

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Neutralising Tendency in Subtitling Chinese Culture-Specific References into English

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Abstract:

Culture-specific references (CSRs) feature prominently in films by Chinese fifth- and sixth-generation directors. Based on the observation of 25 English-subtitled Chinese films made by four directors between 1984 and 2017, this paper found that the CSRs in the original Chinese dialogue are neutralised in their English subtitles through various translation strategies. The CSRs examined in this study encompass CSRs of customs in Zhang Yimou's films, CSRs of local arts in Chen Kaige's films, slang in Jia Zhangke's films, and humour in Feng Xiaogang's films, respectively embodying the quintessence of each director's filmmaking style. A textual analysis is conducted to demonstrate how and why the neutralising tendency emerges in subtitling. It is revealed that the strategies of explicitation, substitution, transposition, compensation and omission are employed to neutralise the CSRs. From a linguistic perspective, such a neutralising tendency can be attributed to the lack of equivalence in English culture, the polysemy of the Chinese CSRs, the compactness of the Chinese language, and sometimes the mistaken intralingual Chinese subtitles. As a constrained activity, subtitling aggravates the neutralisation of the CSRs due to technical constraints and target audience considerations. Given the representativeness of chosen films, the neutralisation indicates a product norm and typical practice of subtitling high-profile Chinese films. Meanwhile, the study shows agreement with the linguistic explanation of cultural discount in translating Chinese audiovisual productions.

Keywords: subtitling, Chinese films, culture-specific references, subtitling strategies, neutralisation

1. Introduction

CSRs pervade Chinese films, especially those made by the fifth- or sixth-generation directors. "The film art of 'Fifth-generation' deals with the nation's political, social and cultural past, with a greater emphasis on the mystique of an unchanging and closed rural communal system that has lasted for thousands of years" (Lin, 2002, p. 263). While searching the historical roots of Chinese culture and identity, the fifth-generation directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige are keen to "deal with their experience of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese history generally, and the complexities of gender, sexuality, Confucianism, and socialism within the Chinese imagination" (Marchetti, 2003). With the successful debut of the fifth-generation directors, from 1980 to 1992, China distributed approximately 500 films to 107 countries and regions, and Chinese films began to win international prizes and be acknowledged by other countries and regions (Xie, 2019, p. 6). By comparison, the sixth-generation directors portray the social reality of contemporary China. They ponder the nation's painful social transformation from a planned economy to a market economy and present the everyday life of the



ordinary people in the context of the stupendous social change, such as the “authentic” stories based in Fenyang in Jia Zhangke’s films and the stories around the Beijing local youngsters in Feng Xiaogang’s films. With these influential directors’ increasing interest in commercial films after 2000, wuxia martial arts or magical fantasy blockbusters have been produced successively, such as *Hero* (2002), *The Promise* (2005) and *The Banquet* (2006), which contain many Chinese traditional CSRs in their plots in the context of ancient China. For transnational and transregional audiences, those films flexibly employ “a wide spectrum of Chinese elements that permeate the linguistic, visual, cultural, economic, political, as well as national dimensions of Chinese cinema” (Wang, 2013, p. 3).

In brief, CSRs are characteristic elements in the fifth- and sixth-generation directors’ films, so exploring their films will inevitably involve the study of CSRs in them. Based on the observation of the English subtitles in the officially distributed DVDs or online videos of the selected films, this paper reveals that these elements are always levelled off in their English subtitles by professional subtitlers, who are considered more invisible than fansubbers (Huang, 2021). Such a phenomenon is regarded as neutralising tendency. For example, the vocabulary and grammar reflecting class and geographical origin are erased (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 185), or the culture-specific expressions are simplified or condensed (Ávila-Cabrera, 2020; Mussche & Willems, 2010). With low or minimum fidelity to the source text, neutralisation often domesticates the Chinese culture-specific references in the films’ English subtitles. This paper will answer how and why the neutralising tendency arises in subtitling Chinese films into English.

2. Literature Review

In the field of audiovisual translation (hereafter AVT), Pedersen (2005, p. 116, 2007, p. 31, 2011, pp. 75-76) summarised six strategies for subtitling Extralinguistic Cultural References (hereafter ECRs) from English into Scandinavian languages on television, i.e. retention, specification, direct translation, generalisation, substitution and omission. Retention, specification, and direct translation are source-oriented strategies, whereas generalisation, substitution, and omission are deemed target-oriented (Pedersen, 2011, p. 75). Additionally, Pedersen (2011, pp. 74-76) placed official equivalent outside the baseline of subtitling strategies for ECRs due to its special status that was “not so much a strategy”. Official equivalent, retention and direct translation were believed to be the strategies leading to “minimum change”, while specification, generalisation and substitution were the strategies involving “intervention” (Pedersen, 2007, p. 31). Minimum change means that minor alterations are made to accommodate the rules of the target language, and intervention indicates that the subtitler needs to intervene in transferring the ECRs to the target language audience.

Shinohara (2013) used Pedersen’s classifications (2011) to examine the CSRs in Japanese dialogue and their English subtitles in the Japanese film *Departures* (2008). Based on Pedersen’s taxonomy, Martínez-Garrido (2013) proposed her classification of translation techniques for subtitling CSRs in Catalan-language films into English, including repetition, orthographic adaptation, direct translation, specification, partial generalisation, complete generalisation, official equivalent, naturalisation, omission and autonomous creation. The former four strategies are source-oriented, whereas the latter six are target-oriented. Salumahaleh and Mirzayi (2014) attempted to identify the subtitling strategies



for CSRs from English into Persian based on the taxonomy proposed by Pedersen and found that there were 36 instances of source-oriented strategies and 51 instances of target-oriented strategies to translate CSRs in the studied film. Similarly, Horbačauskienė et al. (2016) used Pedersen's taxonomy of subtitling strategies to analyse the translation of CSRs from English into Lithuanian in the subtitled Australian TV reality show *My Kitchen Rules*. Abdelaal (2019) also applied Pedersen's taxonomy to analyse the translation of CSRs from English into Arabic and added two more strategies, which were "using euphemistic expressions to render the sex-related expressions and using formal language to render informal language" (p. 1). Chen et al. (2021) adopted Pedersen's definition of ECRs to extract 1088 instances of Chinese ECRs and their English subtitles in six Chinese films of different genres. These include the epic film *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), the wuxia film *The Assassin* (2015), the crime and gangster film *Infernal Affairs* (2002), the comedy *Personal Tailor* (2013), the war film *Youth* (2017) and the documentary *Masters in Forbidden City* (2016). The textual analysis results of these 1088 examples are compared with Gottlieb's (2009) investigation into the ECRs in the English-subtitled Danish films in terms of translation strategies and degree of fidelity in subtitling different film genres. Chen et al. (2021) discovered that target-oriented strategies are prevalent in dealing with Chinese ECRs, the translation of epic films seems to be highly faithful, and the subtitling of crime and gangster films is much less faithful.

Nedergaard-Larsen (1993) worked out eight translation strategies for subtitling CSRs in films from French into Danish: identity, imitation, direct translation, explicitation, paraphrase, situational adaptation, and cultural adaptation and omission. As shown in Table 2-1, Gottlieb (2009) juxtaposed four taxonomies of translation strategies for CSRs, including Pedersen's and Nedergaard's subtitling strategies, Leppihalme's (1997) translation strategies and taxonomy for subtitling CSRs. Gottlieb (2009) ranked each strategy "according to their degree of source-text fidelity as interpreted by the individual authors" (p. 31). Pettit (2009), in turn, proposed seven strategies for dealing with cultural transfer, i.e. omission, literal translation, loan words or borrowing, equivalence, adaptation, generalisation and explication. Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2014, pp. 202-207) illustrated the taxonomy of subtitling strategies (i.e. loan, calque/literal translation, explicitation, substitution, transposition, lexical recreation, compensation and omission). Subsequently, Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2021, pp. 207-217) updated their taxonomy as loan, literal translation, calque, explicitation, substitution, transposition, lexical recreation, compensation and omission by separating the strategies of literal translation and calque and integrating the strategy of addition into the strategy of explicitation.



Table 1. A Summary of Subtitling Strategies for CSRs Based on Gottlieb's Table of Strategies for Translating Culture-Specific Items (Gottlieb, 2009, p. 31)

| | Foreignisation | | | Domestication | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|---------------------|--|--|---------------|---------------------|--------------|-------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------------|--------------|----------|
| | Maximum fidelity | | High fidelity | Low fidelity | | | | | Minimum fidelity | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Nedergaard-Larsen (1993)</i> | Identity | Retention | with explication | Imitation | Direct translation | Explication | Paraphrase | Situational | Cultural adaptation | | <i>Díaz-Cintas & Remael (2021)</i> | Loan | Literal translation | Calque | Explication | Substitution | Transposition | Lexical recreation | Compensation | Omission |
| <i>Leppihalme (1997)</i> | | Retention | | | | | | | | | Retention | Specification | Direct translation | | Hypernym | Functional equivalence | Omission | | | |
| <i>Pedersen (2003)</i> | | Non-translation | Explication | | | | | | | | Literal translation | Specification | Generalisation | Substitution | Omission | | | | | |
| <i>Gottlieb (2009)</i> | | Retention | | | | | | | | | Literal translation | Specification | Generalisation | Substitution | Omission | | | | | |
| <i>Pedersen (2005; 2007; 2011)</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Shiryaeva & Badea (2014)</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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3. Classification of Neutralising Strategies for CSRs

As specified in Table 1, domesticating strategies for CSRs, with low fidelity or minimum fidelity, may include explicitation, substitution, transportation, lexical recreation, compensation and omission (Díaz-Cintas and Remael, 2021, pp. 207-217). These strategies are perceived as neutralising strategies which dilute CSRs in subtitles.

The strategy of **explicitation** is “to make the source text more accessible by meeting the target audience halfway, either through specification, using a hyponym, or by generalisation, using a hypernym or superordinate” (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2014, p. 203). The addition of extra information is also regarded as a sub-strategy of explicitation (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, pp. 210-212). Additions are rarely used in subtitling, mostly due to technical constraints (i.e. time and space), except for the cases when “information is added to passages containing cultural references that are expected to cause comprehension problems but are essential for a good understanding of the programme” (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 210). According to Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2021), the strategy of **substitution** “consists in replacing the cultural reference in the source text with a similar reference that already exists in the source culture or in the target culture (cultural substitution), or with an expression that fits the situation but shows no connection with ST expression (situational substitution)” (p. 212). Substitution is to replace CSRs with those either from the source culture or target culture or by something completely different (Pedersen, 2011). Gottlieb (2009, p. 32) proposed three categories of replacement of a foreign element unknown to the target audience: 1) replacement by a foreign element known to the target audience; 2) replacement by a foreign element shared with the target culture, i.e. an international element; and 3) replacement by a domestic element. **Transposition** is to replace a cultural concept of one community by a cultural concept of another, which is similar to the strategy of substitution (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 213). Vinay and Darbelnet (1958, p. 50) held a different opinion that one part of speech is replaced by another without changing the message’s meaning. Transposition can be recognised as a mode of “grammatical equivalence” (Pym, 2016, p. 7). It indicates that a linguistic sign can change its grammatical value but keeps its semantic value by adopting the function of a lexical category. **Lexical creation** is the invention of a neologism, especially for translations of new words in the source language. The strategy of **compensation** “means making up for a translational loss in one exchange by being more creative or adding something in another” (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 215). The strategy of **omission**, also known as deletion, is to omit source text expressions in the target text subtitles. It is believed to be in line with subtitling constraints (Bogucki, 2020, p. 62). Kuo (2020, p. 594) revealed that the strategy of deletion could be found in every part of the film series she studied, which could be attributed to the temporary and spatial constraints of subtitling. As Gottlieb (1991, p. 166) argued, deletions referred to omitted expressions or no verbal contents caused by fast speech of less importance.

The classification of those six strategies above provides a benchmark against which the neutralising evidence is explained in the selected 25 English-subtitled Chinese films by Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Jia Zhangke and Feng Xiaogang (as shown in Table 2), who are the representatives of the fifth- and sixth-generation directors. These 25 Chinese films were selected depending on whether their translators or subtitlers had responded to a follow-up interview survey. Though the selection of the studied films is related to the interview-based analysis, this present study does not include a discussion of the



interview data since its main focus is to investigate the neutralising tendency from a linguistic rather than a subtitler or translator's perspective. The search for neutralising evidence of subtitling CSRs in the selected films is not exhaustive. In other words, the product-based analysis has not enumerated all possible neutralising examples for checking whether each possible example satisfies the neutralisation. Instead, many neutralising examples have been identified to testify to the existence of the neutralising tendency. They are saved in the format of screenshots with the file names of Chinese lines. Nevertheless, these screenshots are not illustrated in this article due to the concern of film copyright. The inquiry on the neutralising tendency only concentrates on the CSRs characteristic of each director's filmmaking style as specified in the next section CSRs in the Four Selected Directors' Films.

Table 2. Twenty-five Films for Textual Analysis

| Year | Film | Director | Available Format |
|------|-------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1984 | <i>The Yellow Earth</i> | Chen Kaige | VCD by Mei Ah Laser Disc Co. Ltd. |
| 1987 | <i>Red Sorghum</i> | Zhang Yimou | DVD by Xinsheng |
| 1987 | <i>King of the Children</i> | Chen Kaige | DVD by Beauty Culture Communication |
| 1993 | <i>Farewell My Concubine</i> | Chen Kaige | DVD by Miramax Classics |
| 1996 | <i>Temptress Moon</i> | Chen Kaige | DVD by Mei Ah Laser Disc Co., Ltd. |
| 1999 | <i>The Emperor and the Assassin</i> | Chen Kaige | DVD by Sony Pictures Classics |
| 1999 | <i>Sorry Baby</i> | Feng Xiaogang | DVD by Dejin Culture |
| 2000 | <i>Sigh</i> | Feng Xiaogang | DVD by Zoke Culture |
| 2001 | <i>Big Shot's Funeral</i> | Feng Xiaogang | DVD by Sony Pictures Classics |
| 2002 | <i>Hero</i> | Zhang Yimou | DVD by Miramax |
| 2002 | <i>Unknown Pleasure</i> | Jia Zhangke | DVD by New Yorker |
| 2004 | <i>House of Flying Daggers</i> | Zhang Yimou | Video on Youtube |



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|-------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2004 | <i>World</i> | Jia Zhangke | DVD by Beauty Culture Communication |
| 2006 | <i>Curse of the Golden Flower</i> | Zhang Yimou | DVD by Sony Pictures Classics |
| 2006 | <i>Still Life</i> | Jia Zhangke | DVD by BFI & DVD by New Yorker |
| 2007 | <i>Assembly</i> | Feng Xiaogang | DVD by Rialto Distribution |
| 2008 | <i>Forever Enthralled</i> | Chen Kaige | DVD by Mangpong |
| 2010 | <i>Aftershock</i> | Feng Xiaogang | DVD by Vendetta Films |
| 2012 | <i>Back to 1942</i> | Feng Xiaogang | Video at V.QQ.COM |
| 2013 | <i>A Touch of Sin</i> | Jia Zhangke | DVD by Kino Lorber |
| 2013 | <i>Personal Tailor</i> | Feng Xiaogang | Video at V.QQ.COM |
| 2014 | <i>Monk Comes Down the Mountain</i> | Chen Kaige | Video on QIYI |
| 2015 | <i>Mountains May Depart</i> | Jia Zhangke | Video at 1905.com |
| 2016 | <i>I Am Not Madame Bovary</i> | Feng Xiaogang | Video on QIYI |
| 2017 | <i>Youth</i> | Feng Xiaogang | DVD on Youtube |

4. CSRs in the Four Selected Directors' Films

The arbitrariness of CSRs ([Aixelá](#), 1996, p.57) and an abundance of Chinese CSRs (X. Wang, 2006; Zeng, 2005) characterise a unique typology of CSRs in the subtitles of Chinese films according to the directors' distinctive filmmaking styles.

Zhang Yimou is famous for the rural romance film genre. He focused on rural stories and tended to reflect the tragic destinies of people in the bottom strata, such as in *Red Sorghum* (1987). The rural-subject stories feature the scenery and customs of the rural regions in China, and Zhang uses his camera to represent the rustic spirit within them. "In his visual language system, he prefers a direct and



straightforward style and the passionate and bold colours to folk art” (Ni, 2002, p. 187). Folk customs are indispensable elements in Zhang’s art films, and he is capable of converting those customs into plots naturally and ingeniously (Zhou, 2014). Zhang is said to be a protector of folk customs by exploring and exploiting them in his films (Chen, 2010). Meanwhile, he is often criticised for portraying rural village life using imaginary customs that show China as primitive and inhumane (Larson, 2017, p. 84). Nevertheless, the rurality of his films makes CSRs of local customs concerning the distinctive usages that have been handed down from past generations to the present time.

CSRs related to local arts are Chen Kaige’s signature style. When writing about the urban “educated youth” in the 1980s, McDougall (1991) mentioned: “The knowledge they gained of the local arts and their place in the lives of the local people was equally important in forming the aesthetic basis of their work” (p. 29). For example, Chen’s historical drama film *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and biographic film *Forever Enthralled* (2008) encompass a large amount of Beijing Opera scenes, in both of which life and art are interwoven together. Being asked about *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), Chen once claimed, “the emphasis on Beijing as a local city brings out the tension between grand narrative at the national level and personal experience represented by the local culture and cityspace” (Berry, 2003, p. 4). Chen’s preference and facility for employing Beijing Opera in his films can be partly attributed to the influence of his father, Chen Huaikai, who was an established director with numerous successful drama films and Beijing Opera films. In addition to Beijing Opera, the quintessence of Chinese culture, Xintianyou, the music style native to Shaanxi, is reiterated in Chen’s *The Yellow Earth* (1984). Thus, the CSRs embedded in and enclosed with the local arts will be investigated in Chen’s films in this research.

Dialect is one of the most outstanding features in films by Jia Zhangke (Liu, 2006; Lu, 2007; Jin & Xu, 2008; Sun, 2018; Yao, 2013). His films constantly and pervasively use the Fenyang dialect, which belongs to his home province Shanxi. In contrast to his predecessors, the fifth-generation directors’ grand epic films, Jia’s films depict the characters who are “approximations of the Chinese ‘average’: all live in or are from towns of lower rank than provincial capital, none have college educations or the hope of attaining one” (Berry, 2008, p. 250). Jia is adept at portraying such characters of ordinary youngsters from small and remote towns in China. When they go out of their hometowns, the dialects used by these outsiders become even more conspicuous when the dialects are contrasted with the Putonghua (Jin & Xu, 2008; Lu, 2006). Noticeably, the characters’ dialogue in dialects is packed with slang. Slang is the non-standard and informal language usage typically associated with a particular context or group of people, for example, immigrants. In this research, the slang indicates the non-standard and informal vocabulary used by those average youngsters in Jia’s films, some of which can even be offensive. Slang usually exists on the outskirts of language (Khoo, 2006, p. 18; Partridge, 1972, p. 2) and inevitably converges with those socially marginal people who live an ordinary life full of hardship on the outskirts of society. Zojer (2011) maintains that “cultural references come in many different disguises such as, i.e. sociolects, dialect and slang” (p. 404). Hence, the textual analysis of Jia Zhangke’s films primarily focuses on slang embedded in dialects.

Beijing for Feng Xiaogang is just like Fenyang for Jia Zhangke. Feng is inspired by his hometown Beijing and its local dialect that is implanted in the survival strategies of lower-class people and street humour, where the Beijinger comic spirit lies (Kong, 2003, pp. 179-180). His realism is different from



Jia's documentary style. Jia pierces the social reality with pain, but Feng teases out the truth of life with laughter. Lu (2006) compares the different functions served by dialects in Jia's films and Feng's films. The Shanxi dialect in Jia's *World* (2004) symbolises the backward poverty latent in the illusory modern prosperity, whereas the Sichuan dialect in *Cell Phone* (2003) and the Hebei dialect in *A World Without Thieves* (2004), both of which are directed by Feng Xiaogang, are designed for comedic effects to entertain Chinese audiences (Lu, 2006). Feng's big box-office success in Chinese comedy films is described as having commercial aesthetics (Yin & Tang, 2006), and the unique humour of Feng's style has been extensively discussed (Berry, 2012; Ji, 2010; Jun, 2002; Y. Wang, 2006). Thus, humour will be emphasised in analysing the subtitles of the CSRs in Feng's films. Feng is renowned for making comedies in the Beijing dialect, and nearly all his films star Ge You in a leading role. Ge is a native of Beijing and has created numerous typical characters of Beijing men in Feng's films. More often than not, humour is correlated with the use of linguistic variation. Bucaria (2017, p. 437) finds that socio-cultural and diastratic variation is frequently adopted as humour-creating devices on screen. They are usually considered some of the major causes of "loss" of meaning in the process of lingua-cultural transfer.

5. Neutralising Strategies in Subtitling CSRs and Their Possible Reasons

Typical subtitling strategies for dealing with the Chinese CSRs in the selected films are explicitation (specification and generalisation), substitution, transposition, compensation, and omission (complete omission and partial omission). These strategies are all neutralising strategies with low or minimum fidelity to the original Chinese lines. These analysis findings coincided with the target-oriented translation identified in English subtitles of Danish films (Gottlieb, 2009) and English subtitles of Chinese films (Chen et al., 2021). The screenshots stored for the studied films are considered in discussing relevant lines, though they are not included in this publication owing to the copyright issue. The analysis is based on the typology of CSRs (see section 4 CSRs in the Four Selected Directors' Films) in the subtitles of Chinese films according to the directors' distinctive filmmaking styles: CSRs of local customs in Zhang Yimou's films, CSRs of local arts in Chen Kaige's films, slang embedded in dialects in Jia Zhangke's films and humour combined with the use of dialects in Feng Xiaogang's films. However, the technical constraints are not given a particular account in this section, as they are typically the primary cause for the strategy of omission in most cases (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 161). In the case of subtitling Chinese CSRs, however, the omissions arise due to the asymmetries between languages (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2021, p. 162), such as the multi-layer meanings of the Chinese CSRs and the conciseness of the Chinese language.

5.1 Explicitation

It is found that subtitlers try to look for some hypernyms or hyponyms to translate CSRs. *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and *Forever Enthralled* (2008) by Chen Kaige both develop their plots about the life and destiny of Beijing Opera actors. In these two films, two high-frequency culturally-loaded words of local arts are found, which are 梨园 (*lí yuán*, pear garden) and 下九流 (*xià jiǔ liú*, lower nine professions). The Pear Garden or Liyuan was "the first music conservatoire" "established by Emperor Xuanzong" (712-755) during the Tang dynasty and "became the pseudonym of the Chinese theatre" in



later dynasties (Tan, 2008, p. 223). When translating 梨园 (pear garden) into English, some scholars also prefer to render it literally as the Pear Garden (Ji, 2008; Mitchell & Li, 1973; Tan, 2008; Zuo, 2007) to convey the particular Chinese cultural elements to the target English language. At the beginning of *Forever Enthralled* (2008), 梨园 (pear garden) is translated as “garden” by generalising the concept of the pear garden through the strategy of explicitation. In contrast to this generalisation, 下九流 (lower nine professions) is specified as “prostitutes and actors” in *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), when Master Guan talks to Cheng Dieyi’s mother. Master Guan’s line goes “都是下九流，谁嫌弃谁啊” (*dōu shì xiàjiǔliú, shuí xián qì shuí a*, as we are both among the lower nine professions, we cannot despise each other). In this scene, Cheng Dieyi’s mother kneels on the floor, and Master Guan sits in the chair. In the film, the former is a prostitute, while the latter is an actor. In the old days, they both belong to the lower nine professions. In ancient Chinese society, 27 professions gradually took shape and were categorised into three levels according to how respected the profession was: upper nine professions, middle nine professions, and lower nine professions. In the olden days, opera actors or actresses were among the lower nine professions with the least respect from society.

5.2 Substitution

The strategy of substitution is employed to replace the original CSRs with English expressions known to the target audience or accord with the scene. Apart from the strategy of explicitation, 梨园 (pear garden) is also substituted with “the theatre” or “the theatre arts” in *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). Some other CSRs of the local arts also have been neutralised in their English subtitles. In Chen’s first film, *The Yellow Earth* (1984), the recurrent Xintianyou, a folk song originating in the northern Shaanxi Province, is called 酸曲 (*suānqǔ*, sour song) by the local people. The sour taste describes the Shaanxi people’s bitter struggle for a sweet life. It is subtitled as “corny songs”, but it actually refers to love songs whose implication is substituted in English. The CSR of local customs, 盖头 (*gàitóu*, head cover), is a traditional Chinese wedding accessory made of a large piece of red cloth, mentioned in the film *Red Sorghum* (1987) by Zhang Yimou. The bride’s head is covered with it in the wedding ceremony until the bridegroom uncovers her in their room at night. That word is substituted with “headband” in English subtitles due to the lack of an equivalent in the target culture. The image of 盖头 (head cover) does not appear synchronously, which compounds the loss of information contained in this line to the English-speaking audience.

Moreover, the slang, 混口饭吃 (*hùn kǒu fàn chī*, muddle through for food) is subtitled as “learn to live day by day” in *Unknown Pleasure* (2002) by Jia Zhangke. In *Youth* (2017) by Feng Xiaogang, after learning that the pigs have run out of the pigsty because of the over-eager and careless Party candidates, Chen Can steals two tomatoes for Xiao Suizi when all the cooks are out chasing the pigs. Hao Shuwen jokes, “Oh, you are shameless, to steal in a time of crisis.” 趁火打劫 (*chèn huǒ dǎ jié*, to rob somebody when their home catches fire) is related to the crisis talked about by the characters and substituted as “to steal in a time of crisis”. The traditional Chinese medicine, 草乌头 (*cǎo wū tóu*, aconite), is replaced by “black fungus” in *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006) for the target audience’s easy understanding. In this film by Zhang Yimou, the foreign expressions known to the target audience are also discovered in the English subtitles of traditional Chinese hours. As the queen takes her



medicine on the hour, the background sound is always the bellman striking the hour with a gong and calling out every time she takes the drug. Throughout the whole film, similar hour-striking scenes occur six times. In the old days, a 24-hour day was divided into 12 equal periods called *shichen* in Chinese and often referred to as double hours in English. Each double hour is named after the 12 terrestrial branches: *zi* hour, *chou* hour, *yin* hour, *mao* hour, *chen* hour, *si* hour, *wu* hour, *wei* hour, *shen* hour, *you* hour, *xu* hour and *hai* hour. In this film, the English translations of traditional Chinese hours replace the conceptions of 12 terrestrial branches with the names of 12 zodiac animals. For example, they are substituted with the Hour of Tiger, the Hour of the Rabbit, the Hour of the Dragon, the Hour of the Snake, the Hour of the Monkey, and the Hour of the Rat.

5.3 Transposition

Subtitlers also attempt to change part of speech due to CSRs. The CSR of 下九流 (lower nine professions) is transposed to “despise” in *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and *Forever Enthralled* (2008) by making good use of its implied meaning that the lower nine professions are least respected in society. In the former film, “都是下九流，谁嫌弃谁啊” (*dōu shì xiàjiǔliú, shuí xián qì shuí a*, as we are both among the lower nine professions, we cannot despise each other) is subtitled as, “Prostitutes and actors are equally despised by society”. In the latter film, the line spoken by Shisan Yan, a veteran Beijing Opera singer, 咱们是下九流啊 (*zánmen shì xiàjiǔliú a*, we are among the lower nine professions) is rendered as, “They despise us” in its English subtitles. The culturally-loaded noun expression 下九流 (lower nine professions) is transposed in the translation, changing the part of speech from a noun to a verb. However, when reading the subtitles, the English-speaking audience might wonder why they are despised without cultural knowledge about the lower nine professions, as discussed in 5.1. Similarly, the slang phrase 混社会的 (*hùn shè huì de*, muddle along in the society) with a verb 混 (*hùn*, muddle along) is converted into a noun, “outsider”, in Jia’s film *Unknown Pleasure* (2002). On the contrary, the noun 色心 (*sè xīn*, a colourful heart) is rendered into an English verb expression “fall into bed” in *House of Flying Daggers* (2001) by Zhang Yimou, which is used as a CSR of traditional romance. Another example lies in the rendering of the CSR of martial arts, 气血攻心 (*qì xuè gōng xīn*, qi and blood attacking the heart), which changes a verb phase into two adjectives, “emotional and agitated”, in the film *Hero* (2002) by Zhang Yimou. However, such a rendering matches well with the facial expression of the female character, Flying Snow, fighting with Nameless in revenge for Broken Sword’s death.

5.4 Compensation

Compensation is found to combine explication and transposition to render the line, 都是下九流，谁嫌弃谁啊 (*dōu shì xiàjiǔliú, shuí xián qì shuí a*, as we are both among the lower nine professions, we cannot despise each other), in *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), by adding the concepts of “prostitutes” and “actors” (also see 5.1). *Still Life* (2006) depicts the story of two people from Shanxi Province who came to Fengjie, Chongqing, in search of their spouses, against the backdrop of migration in the development of Three Gorges Reservoir. Naturally, the dialects in question are the Shanxi dialect and the Chongqing dialect. Two English-subtitled versions were discovered for the textual analysis of this



research. One is a British English version distributed by the British Film Institute (BFI) in 2008. The other is an American English version distributed by the New Yorker Films Artwork (NYFA) in the same year. Though slight discrepancies are detected in these two versions of English subtitles, the credits related to subtitling jobs are given to the same persons in the film's two English-subtitled versions. When the main male character, Han Sanming, from Fenyang, Shanxi, talks to a local elderly person in Chongqing, the elderly person cannot understand his accent. He asks a few questions, and the old man just answers “没听懂” (*méi tīng dǒng*, I don't understand) or “没听懂你说的” (*méi tīng dǒng nǐ shuō de*, I don't understand what you've said). Although the subtitlers do not choose to reproduce the dialectal features, the subtitles in the NYFA and BFI versions of those two lines mention “your accent” as a compensation strategy. NYFA version subtitles 没听懂 (I don't understand) and 没听懂你说的 (I don't understand what you've said) respectively as “I can't understand your accent” and “I can't understand you”, whereas the BFI version displays the English subtitles as “I don't understand” and “I can't understand your accent”.

5.5 Omission

Omission is also widely applied to handling Chinese CSRs. Sometimes, the whole notion is erased in the English subtitle, whereas sometimes, the CSR is partially deleted in the target language. Complete omission can be seen in the subtitling of the CSR of martial arts, 江湖 (*jiāng hú*, rivers and lakes), in Zhang's *Hero* (2002). Compared to the life attached to the central government around the emperor and being confined to the political system and the power hierarchy, the life in 江湖 (rivers and lakes), mostly rendered as “underworld” in English, more specifically a world full of turbulence, indicates complete freedom far away from the madding crowd and strong connection to local and especially remote underworld forces. In Teo's (2009) words, *jianghu* is “an anarchic domain with its own codes and laws in which knights-errant roam and operate and commit acts of violence based on revenge” (p. 7), a Chinese equivalence of the Wild West. As a highly culture-specific word in Chinese, it is often substituted in the target English text. For example, 《笑傲江湖》 (*xiao ao jianghu*, meaning *Proudly Smiling on Rivers and Lakes*), a renowned wuxia novel by the Hong Kong writer, Jin Yong, has been rendered into various English titles, but all of them avoid directly translating the word 江湖 (rivers and lakes), reducing the original phrase to *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*, *The Wandering Swordsman*, *Laughing in the Wind*, *The Peerless Gallant Errant*, *The Proud and Gallant Wanderer* and *State of Divinity*. In this film, the notion of 江湖 (rivers and lakes) is omitted in subtitling 长空说他此生纵横江湖，无牵无挂 (*cháng kōng shuō tā cǐ shēng zòng héng jiāng hú, wú qiān wú guà*, Sky said he had freely lived life in rivers and lakes with nothing to care) as “Sky said he had always lived his life without burden or responsibility”.

In the film *House of Flying Daggers* (2001) by Zhang Yimou, Chinese four-character idioms about beauty have been recognised in Leo's description of Mei, which are 倾国倾城 (*qīng guó qīng chéng*, to overthrow states and cities) and 天生丽质 (*tiān shēng lì zhì*, a born beauty). These CSRs are related to CSRs of traditional romance and are regarded as a type of local customs in ancient Chinese culture. Being chased by their enemies in the forest, Leo talked to Mei, “小妹容貌倾国倾城，好比山野鲜花” (*xiǎomèi róngmào qīng guó qīng chéng, hǎo bǐ shān yě xiān huā*, Mei, your appearance overthrows



states and cities like fresh flowers in mountains and plains). In its English subtitle, the first half of the line is omitted, and merely the concept of a flower is kept, which goes as “You’re an exquisite flower”. The four-character idiom 倾国倾城 (to overthrow states and cities) originates from Li Yannian’s poem in the Han dynasty. Li was a musician during the era of Emperor Wu, and he created this poem to introduce his sister’s beauty to Emperor Wu. In the poem, the original sentences concerning 倾国倾城 (to overthrow states and cities) is “一顾倾人城，再顾倾人国” (*yī gù qīng rén chéng, zài gù qīng rén guó*, a glance from her will overthrow a city, a second glance will overthrow the state). Xu Yuanchong, a well-established Chinese poetry translator, renders the sentences into English as “At her first glance, soldiers would lose their town; At her second, a monarch would his crown” (Xu, 2013, p. 25). When Mei sings this poem, the corresponding lines are subtitled as “A glance from her, the city falls, A second glance leaves the nation in ruins”. Nevertheless, those specific CSRs in the phrase 倾国倾城 (to overthrow states and cities) are not translated in Leo’s compliment on Mei’s striking appearance. In the other case of 天生丽质 (a born beauty), the original meaning of “a born beauty” is rendered as “a rare beauty” with a translation strategy of partial omission. The same as 倾国倾城 (to overthrow states and cities), 天生丽质 (a born beauty) is also derived from an ancient Chinese poem. The poem is called *A Song of Eternal Regret* (《长恨歌》, *cháng hèn gē*) by Bai Juyi in Tang Dynasty, and the sentence containing 天生丽质 is “天生丽质难自弃” (*tiān shēng lì zhì nán zì qì*, a born beauty could not forsake her destiny). Xu once creatively translated that poem sentence as “A lovely form of Heaven’s mould is never cast aside” (Xu, 1997, p. 285). Another distinguished translator, Zhang Bingxin renders the expression as “She was born a beauty” (Zhang, 2002, p. 69) when translating the same poem. Both those two poem translations retain the original meaning of “being born with”.

Additionally, before the line about the specific time in *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), as addressed in 5.2, there are always some remarks spoken loudly by the bellman to imply different settings in the story. At the Hour of Tiger, i.e. six o’clock in the morning, the opening remark is 风雨如晦，朝野满盈，平旦 (*fēng yǔ rú huì, cháo yě mǎn yíng, píng dàn*, windy and rainy like a dark night, the court is full, peaceful dawn). In Chinese culture, the four-character idiom 风雨如晦 (windy and rainy like a dark night) is usually used to depict a gloomy society in turbulent political times. When the film begins, such an expression hints at the following machination in the imperial court but is omitted in the English subtitle “The day breaks”. 开国承家，无往不复，升平 (*kāi guó chéng jiā, wú wǎng bù fù, shēng píng*, to establish a state and inherit lands, return always follows departure, peace and tranquillity) also concerns two four-character idioms, which is the greeting at the Hour of Dragon, i.e. 10 o’clock in the morning. That verb expression 开国承家 (to establish a state and inherit lands) is transposed into two short noun phrases connected by ellipses, “law of the nation” and “precept of the home”. Additionally, breaking one phrase into two results in no space left for the translation of the word 升平 (peace and tranquillity), which is omitted in the English subtitle “...ancient yet unchanged”.

5.6 Possible Reasons for Neutralising Chinese CSRs in English Subtitles

Based on the textual analysis, the neutralising tendency in subtitling Chinese CSRs can be attributed to the lack of equivalence in English culture, the multi-layer meanings of the Chinese CSRs, the



conciseness of the Chinese language, or the mistaken intralingual Chinese subtitles. These “textual-linguistic norms” regulate specific justifications by governing “the linguistic material for the formulation of the target text” (Toury, 2012, p.83), leading to subtitlers’ choices of translation strategies.

Without appropriate equivalences, subtitlers resort to the translation choices that replace 盖头 (head cover) with headband in *Red Sorghum* (1987) and 酸曲 (sour song) with corny songs in *The Yellow Earth* (1984). “As in English, and to an even greater degree, a word in Chinese does not always have one clear-cut, fixed meaning, but often covers different meanings...it makes possible the expression of thought and emotion with the greatest economy of words.” (Liu, 1962, p. 8). Most Chinese CSRs have rich implications, i.e. surface meaning and implied meaning, for example, 风雨如晦 (windy and rainy like a dark night) and 开国承家 (to establish a state and inherit lands) in *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). Importantly, even when a Chinese culturally-loaded word merely possesses one single meaning in the context, its meaning will sometimes entail long explanations in English, such as 倾国倾城 (to overthrow states and cities) in the film *House of Flying Daggers* (2001) as well as expressions concerning 混 (muddle along) in Jia’s film.

Meanwhile, mismatched Chinese subtitles have been identified in the relevant textual analysis. *The Yellow Earth* (1984) begins with a wedding scene in which the ceremony moderator speaks an impressive prologue in the Shaanxi dialect. When that prologue in the Shaanxi dialect is examined in detail, it is found that the wedding moderator’s opening remarks turn out to be lyrics of a popular northern Shaanxi folk song for local wedding ceremonies (Wang, 2011). When the lines of the dialect in question and their Chinese subtitles in the film are compared to the folk song, it is revealed that: (1) The dialect dialogue almost matches every detail of the folk song; (2) The Chinese subtitles distort its meaning at several points probably due to the errors in transcription from the dialect dialogue into the Chinese texts; (3) The English subtitles lead to a further divergence from the opening remarks in the Shaanxi dialect. Some of the discrepancies between dialect lines and their Chinese subtitles are significant, as illustrated in words in bold in Table 3. Even though their pronunciation is relatively close to each other, their meanings differ markedly. Based on the distorted Chinese subtitles, English subtitles continue to eliminate the local flavour combined with CSRs and generate some seemingly unjustified expressions. For example, why do people beat the sedan when the bride arrives (see Line 1 in Table 3)? Why is a boy dressed in a nice gown and with a mirror (see Line 6 in Table 3)?



Table 3. Comparison between the Lines Containing Dialects and their Chinese and English Subtitles

| No. | <i>Dialects in Chinese Utterance (English Gloss)</i> | <i>Chinese Subtitles (English Gloss)</i> | <i>English Subtitles</i> |
|-----|--|--|---|
| 1 | 一撒谷，二撒粮 | 一撒麸，二打轿 | Here comes the sedan chair |
| | yī sā gǔ, èr sā liáng | yī sā fū, èr dǎ jiǎo | |
| | Firstly scatter grain, secondly scatter food | Firstly scatter bran , secondly beat the sedan | |
| 2 | 新媳妇，下花轿 | 新媳妇，下了轿 | And out comes the bride |
| | xīn xīfu xià huā jiào | xīn xīfu, xià le jiào | |
| | The bride comes out of the wedding sedan | The bride comes out of the sedan | |
| 3 | 两口子，一辈子 | 两口子，和和美美过日子 | The two of you will live happily ever after |
| | liǎngkǒuzi, yībèizi | | |
| | A couple in all their life | liǎngkǒuzi, héhé měiměi guò rìzi | |
| | 和和美美过日子 | | |
| | héhé měiměi guò rìzi | A couple live harmoniously and happily | |
| | live harmoniously and happily | | |
| 4 | 一辈子，两口子 | 一辈子，和和美美过日子 | The two of you will live happily ever after |
| | yībèizi, liǎngkǒuzi | | |
| | In all their life, a couple | yībèizi, héhé měiměi guò rìzi | |
| | 和和美美过日子 | | |
| | hé hé měi měi guò rì zi | Live harmoniously and happily for all their life | |
| | live harmoniously and happily | | |
| 5 | 养小子，要好的 | 养小子，要好子 | Let your sons be good ones |



| No. | <i>Dialects in Chinese Utterance (English Gloss)</i> | <i>Chinese Subtitles (English Gloss)</i> | <i>English Subtitles</i> |
|-----|---|---|--|
| 6 | yǎng xiǎozi, yào hǎode | yǎng xiǎozi, yào hǎozi | Be they wrapped in splendour |
| | If you have a boy, let him be good | If you have a boy, let him be a good child | |
| | 穿蓝衫，戴顶子 | 穿兰衫，带镜子 | |
| 7 | chuān lánshān, dài dǐngzi | chuān lánshān, dài jìngzi | Let your daughters be fair ones |
| | who wears a blue gown and an official's hat | Dressed in a nice gown and with a mirror | |
| | 养女子，要巧的 | 养女子，要俏子 | |
| 8 | yǎng nǚzi, yào qiǎode | yǎng nǚzi, yào qiàozi | Be they as pretty as the pomegranate and the peony |
| | If you have a girl, let her be dexterous | If you have a girl, let her be a beautiful child | |
| | 石榴牡丹冒较的 | 石榴，牡丹貌俏子 | |
| 8 | shíliú mǔdān mào jiǎo de | shíliú, mǔdān màoqiàozi | Be they as pretty as the pomegranate and the peony |
| | who can improvise paper cuttings of pomegranate flowers and peonies | As beautiful as pomegranate flowers and peonies | |
| | | | |

6. Conclusion

Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Jia Zhangke and Feng Xiaogang are powerhouses in the Chinese film industry, producing high-profile films which have won significant domestic and international awards. Their distinctive works have somewhat promoted Chinese culture on the international film stage by telling stories brimming with Chinese CSRs. However, as discussed above, these CSRs are neutralised in the films' English subtitles through explicitation, substitution, transposition, compensation, and omission strategies due to the typical difficulties in translating Chinese into English. Linguistic explanations for neutralisation have been made regarding the features of the Chinese language embedded in its local culture. Its locality aggravates the asymmetries between Chinese and English. For example, dialects might have been wrongly subtitled in Chinese and further distorted in English. Such a neutralising tendency leads to the "cultural discount" (Díaz-Cintas & Zhang, 2022) in transferring linguistic connotations, which can be related to the English-speaking audience's low interest in "knowing more about China, its culture and values" (Díaz-Cintas & Zhang, 2022, p. 6).



With the increasing popularity of Chinese culture and its influence overseas, I believe that the English-speaking audience will expect more details about what is neutralised in the English subtitles of Chinese films as they do of Japanese or Korean cultural products. As ultimate users of cultural products, the audience has the voice to influence or even the power to drive the product norms from acceptability, i.e. target-orientedness, to adequacy, i.e. source-orientedness (Toury, 2012, p.79). Since the 2000s, Japanese culturally-rich content, manga, anime and video games have gained more attention with the globalisation of Japanese cultural production (O'Hagan, 2007). Manga readership often harbours expectations for "Japaneseness" in comic translation (Zulawnik, 2022, p.22), whereas game fans desire to access "the original game with full content, as was played by gamers in the source language market, but in their language" (O'Hagan, 2017, p.197). After the great success of *Parasite* (2019) by Korean director Bong Joon-ho, a Korean audiovisual product, *Squid Game*, became Netflix's most-watched series, which even sparked an intense debate about what gets lost in subtitling (Groskopf, 2021; Kwon, 2021). *Squid Game* was criticised for its dubious quality of subtitles that often purge Korean CSRs in English translation, "a practice that is coming under increased scrutiny as fans crave every possible detail from the content they love" (Collins, 2021). Fans' criticism of its botched English subtitles even urged Netflix to appoint Sharon Choi to take a second pass on the TV series' subtitles (Deck, 2021; O'Hagan, 2021). Choi, the star interpreter for South Korean director Bong Joon-ho during the award season of *Parasite* (2019) in 2020, was finally invited to revise some of the English subtitles and credited alongside the original subtitler, Youngmi Mayer.

Following the wide dissemination of Japanese and Korean cultures, Chinese films are considered an essential medium to communicate Chinese culture to foreigners under the ongoing globalisation and the Chinese national initiative of Going Global. China has been making significant investments in its Going Out project. Launching multi-language satellite TV channels and websites is one of the essential items high on the agenda.

Since 2011, Chinese governmental agencies have increased their efforts to promote Chinese film and television to overseas markets through translation by initiating national translation projects such as the China-Africa Film and Television Cooperation Project in 2012, the Contemporary Works Translation Project in 2013 and Silk Road Film and Television Bridge Project in 2014. (Jin, 2018, p. 199)

Thanks to those state-sponsored projects, more than 300 Chinese films and TVs have been translated into over 20 languages, among which are English, French, Portuguese, Swahili, Hausa, Arabic, Spanish, and Hindi (Jin, 2017, p. 33). Since the *Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China* was issued in 2016, the government has been further supporting the translation and dissemination of high-quality Chinese films into foreign languages and also using diplomatic, cultural and educational resources to promote Chinese films to spread overseas (Jin & Gambier, 2018, p. 29). Films are seen as "an ideal means of projecting China's image internationally" (Clark, 2017, p. 21). In the first quarter of 2018, China surpassed North America for the first time and became the biggest film market, with a box office revenue of 20.218 billion yuan (Lü, 2018). With a growing number of Chinese films released overseas, the CSRs in Chinese films may well attract more attention from the English-speaking audience who concern themselves with the original meanings of the CSRs neutralised in the English subtitles. Thus, a source-oriented trend in subtitling Chinese films is expected in the



globalisation of Chinese cultural products, though film subtitling from LOTE (Languages Other Than English) into English is traditionally a target-oriented translation (Chen et al., 2021; Gottlieb, 2009). The diverse CSRs in Chinese films can be reproduced in English subtitles by adopting more preserving strategies. With maximum or high fidelity to the source, the English subtitles could assist in communicating the film stories more authentically and accurately to the English-speaking audience.

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