



# A Study on Semantic Differences and Cultural Adaptation Strategies in English-Chinese Film Title Translation from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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**Abstract:** In the context of globalization, film serves as a pivotal medium for cross-cultural communication, with its title translation undertaking dual missions: cultural dissemination and commercial values. However, English-Chinese film titles, shaped by divergent linguistic sign systems and cultural cognitive frameworks, encounter intricate challenges in semantic transformation and cultural adaptation during translation. Grounded in Saussure's semiotic theory and Whorf's linguistic relativity, this study systematically analyzes semantic differences. Furthermore, to address these challenges, the paper proposes four cultural adaptation strategies. Future research is encouraged to integrate with quantitative corpora and neurolinguistic methodologies for deeper insights into audience psychology, thereby advancing translation practices toward data-driven paradigms. This study contributes a theoretical framework and actionable strategies for cross-cultural film title translation, asserting that translation transcends semantic equivalence to bridge cultural cognition and convey aesthetic values. Its findings hold significant implications for facilitating intercultural dialogue in an increasingly globalized world.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural perspective; English-Chinese film title translation; manifestations of semantic differences; cultural adaptation strategies

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## I. Introduction

In recent years, with the continuous development of globalization, English has become an increasingly important tool for cross-cultural communication (Zhang, 2024). Under the backdrop of globalization, the depth and breadth of cross-cultural communication have been constantly expanding. As a core medium for cultural dissemination, films play a vital role, and their English titles serve as a crucial link between audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Film titles are not merely identifiers for the movies; they also carry rich cultural connotations, unique aesthetic values, and distinct commercial intentions. From Saussure's semiotic theory to Whorf's linguistic relativity hypothesis, the relationship between language and culture provides a solid theoretical foundation for the translation of film titles. Specifically, it systematically explores the semantic differences in the translation of English-Chinese film titles from a cross-cultural perspective and proposes cultural-adaptive strategies to offer theoretical references and practical guidance for translation practice.

## II. Theoretical Foundations and Core Concepts

### 2.1 Film Title Translation from the Perspective of Saussure's Semiotic Theory

Saussure posited that language is a system of signs, and one of the two fundamental principles of linguistic signs is their arbitrariness (Guo & Li, 2023). He argued that a linguistic sign consists of the signifier (phonetic form or written character) and the signified (concept or meaning), establishing a relationship that is both arbitrary and systematically constrained. As a typical example of a linguistic sign, the relationship between the signifier and the signified in film titles differs significantly between Chinese and English, profoundly influencing the transmission of meaning in the translation process:

#### 2.1.1 The Aesthetic of Ambience in Chinese Film Titles

Chinese film titles emphasize the combination of images and cultural metaphors, aiming for an aesthetic effect where "the words end but the meaning lingers." For instance, the title *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

creates a sense of mystery in the martial world through the images of "crouching tiger" and "hidden dragon." The relationship between the signifier and the signified relies heavily on cultural background for interpretation.

### **2.1.2 The Directness of English Film Titles**

English film titles, on the other hand, conversely tend to directly convey the core content, prioritizing the efficiency and accuracy of information transmission. For example, *Inception* (《盗梦空间》) summarizes the film's theme with the concept of "dream - stealing," demonstrating a more logical correspondence between signifier and signified.

## **2.2 Cultural Cognitive Differences from Whorf's Linguistic Relativity**

Whorf's Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis suggests that the structure of a language influences modes of thought and perception. In film title translation, this difference manifests as follows:

### **2.2.1 Shaping of Cultural Cognition**

Culture is not only closely related to the developmental process of human society, but also has an intrinsic connection with human society as a whole (Zhang, 2017). Take the translation of film titles as an example. The English title *Gone with the Wind* translates literally to “随风而去” which retains the literal imagery but fails to fully convey the complex emotions set against the backdrop of the Civil War. In contrast, the Chinese title “乱世佳人” (“*Gone with the Wind*”) places the images of "chaotic times" and "beautiful woman" side by side. This not only highlights the turbulent historical context but also emphasizes the characters' resilience in adversity. This cultural fit perfectly aligns with Chinese audiences' dual expectations of historical narrative and the brilliance of human nature, vividly demonstrating the deep-seated demand for "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" in cultural translation.

### **2.2.2 Differences in Aesthetic Expectations**

English-speaking audiences may focus more on the efficiency and appeal of information conveyed by the title, while Chinese-speaking audiences generally prefer to perceive the ambiance and emotional tone from the title, seeking a poetic or philosophical expression. This difference requires translators to balance linguistic function and cultural adaptation to meet the deep-seated aesthetic needs of audiences from different cultural backgrounds.

## **III. Semantic Differences in the Translation of English - Chinese Film Titles**

### **3.1 Misalignment and Loss of Cultural Imagery**

In the semantic differences of English-Chinese film title translation, the misalignment and loss of cultural imagery are particularly prominent phenomena. Their root lies in the imperfect correspondence between the source language and the target language's cultural symbol systems. Take "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*" as an example. Although its English translation "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*" retains the literal imagery of "crouching tiger" and "hidden dragon," the difference in cultural contexts between Chinese and English means that English-speaking audiences find it hard to associate this title with the profound philosophy of "recluses" and the unique social ecosystem of the "jianghu" (martial world) in Chinese martial arts culture. As a result, the originally rich cultural imagery is diluted and even simplified to mere animal imagery, with the semantic connection between the translated title and the original becoming more superficial.

Similarly, the original title "*The Shawshank Redemption*" contains the culture-specific proper noun "Shawshank," which, as a place name, lacks universal cultural connotations. The Chinese translation chose to omit this specific reference, focusing instead on the core theme of "redemption." While this accurately conveys the main idea of Andy's self-redemption and spiritual freedom, it also weakens the cultural specificity of the original title, reducing the cultural connection between the translated title and the original. These two typical cases together reflect that the misalignment and loss of cultural imagery in English-Chinese film title translation are essentially challenges in reconstructing the relationship between the signifier and the signified of linguistic symbols in a cross-cultural context. This requires translators to balance cultural preservation with audience comprehension and highlights the complexity of conveying cultural connotations during semantic transformation.

### **3.2 Deviation and Reconstruction of Emotional Tone**

In the semantic differences of English-Chinese film title translation, the deviation and reconstruction of emotional tone is a key dimension that affects the acceptability of the translated title.

Consider the Chinese translation of *Gone with the Wind* as “乱世佳人” (*A Lady of the Turbulent Times*). The literal translation “随风而逝” (*Gone with the Wind*) only conveys a sense of drifting and loss. However, the translator, through the combination of the images of “chaotic times” and “beautiful woman,”

elevates the sense of personal fate's drifting into a sense of historical gravity under the tide of the times. This not only strengthens the social narrative of the Civil War background but also highlights the protagonist Scarlett's subjectivity. This reconstruction of emotional tone perfectly matches Chinese audiences' aesthetic expectations for the interweaving of "national sentiment" and "personal heroism" in tragic aesthetics.

In contrast, the English translation of *大话西游* as *A Chinese Odyssey* falls into a predicament due to the deviation of emotional tone. The original film uses absurd humor to reinterpret the classic *Journey to the West*. However, "Odyssey," as a symbol of Western epic, has a solemn narrative tone that forms a stark contrast with the original film's nonsensical style. As a result, the translated title fails to accurately convey the film's comedic core and postmodern deconstruction spirit. The comparison of these two cases shows that the matching of emotional tone requires not only linguistic translation but also a deep understanding of the target culture audience's cultural presuppositions regarding film genres and emotional expression. By reconstructing or adjusting the emotional tone, the translated title can achieve a deep resonance with the audience's aesthetic expectations.

### **3.3 Constraints and Innovation in Linguistic Forms**

In the semantic differences of English - Chinese film title translation, constraints and innovation in linguistic forms represent a significant challenge that translators must confront, primarily manifested in syllable limitations and part-of-speech conversion.

Chinese film titles, influenced by traditional culture, often adopt a four - character structure (e.g., *In the Mood for Love*). This structure possesses rhythmic beauty and the ability to create an ambiance in Chinese. However, English, as an inflected language, has distinct rhythmic and grammatical structures compared to Chinese. Therefore, English translations need to adjust the number of syllables to accommodate the expressive habits of the target language. For example, the title *In the Mood for Love* is translated as "In the Mood for Love." By adding the prepositional phrase "In the Mood for," the translation not only retains the temporal sense of "year" from the original title but also balances the grammatical requirements of English by expanding the syllable count, making the title more in line with the auditory habits of English-speaking audiences.

On the other hand, part-of-speech conversion is another common strategy. Chinese film titles are often nominal phrases (e.g., *Farewell My Concubine*). While a direct translation into English as a nominal phrase is possible, it may lack dynamism or cultural relevance. Therefore, translators often convert Chinese nouns into English verbs or phrasal structures to enhance the expressiveness and cultural fit of the translation. For instance, *Farewell My Concubine* is translated as "Farewell My Concubine." The original noun "别姬" is converted into the verbal phrase "Farewell," which retains the core action of "farewell" while reinforcing the character relationship through "My Concubine." This makes the title more consistent with English grammatical conventions and narrative logic.

These constraints and innovations in linguistic forms demonstrate that translating English-Chinese film titles involves not only conveying semantic information but also finding a balance between the rhythm, grammar, and cultural expression habits of the target language. Through strategies such as syllable adjustment and part-of-speech conversion, translators can achieve a dual fit in form and meaning for the translated title.

## **IV. The Construction and Practice of Cultural Adaptation Strategies**

### **4.1 Literal Translation with Annotation: Preserving Cultural Characteristics**

Literal translation involves retaining the original sentence structure and mode of expression, essentially preserving the form and content of the source text (Zhang & Zhao, 2023). In the context of cultural adaptation strategies for English - Chinese film title translation, the method of literal translation with annotation is an effective means of balancing cultural preservation and audience comprehension. This approach is particularly suitable for works with unique cultural backgrounds or historical significance, such as film adaptations of literary works or those imbued with specific cultural symbols.

Take the translation of *Farewell My Concubine* as an example. The English title "Farewell My Concubine: A Legend of Love and Betrayal in Ancient China" employs a main - and - subtitle format. The main title "Farewell My Concubine" is a direct translation of the original, preserving the core action of "farewell" and the character relationship of "my concubine." The subtitle "A Legend of Love and Betrayal in Ancient China," through additional explanation, situates the film within the historical context of ancient China and elucidates the interwoven themes of love, betrayal, and tradition. This strategy not only retains the cultural nuances of the original title, avoiding the dilution of imagery due to cultural differences, but also, through the explanatory function of the subtitle, helps the target - language audience understand the film's historical context and emotional depth. It effectively balances cultural connotations with audience receptiveness.

The advantage of literal translation with annotation lies in its explicit cultural annotation, which builds a bridge for cross - cultural understanding. It respects the artistic value of the original title while lowering the

cognitive barriers for the target audience, representing a typical practice of balancing “preservation” and “explanation” in cultural adaptation strategies.

#### **4.2 Paraphrasing and Restructuring: Extracting the Core Theme**

Paraphrasing refers to a translation method that retains only the content of the original text while discarding its form. When a film title cannot find a direct equivalent in the target language, it is necessary to grasp the core of the story and perform a paraphrased translation that also possesses the aesthetic quality of the target language (Liu, 2023). Within the framework of cultural adaptation strategies for English-Chinese film title translation, the method of paraphrasing and restructuring focuses on extracting the core theme of the film to achieve semantic reconstruction in a cross-cultural context. This approach is particularly suitable for situations where the original title is rich in cultural imagery or difficult to directly correspond.

Take *The Shawshank Redemption* as an example. In its English original title, “Shawshank” is merely a proper noun denoting the name of a prison and serves only as a geographical identifier, while “Redemption” is the spiritual core of the film — Andy's transformation from physical confinement to spiritual freedom through two decades of patience and wisdom. The Chinese translation retains the proper noun “肖申克” (Shawshank) to maintain the film's recognizability, while paraphrasing “Redemption” as “救赎” (redemption). This choice not only accurately conveys the film's themes of hope, perseverance, and self - redemption but also aligns with Chinese audiences' deep - seated expectations for “comeback” narratives (i.e., breaking through constraints and achieving a reversal of fortune in adversity). Compared to a literal translation that might lead to semantic ambiguity (such as “The Redemption of Shawshank”), the method of paraphrasing and restructuring extracts the core theme, transforming abstract concepts into emotional resonance that target - culture audiences can perceive. It accurately conveys the original title's spiritual essence and achieves cultural adaptation through linguistic transformation, thereby enhancing the translated title's dissemination and acceptance.

The essence of paraphrasing and restructuring is to build a bridge between respecting the original work's intent and meeting the target audience's expectations, making the film title translation an effective vehicle for semantic transmission and emotional connection in cross - cultural communication.

#### **4.3 Innovative Titling: Engaging the Target Culture**

In the cultural adaptation strategies for English - Chinese film title translation, the innovative titling method aims to activate the target culture through linguistic innovation. This approach is especially suitable for translations targeting young audiences or commercial genres such as comedies and animations.

Take *Zootopia* as an example. The English original title “Zootopia” is a portmanteau of “zoo” and “utopia.” The Chinese translation directly borrows this neologism, retaining the core concepts of “zoo” and “ideal world” from the original title. At the same time, the addition of the word “疯狂” (crazy) in the Chinese title “疯狂动物城” (Crazy Animal City) enhances the film's fantastical and humorous tone. This translation not only captures the Chinese imagination of a fairy - tale world as “full of imagination and vitality”, but also successfully stimulates the target audience's curiosity and anticipation through the creation of a new word. It preserves the original title's creativity while achieving cultural adaptation through linguistic transformation. Compared to a literal translation that might result in semantic disconnection (such as the awkwardness of “Animal Utopia”), the innovative titling method, through lexical blending and semantic reconstruction, transforms the original title's concept into an expression that is familiar and appealing to the target - culture audience. This ultimately achieves a dual enhancement in the translated title's commercial appeal and cultural fit.

The essence of the innovative titling method is to break down cultural barriers through linguistic innovation, making the film title translation an effective vehicle for activating the target culture and enhancing communication effectiveness in cross - cultural interactions.

#### **4.4 Market - Oriented Adjustment: Balancing Commerce and Culture**

While films carry cultural value, their commercial value is also extremely important. For a major - budget film project, even the slightest change can have a significant impact on its commercial success (Zhang, 2021). In the cultural adaptation strategies for English - Chinese film title translation, market - oriented adjustment is a crucial step to ensure that the translated title has both commercial value and cultural connotations. Its core lies in balancing linguistic standardization with precise audience positioning.

In terms of linguistic standardization, the translated title should avoid obscure characters or bizarre words to lower the cognitive barriers for the target audience. For example, the English title “Tiny Times” for the Chinese film *The Tiny Times* directly conveys the pronunciation and concept of the original title. However, the Chinese title itself, as a series brand, already has high market recognition and dissemination power. This difference

suggests that translators need to retain the core commercial identifier in the language transformation process to avoid weakening brand awareness due to formal adjustments.

Regarding audience positioning, the translated title should adopt differentiated expression strategies based on the characteristics of the target audience for different types of films. For instance, youth - oriented films targeting a younger demographic (such as *If You Are the One*) tend to use lively and fashionable metaphors. The translation "*If You Are the One*" uses the modern - sounding metaphor "the One" to reconstruct a romantic narrative that meets the aesthetic expectations of Western young audiences. In contrast, art films (such as *In the Mood for Love*) focus more on restrained and poetic expressions. The title "*In the Mood for Love*" uses the delicate combination of "Mood" and "Love" to convey the film's hazy emotional tone and the atmosphere of the times, which aligns with the art - film audience's pursuit of depth and aesthetics.

The essence of market - oriented adjustment is to ensure the acceptability of the translated title through linguistic standardization while precisely activating the target culture's consumer psychology through audience positioning. This ultimately achieves a dual optimization between commercial dissemination and cultural expression in film title translation. This strategy not only enhances the film's market competitiveness but also provides a practical path for cultural adaptation in cross - cultural communication.

## **V. Conclusion**

Film title translation, as a core component of cross - cultural communication, is a dual practice of semantic transformation and cultural adaptation. Its essence lies in constructing a cultural consensus between the signifier and the signified of linguistic signs. Based on Saussure's semiotic theory, film title translation needs to address the cross - linguistic reconstruction of the signifier (such as syllables and parts of speech) and the signified (such as cultural imagery and emotional tone). Meanwhile, Whorf's linguistic relativity reveals that translation needs to go beyond the surface of language and delve into the cognitive framework and aesthetic expectations of the target culture. Under this theoretical perspective, English - Chinese film title translation faces core challenges such as the misalignment of cultural imagery, deviation of emotional tone, and constraints of linguistic form.

To address these challenges, this paper proposes four types of cultural adaptation strategies. The first is literal translation with annotation, which retains the original signifier and supplements it with cultural explanations to balance cultural characteristics with audience comprehension. The second is paraphrasing and restructuring, which extracts the core theme of the film to achieve semantic reconstruction in a cross - cultural context. The third is innovative titling, which activates the target culture through linguistic innovation and enhances the commercial appeal of the translated title. The fourth is market - oriented adjustment, which balances linguistic standardization with audience positioning to ensure that the translated title is both in line with the expressive habits of the target culture and retains the artistic value of the original work. Together, these strategies form a progressive practice framework from "cultural preservation" to "audience adaptation."

However, the current research still has limitations. First, the effectiveness of these strategies is mostly based on case - by - case analysis, lacking large - scale corpus - based quantitative validation. Second, the dynamic changes in audience psychology (such as the younger generation's acceptance preferences for cultural symbols) have not yet been fully incorporated into the research scope. Future research could combine techniques such as eye - tracking and neurolinguistics to quantify the emotional arousal of translated titles on audiences. Meanwhile, the integration of translation practice with artificial intelligence technology could be promoted to build big - data - based cultural adaptation models, realizing a transformation from "experience - driven" to "data - and - theory - driven."

Ultimately, the goal of film title translation is not only to transform linguistic signs but also to build bridges of cultural cognition and convey aesthetic values. In an era where globalization and localization go hand in hand, only by deeply understanding the interaction mechanism between language and culture can we promote true dialogue and resonance among different cultures in the "fluid text" of films, contributing the wisdom and strength of translation studies to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

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