translated as “kerener” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet) by subtraction; *In the heat of the Night* was translated as “yanye” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet); *Tomorrow Never Dies* was translated into nouns -- “mingri diguo” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet). After the translation, the title of the film is physical and mental, natural and appropriate.

According to the content of the film, *Catch Me If You Can* was translated as “xiaoyao fawai” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet). This film tells about the story that an agent of FBI and a criminal who is good at counterfeiting a document. Although the Chinese title cannot be exactly as the same as the English title, but it is vividly show the film's plot and content, and achieved good results.

#### 4.3. Transliteration

Transliteration is a method to translate through translating a word or phrase in another language using another language. The transliteration of the English title is translated to Chinese according to the pronunciation, which can take the film plot or content into account. Transliteration is simple and fast.

Some film titles contain some names or names of place in. If it is familiar, or it has important historical and cultural significance, transliteration should be used, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4** Samples of the film titles

English titles	Chinese titles (in Chinese phonetic alphabet)
<i>Tess</i>	taisi
<i>Titanic</i>	taitannike hao
<i>King Kong</i>	jingang
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	luomiou yu zhuliye
<i>Harry Potter</i>	hali bote

#### 4.4. Combination of Free Translation and Literal Translation

There was a situation that the literal translation and translation is difficult to properly reflect the contents of the original film. Some titles of films, if choose literal translation, the audiences will fell confused, and it is difficult to understand the film. Sometimes, the translation of the title is lack of the artistic appeal, so these titles of film should choose the combination of free translation and literal translation when translated. The combination of literal translation and free translation not only takes note of the literal meaning of the title, but also notes its deep meaning. For example, *The Reader* was translated as “shengsi langdu” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet); *Shutter Island* was

translated as “jinbi dao” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet); and Final Destination was translated as “sisen lai le” (in Chinese phonetic alphabet).

## 5. Conclusion

Movie plays an important role both in people’s daily lives and international economy. As a form of commodity and art, movie will still enjoy a great popularity among people. In this essay, the significance of film title translation is discussed, and methods of translating English film titles into Chinese are studied. The translator must first bear the audience at first, make their expectation and reception into full consideration and give priority to the audience-oriented approach in the reception into full consideration and give priority to the audience-oriented approach in the process of translation. Meanwhile, the essay holds that the translator should translate film titles under the basic principle of fulfilling the specific functions of film titles. Therefore, the author analyses and summarizes the principles of English film titles translation, which are economic equivalence, information equivalence, cultural value and artistic aesthetics. This is the rules that must be followed during the translation process.

Under the guidance of these principles, the author then explores the methods commonly employed in film title translation, namely, translation, literal translation, free translation, combination of literal and free translation, and adaptation. Each method has its advantages and limitations and no single method alone could solve all the problems in film title translation. Therefore, all these methods are indispensable and supplementary to each other. During the translation of English movie titles, the translator should always bear in mind principles, and use proper translation skills to make appropriate versions to give the audience most exact information and help them enjoy the movies.

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