

BOOK REVIEW

Chinese Films Abroad: Distribution and Translation

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Film, as a significant instrument for states and institutions, mediates diplomatic and political goals, generates soft power, and engages in nation branding (Zhai, 2024). Therefore, the dissemination and translation of films are crucial for countries seeking to exert their intercultural influence. The periodization of Chinese cinema does not necessarily align with political timelines due to technological and translational constraints (6). The Chinese film industry, unlike Hollywood in North America, is unusual as it caters primarily to home audiences (Kang et al., 2022). This misalignment has hindered comprehensive studies of Chinese films, leading to a notable gap in research on regional film translation and distribution histories. In addition, existing literature often focuses on specific regions or topics, thus often lacking analysis on a macro scale. For instance, key topics that merit exploration within this macro-scale context include the comparative study of Chinese film translation strategies in global markets, the role of international film festivals in promoting Chinese cinema, and the impact of digital streaming platforms on the accessibility of Chinese films worldwide. The timely publication of this book enhances the study of Chinese film development through the quantitative, sociological, and economic lens.

By addressing issues related to the circulation and distribution of Chinese films, including co-productions, agents of exchange, and modes of translation, the authors deal with films from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora between the 1920s and the 2020s, bridging the aforementioned gaps within film translation historiography.

The book is organized into 12 chapters, each dedicated to the examination of a specific geographical region or country regarding the distribution process and translation modes utilized for Chinese films. Chapters 1 to 3 elucidate the distinctive translation methodologies and roles of translators involved in rendering Chinese films accessible to audiences in Asia, with a focus on Japan, Indonesia



(Singkawang), and South Korea respectively. Chapter 4 delves into the trans-narration of Chinese *Kung Fu* films by Swahili language translators in Tanzania, East Africa. Chapters 5 to 9 scrutinize the intricacies of translating and distributing Chinese cinema across various European nations, including Spain, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and some German-speaking countries. Chapters 10 to 12 shift the focus to the Americas, i.e., the United States, Honolulu, and several South American countries.

Chapter 1 examines the evolution of translating Chinese films into Japanese, starting with silent-era practices in the 1920s, where physical subtitle replacement was used, followed by the *benshi* narrators in the 1930s. After World War II, the scarcity of foreign films changed in the 1970s with a surge in Chinese film distribution, particularly *Kung Fu* films, which heightened demand for high-quality translations. The 1980s saw a rise in the popularity of Hong Kong stars, prompting a shift toward direct Chinese-to-Japanese translations and the professionalization of subtitlers. Chapter 2 explores Singkawang Hakka cinema, which reflects the region's unique cultural identity through its linguistic diversity, primarily Hakka and Indonesian, while emphasizing Chineseness and interethnic dynamics (Setijadi, 2015). However, its hyper-local focus risks overshadowing minority languages and homogenizing local culture. The cultural and cinematic exchange between South Korea and China across four distinct periods is delineated in Chapter 3, highlighting the intertwining of audiovisual translation with social-political ideologies. During the Japanese Colonial Era (1910-1945), films were typically subtitled in Japanese. After the Korean War (1950-1953), subtitling became a propaganda tool, and post-1992 diplomatic relations led to increased co-productions and a transition from dubbing to subtitling, enhancing cultural exchange and collaboration.

Building on the Eastern context, the author analyzes Western practices, focusing on Tanzania's unique trans-narration by Swahili language DJs in rendering Chinese *Kung Fu* films in Chapter 4. Initially dominated by Hollywood imports, Tanzania's film industry shifted to Swahili-trans-narrated *Kung Fu* films by icons like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan in the 1970s. Economic downturns in the 1980s led to the market contraction, but DJs revitalized the industry by serving as cultural mediators who not only translated but also crafted new narratives for local audiences, presenting a contemporary image of China (Krings, 2013).

The next five chapters introduce the evolution of Chinese cinema across various European countries, beginning with Spain in Chapter 5. Unlike other Western nations that screened Chinese films as early as the 1920s, Spain began in 1972, reaching nearly 70 screenings by 2021. The 2000s marked a shift toward showcasing Chinese cinema, primarily through film festivals, with distribution channels evolving from theaters to festivals. Most films are translated from English, instead of Chinese, into Spanish, necessitating proofreading to address the challenges of indirect translation. In France, the dissemination of Chinese films over the past four decades has been largely driven by a network of university scholars and cinephiles known as the “French Cinema Literati”, who “invite” films rather than “receive” them, distinct from commercial or political interests (121). Cultural activities and France's politico-diplomatic policies also influenced this flow in the 1970s and 1980s, alongside recent soft power initiatives from China. In Italy, from the early 1990s to 2018, dubbing and film festivals have facilitated the translation of Chinese films, although a focus on blockbusters and limited festival selections risks stereotyping and underrepresenting certain genres. Additionally, the cultural uniqueness of Chinese films, including ethics and religion, often faces challenges in translation, leading to strategies such as oversimplification, substitution, and cultural vagueness. Chapter 8 reviews the



patronage of Chinese cinema in German-speaking countries from 1971 to 1993, noting that initial exports were politically motivated, neglecting audience preferences. However, the “Reform and Opening Up” policy introduced a commercial aspect, shifting the focus from a source-culture to a joint source- and target-culture orientation in film dissemination and translation, enhancing audiovisual quality. Finally, the UK’s exhibition of Chinese films has evolved significantly, from infrequent showings during the silent-era to a more robust presence by the late 1980s and 1990s, spurred by the rise of the fifth generation of filmmakers. Key figures, such as Montagu and other skilled subtitlers, played crucial roles in improving subtitle quality, contributing to a flourishing film exhibition landscape in the UK from the 1990s onwards.

Having concluded the analysis of the European context, Chapters 10 to 12 shift the focus to the Americas, beginning with the United States, where the 1917 premiere of a Chinese film marked its international debut. Chinatown theaters initially served as community hubs, aligning translation needs with social changes. In Honolulu during the 1920s, the exhibition of Chinese films had significant political and educational implications, facilitated by companies like Park Theater and United Exchange, which fostered identity and transnational connections among overseas Chinese. The 1970s saw the rise of Hong Kong’s *Kung Fu* cinema, popularizing dubbing amid industry challenges. Subsequently, the 1980s experienced a surge in subtitled Chinese films driven by mainland entries and university screenings. This trend enhances professional translation standards and expands Chinese cinema studies. In Latin America, the focus narrows to Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay, where foreign dominance limits Asian film presence. Fortunately, government support for the audiovisual sector has allowed for some Chinese film imports, but information on subtitling or dubbing is scarce, hampered by data collection challenges.

Moving from East to West and from sunrise to sunset, the authors explore the interplay of political, cultural, and economic factors in the dissemination and translation of Chinese films, ultimately projecting China's image and soft power. The analysis reveals that factors like geographical proximity and diplomatic relationships contribute to a pronounced presence of Chinese films in Asia, while their visibility diminishes in Europe and hits a trough in distant Latin America. This disparity further influences the translation dynamics, highlighting the complex interconnections between regional contexts and film reception. This gap-bridging volume focusing on regional translation and distribution of Chinese cinema stands out for two key strengths.

First, its chronological and diachronic organization facilitates a linear narrative of Chinese cinema's dissemination and translation, offering a panoramic overview across various periods and regions. While chapters may cover specific periods, they collectively present a holistic progression from inception to maturity, as well as insights into future trends. This structured approach enhances clarity and coherence, highlighting critical junctures and significant figures. Second, the inclusion of detailed materials, historical evidence, and visual aids adds depth to the authors' arguments. Incorporating interviews and databases enriches the analysis, exemplified by detailed examinations of influential directors like Zhang Yimou and some milestone masterpieces. More importantly, by blending factual data with personal insights, the book transcends the traditional paradigm of historical accounts, steering toward a more nuanced exploration of translation dynamics and impacts. Therefore, it can be argued that the two authors have constructed a highly effective paradigm and this innovative approach elevates the book as a comprehensive and insightful contribution to Chinese cinema historiography.



Though stimulating and significant in many ways, this book suffers from thematic focus, historical background, and theoretical foundation. The first concern is the unbalanced emphasis on distribution and translation within the chapters. In the analysis of Chinese cinema in Spain, for example, the focus predominantly on distribution undermines the significance of translation, and relegates translation to a secondary position in facilitating the availability of foreign films to Spanish audiences (86). This oversight results in insufficient exploration of key elements such as the role of translators, the various translation modalities employed, and the languages involved. This imbalance is a recurring issue throughout the book, with either translation or distribution frequently downplayed in multiple chapters, hampering a holistic understanding of their interrelated dynamics. Another concern is its lack of engagement with the specific historical context across different regions. Understanding global history is crucial for grasping the emotional, cultural, and economic dimensions of the indirect connections between nations (Şavk, 2024). However, this book fails to adequately address how various political, cultural, and economic factors influence the distribution and translation of Chinese films. Notably, it neglects to discuss significant historical events and policies in different countries, which may lead to confusion for readers unfamiliar with these unique contexts. Last, although the book proposes a translational lens on film historiography, it lacks integration of relevant theoretical developments in translation studies, particularly those contributed by scholars in audiovisual translation. Since dealing with a language means dealing with norms, values, and customs that are necessarily cultural, this unconstrained practice must go within a theoretical framework (Saad, 2023). For instance, in Chapter 7, which addresses the rendering of culture in dubbing, the authors provide minimal reference to pertinent theoretical framework to substantiate their critique of the rigid and ambiguous translation effects. To remedy this, an overview of the current landscape should be presented through engaging more dialogically with insights from audiovisual translation and cultural translatology.

Overall, *Chinese Films Abroad: Translation and Distribution* offers valuable insights into the challenges and complexities of the global dissemination and translation of Chinese cinema. The book serves as a foundational resource for scholars and enthusiasts seeking a deeper understanding of the interconnected processes shaping Chinese films. As such, this book will be of great interest to scholars and students of Chinese cinema, translation studies, and China studies.

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